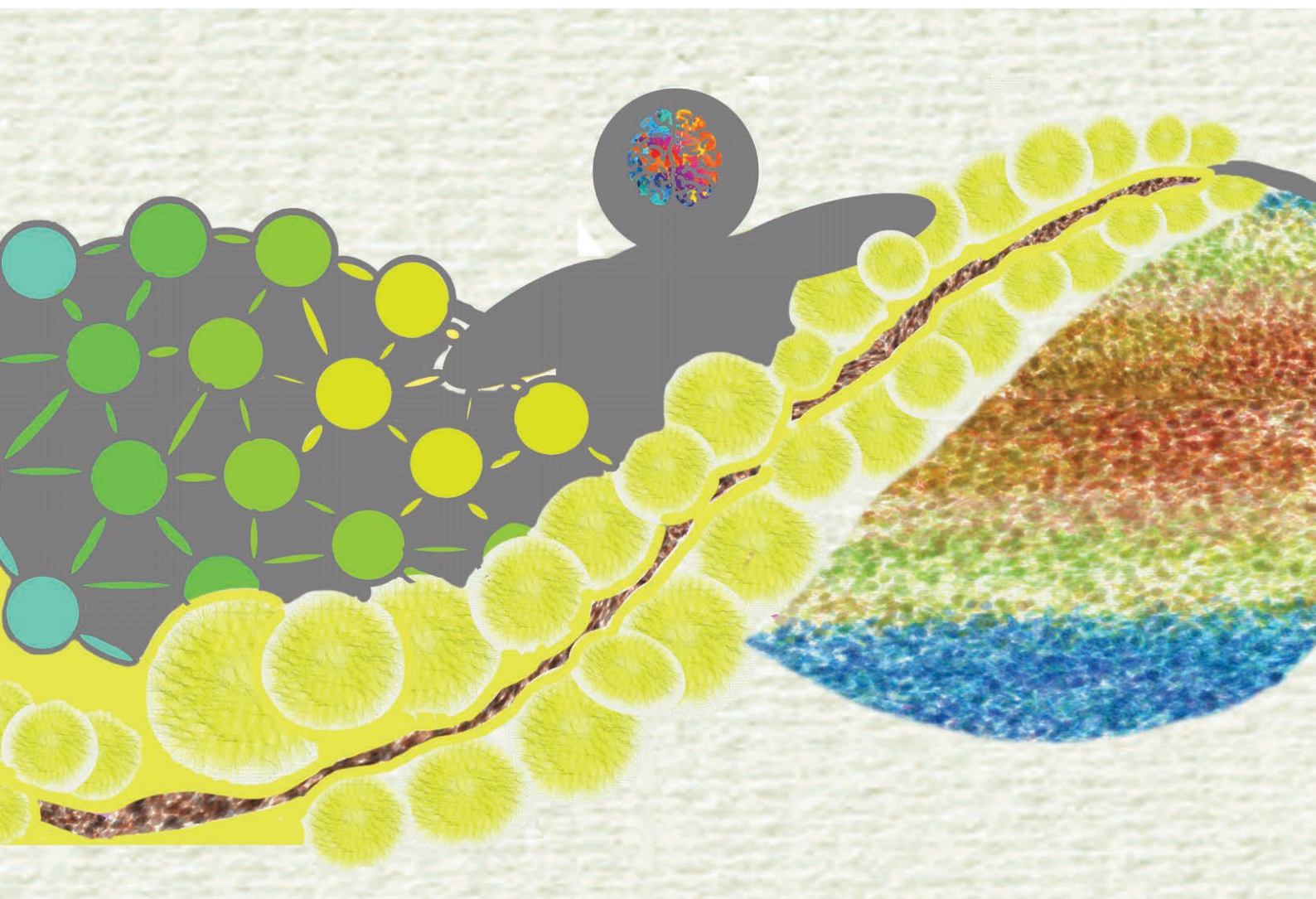


# National Guidance

For best practice in inclusive  
education for autistic students

Draft National Guidance for public consultation

FEBRUARY 2026



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**Suggested citation:** Adams, D., Goodall, E., Carrington, S., Simpson, K., Cayas, A., White, L., Cook, E., Sagers, B., Mavropoulou, S., Champion, C., Ambrose, K., Clarke, B., Waring, T., & Jessop, R. (2026). *National Guidance for best practice in inclusive education for autistic students: Supporting Evidence informing the Draft National Guidance*. Autism CRC.

