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## **YELLOW LADYBUGS SUBMISSION TO: 2020 REVIEW OF THE DISABILITY STANDARDS FOR EDUCATION**

Yellow Ladybugs is pleased to make the following submission to the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education. In making this submission, we draw on the schooling experiences of our extensive community of autistic girls, women and individuals, and parents/carers.<sup>1</sup>

### **SUMMARY**

The review has asked us to consider: whether, and to what extent, the Standards are making a positive difference towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disability.

Yellow Ladybugs considers that at a high level, the Standards offer a sound basis for students with disability, including autistic students to access the same educational opportunities as students without disability. However, the Standards continue to fail autistic girls (and other autistic students) when it comes to practice and implementation. We are aware that at the individual school level, knowledge of the Standards, and of the rights of autistic students (as enshrined in legislation) are poorly understood, poorly implemented, and often denied entirely.

***Autistic girls are often particularly disadvantaged due to their more internalised autism presentation, whereby they may mask well and appear to be coping. Their disability, and their specific needs are often hidden, which serves as a further barrier to accessing the supports they are entitled to at school.***

### **DISCUSSION**

Yellow Ladybugs makes the following comments as per the guidance set out in the 2020 Review Discussion document. Through our regular consultation with our community, we are aware of many cases where individual educators, education providers continue to fail to understand, apply and comply with the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards, including in the following areas:

**Enrolment:** Many schools continue to engage in active gate-keeping to prevent autistic students from enrolling in their school. This practice is often extremely subtle, for example school office staff

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<sup>1</sup> We use identity-first language ('autistic') based on our community's preference. We use the terms 'women' and 'girls' as our key focus, but also support and represent gender diverse autistic individuals. We are committed to building knowledge about the less visible and less understood internalised autistic experience, and which is more common for autistic women, girls and non-binary individuals, but seen in all genders.

claiming they are unable to schedule a meeting with the school principal, as they are ‘fully booked for the next six months’

**Student Support Services:** Many schools continue to claim that without funding (eg Program for Students with Disability funding in Victoria), they are not able to provide any additional support for autistic students, including access to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Student Support Group meetings (SSGs). This is of considerable concern when the IEP/SSG process is the primary means by which autistic students should receive the reasonable adjustments they are entitled to, as set out in the Standards.

**Curriculum development:** Many schools/teachers still refuse to make accommodations, modifications or reasonable adjustments to the curriculum, or to meet the sensory needs of autistic students, on the basis that ‘this is not fair to other students.’

**Participation:** Many autistic students continue to be the victim of exclusion practices, including subtle exclusions that greatly undermine their right to participate fully in all aspects of schooling. Examples include:

- Autistic students being told they can ‘opt out’ of extra-curricular activities such as school concerts, or Grade 6 graduation ceremonies, where no actual effort has been undertaken to genuinely include and accommodate these students in the activity.
- Autistic students not being allowed to attend school excursions/camps, unless their parent/carer accompanies them.

**Rights and obligations:** We have heard hundreds of stories from our community of autistic girls and their families, of autistic students being subject to disciplinary measures or punished due to their disability, in direct contravention of human rights legislation. Example include:

- Autistic students being regularly kept in at lunchtime to finish work, when no effort was made by the school/teacher to modify the work or provide the accommodations and reasonable adjustments to meet this student’s particular needs, and where their sensory needs were ignored also.
- Autistic students being suspended, or put on reduced hours for behavioural reasons, when the underlying cause of this behaviour is their disability and the failure to meet their needs
- Schools using the IEP process inappropriately to place behavioural expectations on autistic students, and often also failing to engage the autistic student and their parents/carers in the IEP process
- We have directly witnessed cases where teachers have received formal training from education and allied health professionals who recommend measures such as suspending autistic students with complex and challenging behaviours in order to ‘give the teacher a break’.

**Elimination of harassment and victimisation:** School bullying policies often fail to meet the specific needs of autistic students who statistically are highly likely to experience bullying while at school. Practices such as ‘Restorative Justice’ often cause more harm for autistic students.

**The complaints process:** Many schools/teaching staff would continue to appear to be unaware of the Standards, and the onus often falls to parents/carers to become knowledgeable about the Standards, and to refer to the Standards when advocating for the rights of their child. Where the complaint mechanism should be a last resort, it is frequently the only mechanism by which an individual student’s needs are acknowledged. We are of the view that the Standards should be applied and understood pro-actively, and should be the minimum standard for the level of support autistic students receive at school. There is much work to be done in this area.

***Yellow Ladybugs is proud to advocate for the rights of autistic girls and individuals, and we would welcome the opportunity to participate further in the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education.***

## **ABOUT YELLOW LADYBUGS**

Yellow Ladybugs is an autistic-led non-government organisation with strong bridges to the community. We are dedicated to the happiness, success and celebration of autistic girls and women. We believe all autistic individuals of all genders deserve to be recognised, valued, accepted and supported in order to realise their full potential.

Yellow Ladybugs runs regular informal social events that offer peer-to-peer connections for autistic girls<sup>2</sup> generally between the ages of five and sixteen. Our events bring our members together in an inclusive, fun and sensory-friendly setting. Underpinning every Yellow Ladybugs event, our mission is to foster a sense of belonging for all our autistic girls, to help them connect with their tribe and to instil autistic pride within our community.

We are also committed to changing the common misconceptions about autism, ensuring autistic girls and women are properly supported according to their needs, and building a society that values and empowers all autistic individuals. We actively seek to address the many challenges the community of autistic girls and women face, including barriers to diagnosis, lack of inclusion in school and employment, and access to support services.

Yellow Ladybugs is an inclusive organisation, and while we have a particular focus on autistic girls and women, we recognise all genders and welcome trans and gender diverse autistic individuals into our community. We consider that the different presentations of autism exist across all genders, and as an organisation, we seek to dismantle all stereotypes which are harmful to the autistic community. We know that autistic girls and women, and particularly those with hidden needs, and a more internalised presentation, continue to be significantly disadvantaged, however, and we remain committed to our mission to reduce these disadvantages.

Kind Regards

*Katie Koullas*

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<sup>2</sup> Yellow Ladybugs also welcomes gender diverse autistic individuals to our events.