


Autism Queensland Education & Therapy Centres

2008 Annual Report

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Principal's foreword

Introduction

Autism Queensland has two Education and Therapy Centres, one on the Northside of Brisbane in Brighton, and the other on the Southside in Sunnybank Hills. Both Centres are accredited Independent Schools and provide a range of group placement options for children aged between Grade 1 to Year 12 diagnosed with Autism.

Students attend group placement for a period of 12 months to 2 years and in a part-time capacity for either 1, 2 or 3 days per week whilst continuing to attend their local school.

Students are grouped according to age, ability and needs, with a maximum enrolment of 6 students per group. Each group is staffed by a Group Teacher and Teacher Aide. Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy is provided to 2 and 3 day placements. Social work and Psychology support is available as needed.

One day placements are intensive targeted programs which focus on specific areas of need including social skills, self management, organisational skills and assignment and/or homework skills.

All school programs are tailored to suit individual student needs to enhance participation, learning and educational outcomes in a student's local school setting. Our inclusive approach is underpinned by regular collaboration and communication with parents, local school staff, and other related professionals.

The part-time format is specifically designed to:

- enable students to maintain connection with their peer group and their local school curriculum
- enable students to practice and develop skills for generalisation
- continue social connection with their local community
- opportunity for observation, data collection and sharing of expertise among key stakeholders

Future outlook

AQ Schools 2009 directions include:

- commitment to providing a safe and secure learning environment for all students
- providing evidence based transdisciplinary programs for students
- commitment in currency for professional development
- continuous improvement in service delivery
- transparent communication with all stakeholders

Our school at a glance

School Profile

The AQ Schools cater for 118 students, aged between Grades 1-12, and have a teaching, therapy, support and administrative staff of 35 with a Principal located at each campus. Students are enrolled in multiage classes according to age, Autism specific needs and abilities. The Principals are members of the Senior Management Team at Autism Queensland and represent the needs of AQ's School communities in this forum.

To access group placement students must be:

- Diagnosed with Autism / Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)/ Aspergers Syndrome / Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) by a medical specialist such as a Paediatrician, Child Psychiatrist or Neurologist.
- An Autism Queensland registered client.
- Aged between Grade 1 to 12.
- Verified by an approved Educational Authority.
- Attending an alternative educational program or setting (e.g. state school, independent school, Distance Education etc).
- Able to maintain placement in a small group setting.

The multidisciplinary School team includes teachers, teacher aides, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, social worker and psychologist.

It is important to note that all students who are enrolled at an AQ School are enrolled on a part-time basis meaning that they are also enrolled in a State, Catholic or Independent School.

Curriculum offerings

AQ delivers an autism specific curriculum linked to the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) Key Learning Areas (KLAs) of English, Mathematics, Health and Physical Education (HPE), Studies of Society & Environment (SOSE) and Information Communication Technology (ICT).

AQ's comprehensive educational approach for school aged students is a curriculum focused on the core characteristics of Autism, these being:

- Social Skills
- Communication
- Sensory Information Processing
- Adaptive Behaviour
- Stress Management
- Daily Living Skills
- Community Access
- Play and Recreation Skills

This is achieved through:

- Modified academic curriculum
- Individualised programs tailored the students developmental needs and strengths
- Small group setting
- Multidisciplinary team including Teachers, Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists and Social Worker
- Inclusive programs which support students maintaining and improving participation in their local school setting

Our school at a glance

- Collaboration and consultancy with key stakeholders
- Structured learning and skill building based upon positive behaviour support techniques
- Focus on functional life skills
- Environmental modifications and supports
- Emphasis on generalisation
- Supported transition
- Parent education and training

The role of the AQ schools is to assist student's to develop strategies to overcome, minimise or manage the deficits associated with their Autism so that they can experience success as learners and complete their formal education.

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How computers are used to assist learning:

At AQ we aim to be able to offer our students access to high quality ICT. Through this we know students with ASD can better communicate with others, be self sufficient, achieve more at school, and be better placed for employment later in life. It has been well documented that children with ASD have an enhanced ability to learn complex computer skills easily due to their extreme focus and logical thinking. This can give our students the ability to succeed when they often have difficulty doing so.

It is important that we prepare the students at Autism Queensland for the digital learning environments of both the present and future through use of:

The internet:

- access learning materials to assist their individualised areas of interest
- be able to go online to use the internet to conduct research for school assignments
- communicate with students in other schools and countries

One to one digital learning:

- students will be able to visit the computer room as a class unit and work on a range of one to one learning tasks that are individualised to their ability level e.g. reader rabbit, zoombinies, PowerPoint etc.
- engaging tasks that focus on communication and social skills.
- students will be able to continue to work and on and even enhance activities from their Education Queensland and private school placements

Collaborative learning

- students can produce quality collaborative and co-operative results utilising current best practice, dynamic and stimulating technology e.g. digital photo presentations, digital video making, recording and broadcasting pod casts, garage band soundtracks, web page design etc.