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## Acknowledgements

The Guidance Development Group (GDG) recognises the many individuals and communities whose time, expertise, and lived experience informed the development of the **National Guidance for best practice in inclusive education for autistic students** (National Guidance).

### Children, youth, families, and community

We acknowledge and thank the autistic children, youth, and adults, family members, educators, and other members of the autistic and autism communities who shared their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences with us. Their contributions shaped the National Guidance from start to finish. In this we include all the people who generously participated in the original research studies identified through our systematic literature searches, everybody who participated in the community consultation activities undertaken specifically to develop this National Guidance, and those who provided feedback on the Draft National Guidance document. Each person's insights were essential to ensuring this National Guidance is grounded in real-world, lived experience and quality research evidence.

### Research assistants

We thank the research assistants who made the analysis of data gathered during the community consultation process and the systematic literature searches possible. Their work in organising, coding, and checking the large volumes of information was critical to the development of the National Guidance. The research assistant team included (in alphabetical order of family name) Kalani Madhusha Loku Liyanage, Lauren Moses, Chris Paradisis, Abby Sesterka, Raechel Smart, Megan Tones, Gilly-Elle Wiltshire, and Lynsey Kennedy-Wood.

### Guidance Reference Group

We acknowledge the members of the Guidance Reference Group (GRG), who brought diverse expertise and perspectives. The organisations represented on the GRG operate in the fields of education; autism; or diversity, equity, and inclusion; or have an interest in supporting autistic children and youth, and inclusive education. Details of GRG members and the organisations they represented are provided further into this document.

### Additional contributions

We also acknowledge individuals who provided advice and practical support at various stages of the National Guidance development. This included Megan Gibson and Rebecca Jessop who attended some GDG meetings, and also those who shared experience and advice from previous Guideline development projects (Rachelle Wicks, Emma Hinze), for which the team are grateful.

**Cover artwork:** Dr Emma Goodall.

## National Guidance funding

Autism CRC funded the development of the National Guidance and its publication.

Dawn Adams (Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University), Emma Goodall (Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology), and Suzanne Carrington (Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology) were appointed Co-chairs of the Guidance Development Group. Kate Simpson (Autism Centre of Excellence, Griffith University) was also a named research lead on the project.

Dawn Adams, Suzanne Carrington, and Kate Simpson contributed to the project on an in-kind basis. Funding provided by Autism CRC to their respective institutions supported the employment of Emma Goodall (through QUT), research fellows and research assistants, the conduct of community consultation activities, and the provision of honoraria for members of the Guidance Development Group.

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# Introduction

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The Recommendations in the National Guidance are grounded in an evidence-based practice framework that integrates three complementary sources of evidence:

1. published research evidence,
2. community perspectives, and
3. professional wisdom of practice.

This integrated approach ensures the National Guidance is informed not only by high-quality research but also by the lived experiences and priorities of autistic students and the wider autistic and autism communities, alongside contemporary professional expertise in education. This document provides an overview of the process used to identify the evidence and draft the Recommendations. It also includes evidence summary tables that present each Guiding Principle and Recommendation alongside examples quotes from the research literature and community consultation activities that were used to generate these Recommendation. These include selected quotations from peer-reviewed studies, community surveys, focus groups, and interviews with autistic young people. The excerpts are provided to exemplify key themes and are sometimes brief segments from broader sources or discussions; they should be interpreted within the context of the full evidence base that will be described in the Administration and Technical Report that follows at project completion.

## Evidence-gathering activities

Evidence was gathered between July and September 2025 through a structured program of research activities, with ethical approval obtained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. The included seven systematic literature reviews, broad national community consultation activities, and a Delphi study with experienced school leaders.

## Systematic literature reviews (SLRs)

To ensure the National Guidance is based upon the most current and relevant international research, seven systematic literature reviews were conducted. Over 64,000 articles published since 2015 were carefully screened. Of these, 507 studies meeting rigorous inclusion criteria for full-text review. Each study was critically appraised using the Quality Appraisal for Diverse Studies (QuADS) tool to ensure methodological rigor and identify potential biases.

