



Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry: Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Hearing Date: 12 June 2024

Question[s] taken on notice

Directed to: Amaze

Received Date: 25 June 2024

1. Melina BATH, page 29

Question Asked:

what does the education department need to do to support our teacher assistants? What other things might they need? Take it on notice.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I will.

Response:

Summary of Amaze recommendations:

- Commit to a comprehensive review of Education Support Staff (ESS) policy, guidelines and initiatives to ensure they are consistent with best practice, are driving a consistent approach to education support and are positively impacting experiences and outcomes for ESS, students, their families, teachers and school leaders.
- Undertake a systematic literature review and community consultation to comprehensively understand and identify best practice regarding the roles and functions of ESS in the classroom.
- Upskill the ESS workforce, including by working collaboratively to co-design mandatory and registered training and professional development programs.
- Strengthen teacher training and professional development to ensure teachers have the skills and training required to positively work with ESS and maximise their roles and capabilities.
- Explore learnings from recent South Australian government initiatives, including the roll out of Autism Inclusive Teachers to build autism capabilities among teachers and ESS, and collaborative work to embed autism and inclusion in training programs.
- Consider how ESS may be upskilled to provide comprehensive support to teachers and alleviate their non-teaching workload.

- Explore how the capabilities of ESS may be strengthened to support Casual Relief Teachers and alleviate the impacts of teacher shortages on Autistic students.
- Provide ESS and teachers with mandatory training and guidance to provide consistent and evidence informed communication and behaviour support to Autistic students.

Amaze Response.

- Thank you for this Question on Notice. We are pleased to provide further advice on what the Victorian Department of Education may do to better support teacher assistants, commonly known as classroom Education Support Staff (ESS).

Background

- **Amaze and autism** - At Amaze, we aim to represent the views of Autistic students and their families and have expertise in autism. We do not purport to represent the needs of all neurodivergent students, or students with disability more broadly, whose needs may vary in some respects to Autistic students. To understand the needs of these students we recommend seeking a response to this question on notice from other sector organisations that you heard from at your public hearings, such as Association for Children with Disability and SPELD Victoria.
- **Current issues relating to ESS** - ESS are among the most important people in the lives, learning, development and wellbeing of many Autistic students. They provide learning, social and emotional support on a daily basis and may spend considerable periods of time with students in the classroom, including in 1:1 learning and/or small group settings. However, to commence work as an ESS in Victoria, there are no mandatory training or skills requirements. It is well known that across schools: ESS are inconsistently supported to access training and ongoing professional development; that the roles and functions of ESS are not well understood and can be highly inconsistent within and across schools; and that schools can often utilise ESS to exclude students (for example, by requiring them to take students out of the classroom or to separate spaces for long periods of time) rather than support inclusion in the classroom. See for example, evidence given to the [Disability Royal Commission](#). There are also differing views regarding the roles of ESS in the classroom. For example, differing views are held on the extent to which they should support a particular student or students, and the extent to which they should support the classroom teacher to meet the needs of student(s) with disability in the classroom.

Review existing policies and guidelines and undertake research into best practice in education support.

- **Review existing policies and guidelines to support ESS** - There are a number of Victorian policies, guidelines and initiatives that aim to build the knowledge and skills of ESS, and ensure a systematic and consistent approach to the implementation of their roles and functions in the classroom. For example, we understand that the:
 - [Education Support Staff Working in Classroom Support Role Guidelines](#) (2020) aim to provide evidence-based guidance about effective ways to work with ESS in the classroom,
 - [Education Support Class](#) policy and guidelines aim to identify the roles and responsibilities of varying levels of ESS.
 - [Autism Education Strategy](#) commits to delivering coordinated, system wide capability building for school leaders and staff in inclusive education, autism inclusion and legal obligations relating to Autistic students.
 - [Disability Inclusion Reforms](#) have included the creation of a Diverse Learners Hub that aims to provide frontline coaching and resources to build the capabilities of educators.

However, the impacts of these initiatives, policies and guidelines on the experiences and outcomes of students, their families, ESS and teachers remain unknown. It is not known whether they have consistently improved capabilities or understandings regarding the roles and functions of ESS. Transparent accountability measures are needed across the existing policy documents and guidelines to assess their impacts and inform future work. We would also encourage a review of education support policy and guidelines to ensure they are informed by current evidence regarding best practice in education support, are supporting a consistent approach to education support in the classroom, are being implemented across all schools and are meeting the needs of ESS, teachers, students and their families. This review should be undertaken in co-design with ESS, teachers, school leaders, students and families, including Autistic students and their families. A review is also required regarding the impacts of the Autism Education Strategy and Disability Inclusion Reforms capacity building initiatives. For example, the review may consider: how many ESS have accessed capacity building resources; have they improved the capacity of ESS to support children with disability (including Autistic children) to participate, socialise, regulate and learn; have they contributed to improved outcomes for students (including improved attendance

and reduced exclusion rates); and how can the Diverse Learners Hub be strengthened to better support ESS through accessible and inclusive information resources and training. Engagement with teachers, ESS, students and their families will be vital to understanding the impacts of these recent reforms and inform future work.

