



## Support of Inclusive Education of Students on the Autism Spectrum

Autism Queensland supports the rights of students on the autism spectrum to participate in an inclusive, quality education on an equal basis with students without disabilities. Consistent with *The Education Goals for Young Australians* in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019), Autism Queensland is committed to:

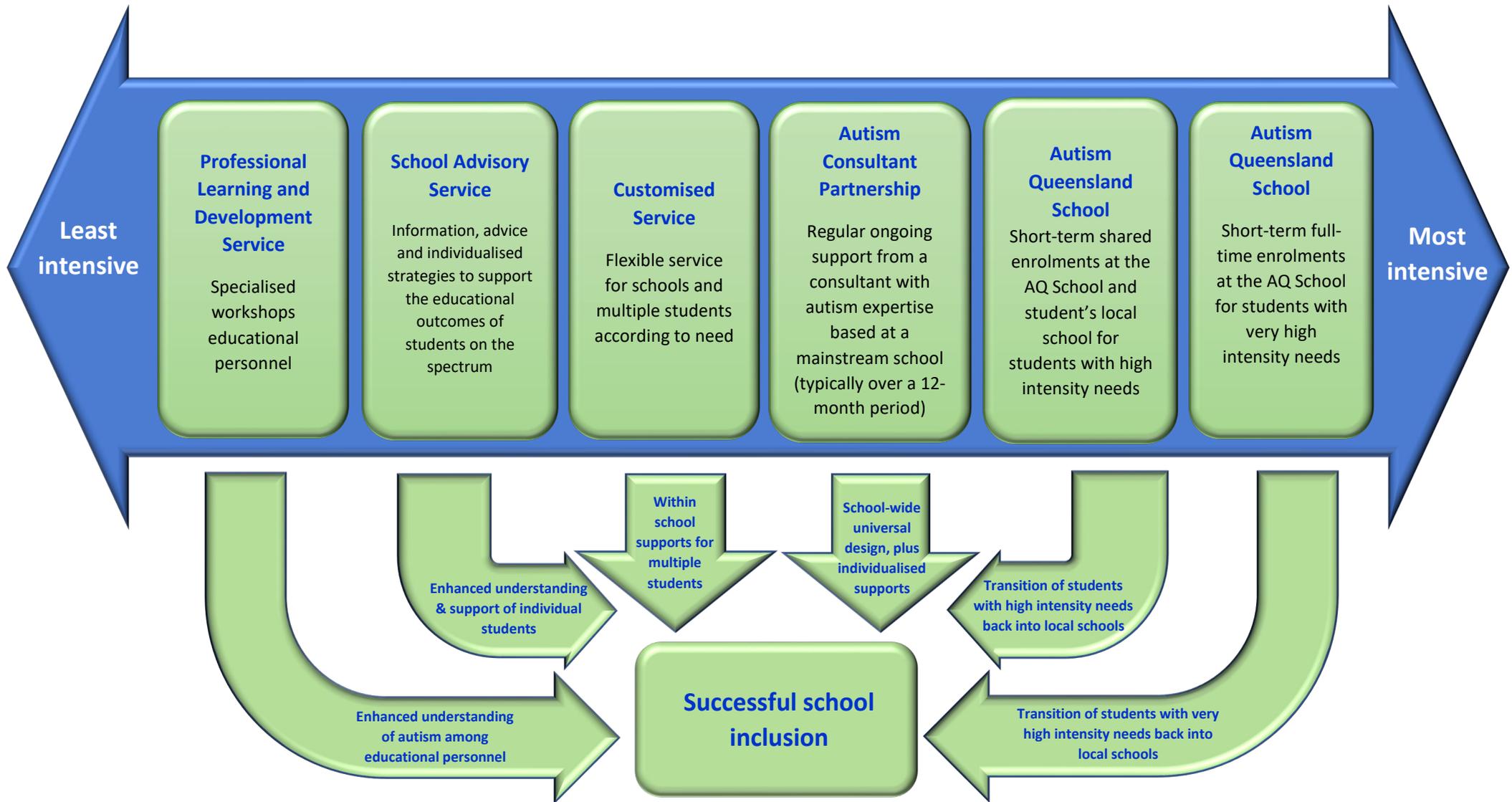
1. An education system that promotes excellence and equity
2. All young Australians becoming confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.