## Community consultation

To ensure the National Guidance reflected lived experience, extensive consultation was undertaken with autistic students, autistic adults, families, educators, school staff, allied health professionals, school leaders, and community organisations across Australia. This included two national surveys (completed by 34 autistic youth and 793 adults), 13 focus groups, and individual interviews with autistic young people.

## Delphi study with school leaders

A structured four-round Delphi study with 24 experienced school leaders synthesised professional perspectives on inclusive education and established consensus on priority principles and practices for supporting autistic students in mainstream schools.

# Analysing the evidence

All research and community consultation data were systematically coded, analysed, and synthesised using an iterative process informed by the NHMRC Evidence-to-Decision framework. Initially, evidence from each source was analysed independently. Then, information from the sources were integrated to inform the drafting of Recommendations and practical guidance for implementation. To ensure rigor, coding and evidence extraction followed a structured framework, with inter-rater checking to verify consistency and accuracy.

First, the coded community survey data was read, reviewed and similar codes clustered to provide answers to the questions for research activities and community consultation. The same process was then undertaken for the focus group and interview data. Second, the data from the systematic literature reviews were coded using the codes developed from the community consultation data, with extra codes added if needed (i.e., if the research data covered something additional or different from the community data). Finally, the data from the Delphi Study was read, reviewed, and responses grouped into key ideas. Participants were then asked over subsequent rounds to rank these key ideas from most to least important for inclusive education leadership. In the final round, a consensus was reached about how best to lead inclusive education for autistic students in Australian schools. This was then coded into the community consultation data.

## Writing the Recommendations

Recommendations were carefully formulated based on categorised evidence. Each Recommendation was worded so that it responded directly to the questions asked in the National Guidance. Each Recommendation was written as explicit, detailed, and actionable guidance for schools. The strength and certainty of the supporting evidence for each Recommendation were evaluated by considering the quality and consistency of research, the depth and agreement of community perspectives, and the overall evidence base. Certainty ratings, ranging from high to very low, reflect the strength of evidence (not the importance of the Recommendation itself). All Recommendations represent best practice and are intended for implementation. Table 1 below illustrates this rating scale.

**Table 1. Graphic scale signifying strength of evidence for the National Guidance Recommendations**

| Graphic scale | Strength of evidence   |
|---------------|--|
| ●●●●          | <b>High</b> certainty – the Recommendation is well supported by a range of evidence across research data and community views.  |
| ●●●○          | <b>Moderate</b> certainty – the Recommendation is supported by some evidence across research data and community views but the strength of evidence may not be equal in both sources. |
| ●●○○          | <b>Low</b> certainty – the Recommendation is supported by some evidence, or evidence from research or community views, but further research is required.                             |
| ●○○○          | <b>Very low</b> certainty – the Recommendation is supported by very limited or inconsistent evidence.  |
| ○○○○          | <b>Not recommended</b> (i.e. indication of harm) – the evidence suggests harm may result from such activity, therefore not considered appropriate practice.                          |

The certainty ratings are intended to support informed implementation decisions and do not imply that any Recommendation is less important. All included Recommendations are considered good practice, with no Recommendations based on 'very low' or 'not recommended' certainty levels. A full set of judgements for each Recommendation is provided in the following sections.

# Section 1: Guiding Principles

The Guiding Principles were developed through a co-design process with the GDG, GRG, and national community consultations, drawing on lived experience and professional expertise as primary sources of evidence; as such, research studies are not summarised in the Guiding Principles tables.

## What Guiding Principles should be followed when providing inclusive education to autistic students?

### Guiding Principle 1

**Collaborative:** The approach should be based on genuine and mutual collaboration between students, families, teaching staff, school leadership, administrative and school support staff, and allied health professionals across the whole school journey. Students should, to the extent possible, be actively involved in decisions affecting them. Decisions should be reasonable and desired by or acceptable to students.

#### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Teachers and admin staff who listen to autistic students and their parents/advocates, taking on board what individual students need to access school environments on an equal basis to their peers. These needs must be heard and responded to, rather than dismissed or ignored. [Participant 40, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, former teacher and EA of students with disability and current postgraduate student (autism &amp; neurodivergent studies)]</p> <p>Schools can support inclusion by building strong relationships with families, using interpreters or cultural liaisons when needed, and respecting diverse communication styles and beliefs. Teachers should avoid assumptions, instead seeking to understand each student's unique profile through collaboration with families, support staff, and allied health professionals. [Participant 45, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Schools should include autistic students in decisions that affect them, listening to their experiences and working with families and professionals to co-design inclusive practices. [Participant 23, education professional]</p> |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Looking at IEPs, that needs to have a whole diverse people, and needs to have people from NDIS. Yes, if you can speech therapists or OTs, their point of view, but also leadership, should be part of some of them too. So that, it's all connected. [Participant 4, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>Getting everyone's feedback, whole school perspective, it's everyone's responsibility to support these kids. [Participant 2, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>Listening to the child, listening to the parents and the family and listening to the autistic community at large. As a primary point of focus, because you can go with all of what the books say from your teaching degree and all that stuff, but at the end of the day, this is stuff that actually makes an impact to these people directly, so listen to them. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p>  |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Take the initiative of asking people their needs rather than immediately assuming that they that they do or don't want something. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>It's important that they like see my friends and see how I play, like really understand what the heck I'm saying when I'm like, oh, this is what I do with this friend. Which might sound a little weird in words, but when you actually see it, it might, when they actually see it, it might make a little more sense. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Guiding Principle 2

**Evidence-informed and practice-based:** There should be a setting-wide commitment to ongoing learning based on research and lived experience, including from youth and families, to extend professional knowledge of autism and apply this knowledge to inform practice.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Continuous professional development for staff. [Participant 101, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Schools must listen to experts including parents who are experts on their own children. [Participant 104, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Well trained and resourced staff (teachers, aides, wellbeing and other staff should be trained in up to date, research based information about autistic students and their needs). [Participant 126, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and training to become a health professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>We talk a lot about nervous systems these days, interoception. We have a lot of talk about neurodiversity-affirming practice, but also trauma-informed practice. However, it's not translated into the practice in the classroom. So, passive and active nervous system resets, most teachers at this point in time don't really know what that is, besides the stretch, besides STEM toys. It's really not practically understood enough. There's a theory and a concept, but not an actual understanding. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>I agree about educating the staff... the principal of using evidence-based strategies to support autistic students. This can only happen through professional development. [Participant 2, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> <p>The first thing that comes to my mind is leadership advocating and pushing for professional development and where possible that professional development for staff to be actually run by those who are autistic. We have some people come in and you know, you're sitting there and you're the autistic, the only autistic one in the room and they're giving professional development and you're just thinking, well, this isn't quite right. So I think getting the autistic voices and also trusting your autistic teachers... [and] for those teachers who are openly autistic, for leadership to be showing the adjustments and supports they're providing for the autistic staff. So it's modelled that this is what should be just the norm for our autistic students. [Participant 4, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>The best way to stop rumours and misinformation from spreading is by spreading knowledge. Cause if people were actually educated on what autism actually means rather than what they assume it means or think it means, then it can stop misinterpretations. And it's unfortunate, but a lot of the schools I've been to and even the school I'm at currently, a lot of the kids use the word autistic as an insult. So if there's like one thing like I could do, it'd be to for people to actually be educated on what autism actually means and that it doesn't mean that people are so different. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Guiding Principle 3

**Neurodiversity-affirming/Based in social model of neurodiversity:** An inclusive approach should recognise and celebrate the diverse neurological makeups of individuals, particularly those who are autistic. Neurodiversity-affirming schools should recognise systemic, social, and structural barriers and enablers to inclusion, and demonstrate commitment to removing barriers.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Celebrating and valuing diversity, not trying to change autistic behaviours, having staff that understand neurodiverse affirming practice. [Participant 122, education professional and organisation representative]</p> <p>We also need to foster an inclusive community. Teaching students, families and staff how to accept and embrace each individual. [Participant 48, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Knowledge of autism from a neurodiversity affirming perspective. [Participant 69, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p>  |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>They actually left you out... That's horrible. And, unfortunately, I think a lot of that, the exclusionary things that happened with all the... coddling and bubble wrapping of autistic people is because, oh, we don't want to get, we don't want it to fall back on us if we because you have a disability and we've got to do everything we can in our part. And it's like, well, at the end of the day, like you said, we are people, we are people too. We just think differently and yes, everyone should have the right to, you know, experience everything. Yes, there might be some different considerations for things like camps and socials, but we have accommodations for that. Things like loops. I wear my loops all the time at school because it's just overstimulating constantly and I burnt out because of that. That's just when I wanted, mostly, I just wanted to reach out [to other participant] to say, oh, that was so horrible, but unfortunately everyone has those experiences. [Participant 3, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> <p>If we're trying to make schools inclusive of autistic students, I think the main thing is autism isn't a dirty word. [Participant 1, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> <p>Language used around schools. There needs to be a real focus on training people to use neurodiversity-affirming language. [Participant 3, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>They need to believe us and listen, and different brains are equally important. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>People to be more well educated on um, what autism actually is and what it means for people and how... to actually be able to take the initiative of asking people their needs. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>Especially for some of the students in my class. Like, autistic people are just as capable as normal people. [re: if students believe autistic students are as capable of them] They might actually show some respect. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Guiding Principle 4