- **Conduct a comprehensive evidence review** –A systematic literature review and community consultation will be needed to comprehensively understand and identify best practice regarding the roles and functions of ESS in the classroom. This should include best practice in mainstream and specialist schools, as the roles of ESS and best practice in teacher and student support may differ across these schools. It should also consider best practice regarding different cohorts of students, including students with complex and high behaviour support needs.

Next steps – Upskill the workforce.

- **Upskill the ESS workforce**– Drawing on learnings from a comprehensive review of existing policy, guidelines and best practice approaches, urgent steps should be taken to upskill the ESS workforce to ensure it has the capabilities to provide consistent evidence informed support to Autistic students (and all students with disability) across Victoria’s mainstream and specialist schools.
- **Prescribe registered and mandatory training** – As recognised by the Senate Select Committee on Autism, the capacity of ESS need to be increased to improve the experiences and outcomes of Autistic students. (See Recommendation 51 of the Senate Select Committee’s [Final Report](#). Meaningful change will only occur if education support becomes an appropriately paid skilled occupation, with registered and mandatory training requirements, and ongoing professional development obligations. We recommend working with educators, higher education providers, the Autism Teaching Institute and researchers (such as the Grattan Institute) to create registered and mandatory training programs for ESS, in co-design with teachers, school leaders, students and their families, including Autistic students and their families. Given the high numbers of Autistic students in classrooms, these programs should include a mandatory unit on autism and inclusion. Training should comprehensively build the capabilities of ESS, including to provide holistic and evidence informed support to teachers and students, identify indicators of disability and/or support needs early, foster inclusion and be advocates for students’ rights. ESS should also be trained in the role they can play in building neuro-affirming classrooms, and school wide understandings of disability, including autism. Accountability measures must be built into any training

and ongoing professional learning to ensure it is improving experiences and outcomes for ESS, teachers, school leaders, students and their families.

- **Strengthen teacher training to maximise education support** – There is concern across the community that teachers currently have different understandings of the role of ESS, different capabilities to support ESS in the classroom and varying views on how ESS may or should support inclusion. Teacher training and professional development should provide teachers with the skills and training they need to work positively with ESS, understand their roles and build their capacity to increase inclusion and outcomes.
- **Explore learnings from recent initiatives in South Australia (SA)** – We recommend engaging with the SA Assistant Minister for Autism, the Honourable Emily Bourke, and the SA Office for Autism to learn from its recent initiatives. These include investing \$28.8 million to fund an Autism Inclusive Teacher in every South Australian public Primary School to help build knowledge and understanding of autism among school staff, including ESS. They are also working with universities to boost disability and inclusion studies in South Australian teaching degrees to better prepare our teaching workforce for diverse classrooms. A similar approach could be taken to working with higher education providers (as recommended above) to ensure autism and inclusion is included in any ESS training curriculum.
- **Consider how ESS may comprehensively support teachers and help alleviate the impacts of teacher shortages** – Teachers have increasingly complex workloads and time pressures. Consideration should be given to how ESS can be upskilled to provide comprehensive support to teachers and alleviate their non-teaching workload. For example, this may include training and an expanded role in data collection, tracking student progress, engaging in classroom planning and supporting disability inclusion profile, ILP and student support group meeting processes. For more information about how ESS may better support teachers, see the [Making time for great teaching](#) report by the Grattan Institute. Consideration should also be given to how ESS can be upskilled to support casual relief teachers and the classroom in times of teacher shortages. As highlighted in our submission to the inquiry, ongoing teacher shortages are compromising inclusion and impacting the experiences of Autistic students. This is particularly challenging for Autistic students who struggle with uncertainty, inconsistency and difficulties understanding expectations. Targeted actions are needed to ensure Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs) are supported and provided with adequate information on Autistic children and their learning support needs to provide meaningful inclusion and accessibility. ESS should also be supported to play a key role in ensuring CRTs are aware of,

and able to meet the support needs of students with disability, including Autistic students, in their classrooms.

- **Increase capabilities to consistently provide communication support** – The Disability Royal Commission found that Autistic students can experience significant delays in receiving communication supports or may not receive them at all. It recommended the development of specific guidance on communicating effectively with students who have complex communication, learning and behaviour support needs. ([DRC Final Report](#), Part A, p.220 – 221). Currently across mainstream and specialist schools there is limited and inconsistent levels of knowledge of communication support, Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) and when or how to develop and implement communication support plans. Training and Guidance is needed for all staff, particularly teachers and ESS, on communicating with students with complex communication support needs, including through AAC and developing and implementing communication support plans. Efforts to build understandings of best practice in positive behaviour support, and the development of behaviour support plans should also be reviewed to determine whether they are addressing behaviour support needs and ESS are feeling confident and capable in their application of PBS and behaviour support plans.