Inclusive education for these students is a complex process requiring collaborative relationships and partnerships, responsive planning, and creative supports. Autism Queensland's focus is on supporting educational personnel to make educational adjustments that will maximise the potential of students on the spectrum to achieve educational success and to be successfully included at school.

Autism Queensland has a long history of working in partnership with schools to support students on the spectrum to successfully engage in their learning environment. For many years, Autism Queensland has delivered school advisory visits to educational settings across Queensland with the aim of providing information, advice, support and individualised strategies to support the educational outcomes of students on the spectrum from Prep to Year 12. More recently, we have developed the Autism Consultant Partnership Model, where our staff provide an intensive and individualised level of support to schools that is evidence-based. This model aims to increase knowledge and build capacity at a whole school level, enabling effective inclusion of students on the spectrum to maximise access and participation to the curriculum and school community.

The **suite of programs offered by Autism Queensland to support the successful school inclusion** of students on the spectrum is shown overleaf. The programs range in intensity depending on the specific needs of the students and schools.

## Suite of Programs Supporting Successful School Inclusion



## **Autism Queensland's approach is based on the following principles:**

Autism Queensland aims to provide highly effective school environments and educational support services that optimise learning for students on the spectrum with consideration given to communication, the social and emotional wellbeing of students, the physical environment and students' sensory processing needs, preference for consistent relationships and interactions and curriculum adjustments to content, delivery, and assessment.

Evidence-informed strategies consider each student's individual strengths and optimising access to learning to ensure:

- Students can be successful and confident.
- Adjustments consider safety, maximise success and are least restrictive.
- Uniform strategies, language, resources and support are evident across environments.

This is evidenced by:

- Personalised learning plans and educational adjustments.
- Effective inter-disciplinary team approach.
- Family- and person-centred practice.

## **Supports include but are not limited to:**

- Working collaboratively with educational personnel in mainstream schools to enhance their understanding of autism and the unique needs of particular students on the spectrum.
- Working collaboratively with educational personnel in mainstream schools on adjustments to the Australian Curriculum to accommodate the student's individual strengths and interests, age, and learning preferences.
- Working collaboratively with educational personnel in mainstream schools on adjustments to school environments to accommodate:
  - the sensory differences of students on the spectrum.
  - the need of students on the spectrum for structure and predictability.
- Use of Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) practices:
  - The primary goal of PBS is to improve the quality of life for students on the spectrum by increasing behaviours that will enable them to successfully participate at school and adjusting the learning environment to reduce triggers that may result in interfering behaviours (Neitzel, 2010). There is a strong proactive emphasis on prevention of behaviours of concern rather than a reactive response.
  - Students are supported to develop their capacity to self-regulate emotions and behaviour in order to successfully participate at school.
- Building social awareness:

- Like all students, students on the spectrum want to have friends at school. A recent meta-synthesis of qualitative studies of the mainstream school experience of students on the spectrum (Williams, Gleeson & Jones, 2019) revealed that students on the spectrum are concerned about feeling different from their peers and place a high level of importance on having school friends.
- A range of evidence-informed autism specific strategies are used to assist them to understand the thoughts, feelings and motivations of others and to respond appropriately in social situations.
- Supporting the capacity of students on the spectrum to communicate:
  - The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) describes children’s right to express opinions about actions affecting them. Not all children have the capability to fully realise their right to communication. Some children such as those on the spectrum will require additional support to do so.
  - At Autism Queensland, interventions for communication skills are guided by speech pathologists, who work collaboratively with educational teams to develop individualised strategies to enhance the communication skills of students on the spectrum.
- Development of daily living skills required to participate at school (e.g., toileting, hygiene, eating and clothing management).
- Development of skills for learning (e.g., remaining seated, listening, waiting, turn-taking).
- Development of play and recreation skills to participate in playground and school sporting activities.
- Supporting student’s transitions (e.g. between school settings, school years, or to post-school activities).