The keys to raising student achievements in both social and academic skills are to provide students with a solid foundation and to motivate them to become life long learners.

Technology greatly assists students with autism to accomplish this goal. It is highly engaging for students and stimulates their imaginations. Numerous research studies on the impact of technology on student learning and motivation have demonstrated this finding with remarkably similar results.

Social climate

AQ's philosophy and approach which permeates all aspects of service delivery, especially within the School's, is based on the following:

Our school at a glance

Our Vision

A life of choice and opportunity for people living with Autism.

Our Mission

To be a highly effective facilitator of quality outcomes that significantly enhance the lives of people with Autism.

Our Values

We value:

- The integrity of the person with ASD
- The diversity, talents and contributions of people with ASD
- The rights and confidentiality of clients
- Excellence in Service Delivery
- Open communication and transparent practice
- Collaborative professional and collegiate workplace relationships
- The talent, resourcefulness and commitment of families, carers, staff, volunteers and members
- Continuous improvement in all our activities

Our Drivers



**CREATING
OPPORTUNITY**



**CHANGING
PERCEPTIONS**



**ENHANCING
CHOICE**

Autism Queensland's educational approach is based on the organisation's commitment to individuals with Autism, and their families. Our approach is based on the needs of the individual child and the needs identified in the student's IEP. AQ's model of services is comprehensive and does not follow any single recognised educational approach or methodology. Many of the single-strand philosophical notions (eg. discrete trial instruction or facilitated communication) have many valuable strategies but are not appropriate or sufficient for every individual.

An eclectic or comprehensive approach allows teachers and therapists to use elements of several effective approaches in a way that meets the needs of each child. "There is consensus among well respected scholars in the field of Autism that there is no empirical basis for recommending one approach or endorsing a single program as being superior for all individuals with ASD" (Dunlop & Fox, 2002; Heflin & Simpson 1998a).

The goal we have for all students enrolled in a group placement at the AQ's Schools is to develop in all students the skills that will enable them to participate to the fullest extent in their home school and local community. In providing this, AQ follows the "Principles for Effective Education in ASD" (Jordan, R; 2005).

These are to:

- reduce stress
- harness the strengths and interests of students
- compensate for weaknesses
- develop independence
- increase social and emotional understanding
- improve communication
- facilitate flexibility

Our school at a glance

Involving parents in their child's education.

AQ is committed to working within its school campuses in a highly collaborative model. A full range of professionals - teachers, occupational therapists, psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers, teacher aides, parents and other professionals and care givers develop appropriate Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Because of this wide involvement with goal setting and strategies, our programs are owned by the whole school and all elements of the student's human network.

This approach ensures generalisation of knowledge to other settings such as home, local school setting, and the community. Close collaboration with home school staff ensures that the skills focused on during placement are pertinent issues and required skills for the student when attending their setting.

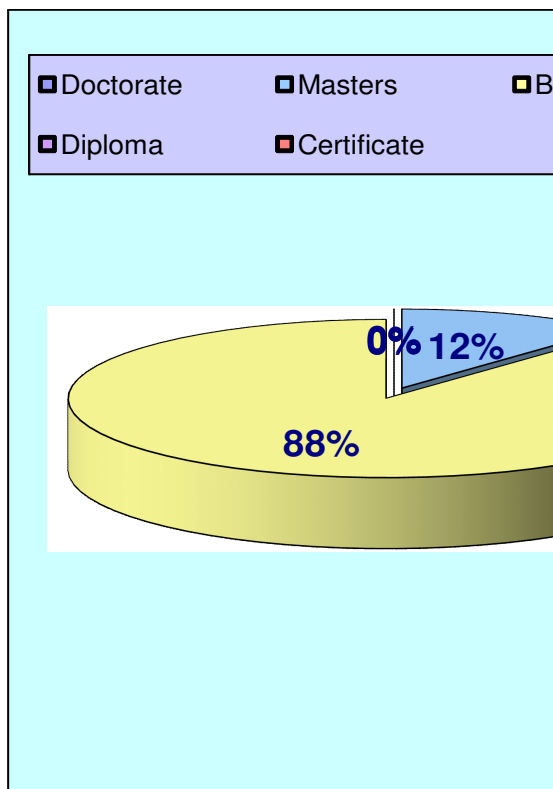
Collaboration with parents regarding issues experienced at home or when participating in family or community activities make up the basis of community access. Home school staff are invited to visit students to see them 'in action' at AQ, and parents are scheduled for parent contact sessions each term. The philosophy behind such processes is to enhance the generalisation of skills between settings, to share ASD knowledge and strategies, and to gain regular feedback that programs and placements continue to meet student needs. AQ in recent years also introduced goal based home/school communication books to track daily progress towards IEP goals and ongoing programming needs.