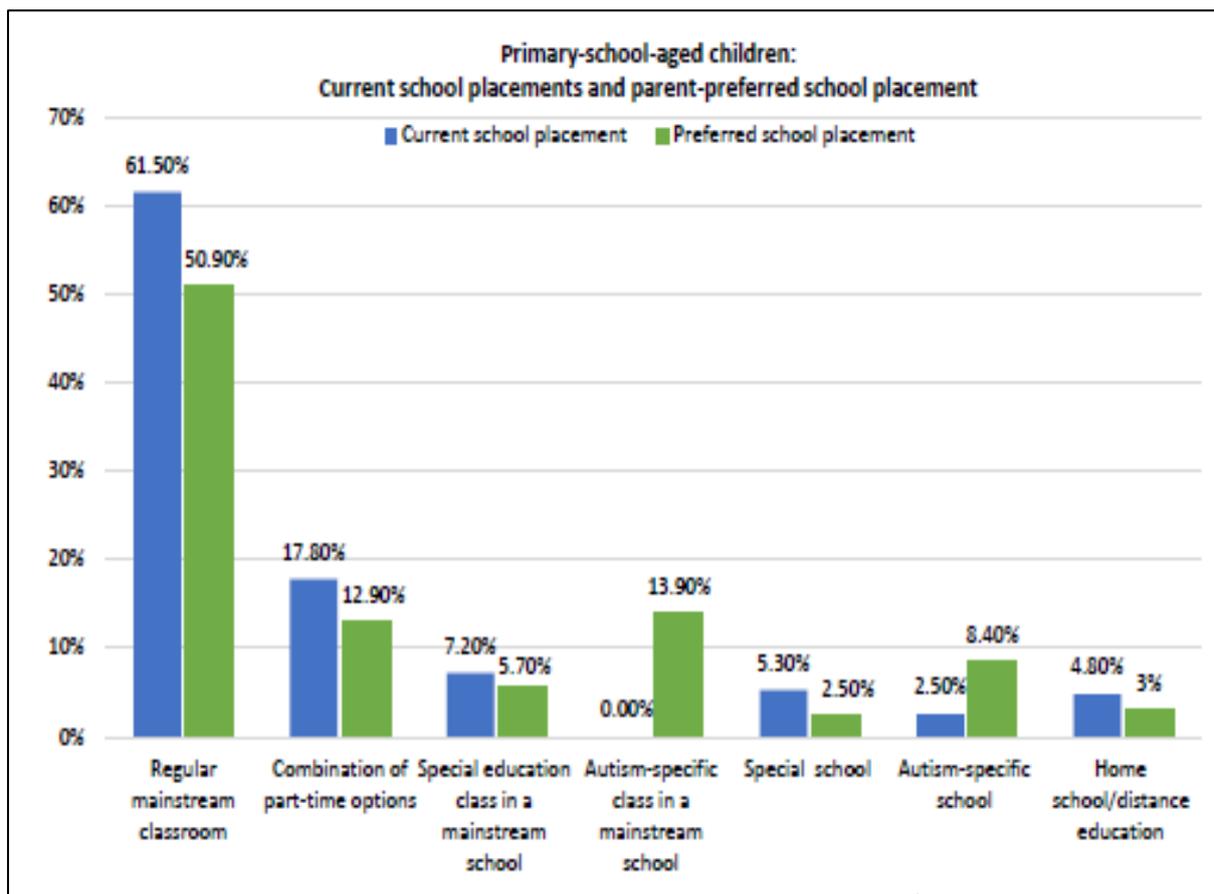
## **What parents have told us about their preferred school placements**

In response to a Queensland-wide survey (Autism Queensland, 2017), 402 parents of primary-school aged children on the spectrum and 175 parents of secondary school aged children on the spectrum answered this question:

***“What are your preferences regarding your child’s school placement?”***

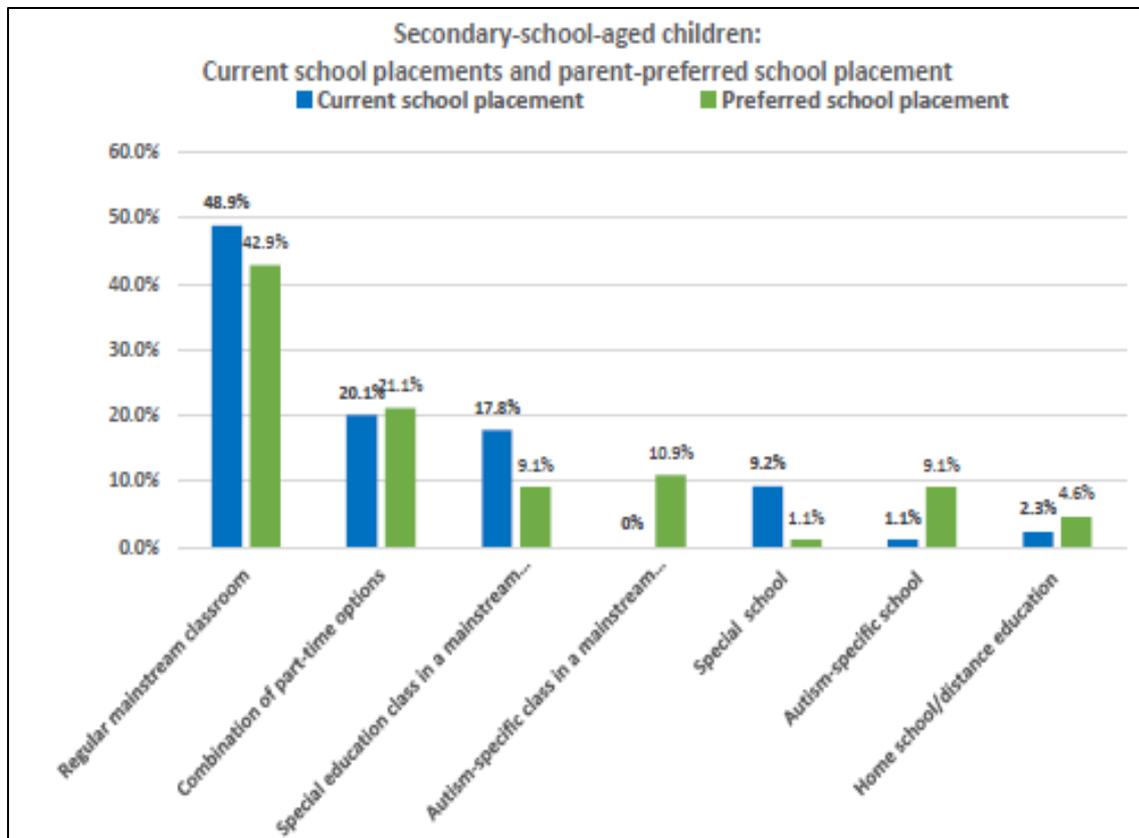
Respondents selected from options including regular classroom in a mainstream school, special education class in a mainstream school (not autism-specific), autism-specific class in a mainstream school, home school/distance education, special school (not autism-specific), autism-specific school, and a combination of part-time options.