Feedback from the parents and from home-school teachers indicated that more almost 96% of parents felt that their child was happy, safe and well supported in the AQ school environment. Whilst getting such information from our students would be a challenge given they range in age from 6 to 16 years of age with varying cognitive abilities, parents prove a highly reliable reporter for such information as they attend parent contact sessions each term on different days and for different sessions so are able to observe for themselves their children within the overall AQ environment and with different staff.

Our staff profile

Qualifications of all Teachers & Therapists

Highest level of attainment	Number of classroom teachers and school leaders at the school
Doctorate	0
Masters	3
Bachelor degree	23
Diploma	0
Certificate	0



Expenditure on and teacher participation in professional development.

The total funds expended on teacher professional development in 2008 was \$35,000.

100% of staff participated in designated professional development across the year.

An exceptional highlight on the 2008 school's annual professional development calendar was the attendance of all teaching and therapy staff at the TEACCH conference held in Brisbane. TEACCH is a 'whole life' approach aimed at supporting children, adolescents, and adults with autism through the provision of visual information, structure, and predictability. Attendance at this conference enhanced the application of the TEACCH strategies across the schools. Autism Queensland staff regularly incorporate structure, clearly defined physical spaces and highly predictable and transparent schedules as advocated by TEACCH into their programs. Other highly regarded approaches used at Autism Queensland include the use of positive behaviour support, the development of functional communication through the development of speech and augmentative and alternative communication systems, pivotal response intervention, and functional skill building. Additionally, Autism Queensland educational programs employ specific teaching strategies that are tailored to accommodate the unique learning styles of children with ASD.

The establishment of discipline specific mentoring groups within the schools and across the wider organisation has laid a sound foundation for professional sharing and development. This further supports a formal process for delivering evidence based practice in our school programs and practices. Under this framework staff conduct research and engage with Autism Queensland's research and development projects. To compliment this, families are also made aware of external research

Our staff profile

opportunities, with information regularly disseminated in coordination with Autism Queensland's Principal Research and Development Officer, Dr Jill Ashburner.

Other professional development highlights included:

- Bringing Creativity to the Health & Human Services
- Helping Kids Speak Up – beyond Diagnosis
- Understanding Visual Perceptual Skills
- Teaching Sexuality in a Special Needs Context
- Evidence Based Practice
- Team Board Training
- Discipline Without Punishment & Rewards
- Siblings of Children with Special Needs

Average staff attendance

- For permanent and temporary staff and school leaders the staff attendance rate was 97% in 2008.

Proportion of staff retained from the previous school year.

- From the end of the 2007 school year, 78% of staff were retained by the school for the entire 2008 school year.

Performance of our students

Student attendance

The average attendance rate as a percentage in 2008 was 95%.

Key outcomes

Students attending AQ Schools do not participate in NAPLAN testing during their placement. However students may participate in NAPLAN testing at their 'home' school with many students being exempt.

All students attending AQ Schools have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) with goals set across curriculum areas, which are reviewed 6 monthly.

Value added

Advocacy continued to be a priority and area of strength for teachers and group therapists, with results from data collected by staff indicating that at least 80% of hours dedicated to outreach support from the schools being centred on the provision of expert advice on the ASD related needs and issues affecting students, their families and mainstream Teachers. The school based psychologist and social worker further developed this area of expertise to improve case management for students and or families where needed.

Parent, student and teacher satisfaction with the school

The intense nature of the working relationship with AQ staff and their student's families and their associated communities provides ongoing and open opportunity for informal feedback. Parents are welcomed and encouraged at all times to offer feedback and suggestions, with IEP meetings usually (but not limited) providing a natural environment for such discussion. This feedback over the last few years has provided invaluable insight to the needs and aspirations of the ETC's community but especially established the basis for changes made to improved placement options and programming.

Annual feedback surveys to both parents and home school staff across ETC's over the last two years have indicated that AQ performs well in its endeavours to match its programs and curriculum to the needs of its students.

2008 feedback results indicated:

- over 90% of parents felt that placement had met their child's major concerns
- over 90% of parents reported that they had been able to successfully use the strategies and information provided by AQ staff
- over 80% of parents reported that communication, social skills and stress management were the priority ASD specific curriculum areas for their child's placement in the previous 12 month period
- over 75% of home school staff reported that a student's performance and participation had improved at their educational setting as a result of placement
- over 90% of home school staff indicated they would recommend placement for another student in the future