## Responses of parents of 402 primary school-age students



**Around 22% of parents preferred autism-specific classes or schools**

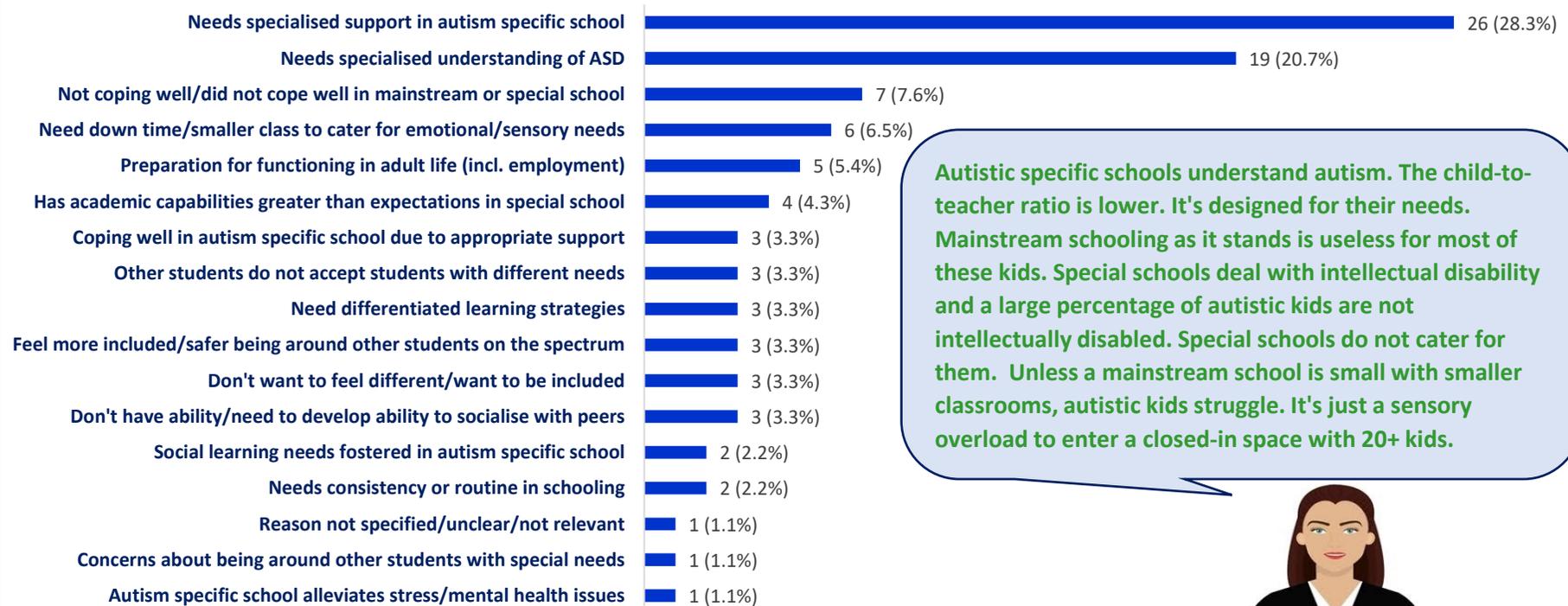
## Responses of parents of 175 secondary school-age students



**Around 21% of parents preferred autism-specific classes or schools**

Respondents to the Autism Queensland survey (2017) were asked to describe the reasons for their preferences regarding their child's school placement.

## Reasons parents gave for their preference for autism-specific schools



Autistic specific schools understand autism. The child-to-teacher ratio is lower. It's designed for their needs. Mainstream schooling as it stands is useless for most of these kids. Special schools deal with intellectual disability and a large percentage of autistic kids are not intellectually disabled. Special schools do not cater for them. Unless a mainstream school is small with smaller classrooms, autistic kids struggle. It's just a sensory overload to enter a closed-in space with 20+ kids.



## Reasons parents gave for their preference for autism-specific classes



**Students whose parents preferred specialised school options** (as compared to students whose parents preferred mainstream regular classes) were **much more likely to have other conditions in addition to ASD**. They were likely to have conditions that impact on learning. This included being 1.8 times more likely to have an intellectual disability, 1.55 times more likely to have a language disorder and 1.5 times more likely to have a specific learning disorder. They were also more likely to have mental health conditions (1.4 times more likely to have anxiety disorders or depression).

## Conclusions

- Around half of parents preferred options other than regular mainstream classroom and over 20% preferred autism-specific options. These findings suggest that **a range of placement options** may be required to cater to the highly variable needs of students on the spectrum at different times during their school career. Examples include:
  - Mainstream classes
  - Autism-specific classes in mainstream schools
  - Shared enrolments (e.g., autism-specific school and local school)
  - Smaller classes with a number of students on the spectrum, such as the ASD Nest program which has 4 students on the spectrum in a class with 12 typically developing students (Koenig, Bleiweiss, Brennan, Cohen. & Siegel, 2009).
- One of the most common reasons that parents gave for preferring autism-specific schools or autism specific classes included the need for **more specialist understanding of ASD**, with comments such as **“Too many teachers do not understand autism”**. There is therefore a need to enhance **education about autism** of pre-service teachers and existing educational personnel in all schools.
- Other common reasons that parents gave for preferring autism-specific schools or autism specific classes included the **need for specialist support**, as their child had not coped well in mainstream regular classrooms. There is therefore a need for increased levels of support for students on the spectrum in mainstream schools including **access to teachers and allied health staff with autism-specific expertise**.
- Parents of students who had co-occurring conditions in addition to ASD, were much more likely to prefer specialised schooling options. There is therefore a **need for more support for students on the spectrum who have ASD and co-occurring conditions** including specific learning disorder, intellectual impairment, language disorders and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

## References

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