**Personalised:** Supports and adjustments in delivery, content, assessment, schedules, and participation should be designed for flexibility to meet each student’s unique needs, strengths, and interests, and to incorporate students’ views and their agency.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Flexibility, support, accommodations. [Participant 118, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Build in social and emotional supports, flexible and individualised supports, collaborate with others and model patience and positive behaviour. [Participant 136, education professional]</p> <p>Accessible curriculum. [Participant 117, education professional]</p>  |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Telling leadership and teachers ‘if you’ve met one autistic person, you have met one autistic person. You need to get to know every single child in the school’. [Participant 1, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>Interest based, and [they] obviously have their strengths in that space. And a lot of knowledge. So, wherever in the curriculum it can be linked in, that really supports their wellbeing because then they feel valued and understood. [Participant 2, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>Meet us where we’re at. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>She was OK with me coming in late. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>I guess they would see me with a headache or something from all the bright lights and noise or something. [re: dimming lights in response to headache] I guess they feel that, uh, that’s not really the best place for a child to be. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> <p>Most of the time I would just spend the time reading books or drawing or doing something like that because I had already finished all the work that was done in the class and, while I was glad that the teachers allowed me to do that, I was kind of disappointed that there wasn’t anything else for me to do, like any sort of extension or anything like that. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> |

## Guiding Principle 5

**Proactive and coordinated:** All actions should be planned and strategically implemented across the whole school journey, including transitions.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Planning learning to support inclusion (UDL). [Participant 2, education professional]</p> <p>Using a Disability and Inclusive Education approach which integrates wellbeing and disability inclusion across operations (Supportive environments = positive educational outcomes). This needs to come from school leadership down. [Participant 30, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Offering adjustments proactively (not waiting until the child asks or is struggling). [Participant 33, parent/caregiver]</p>  |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Communities of practice, genuine collaboration and co-developed strategies. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Recognising that the leadership sets the tone for the school - they need to lead from the front and model best practice. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Stop hiding behind policy: Be open to feedback and repair when harm is caused. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Allow more room for flexibility and allow the individuals to work on the places where they're lacking the most without having to put them into scenarios where one person has an advantage. Because what happens in, as you can imagine, in most sports, is people try to avoid actually going and doing it because they end up getting hurt or injured by the other students who are much more strong and reckless. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>I think that the school is in a little bit of a difficult position where they can't entirely adhere to my needs. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>And she planned out what we're gonna do, in which order, so that I don't miss out on any of the important stuff. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> |

## Guiding Principle 6

**Respectful and culturally responsive:** Approaches should be culturally safe and respectful of cultural, contextual, and individual diversity supported by a whole-school commitment to understanding, curiosity about, and responsiveness to diversity and inclusion.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Having an open mind-set, being willing to accommodate those with additional learning needs. [Participant 20, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>School culture - a willingness to embrace diversity, different ways of being and different ways of doing things. [Participant 88, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, education and health professional]</p> <p>Awareness, understanding, acceptance and commitment to improve experiences. [Participant 74, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, health professional and organisation representative]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>I'd agree with Participant 4 on the there's almost an anti or a tension, a hostility around, you know, the headphones slash audio devices and for my autistic ADHD child that would be incredible, just having that input, but it's just too complicated, so we stay home. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Inclusion specifically and get families giving direct feedback to the school, not just about their child and what their child needs, but about the whole place. [Participant 2, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>It's not really a principle, but presumption of, can we presume competence? Can we presume that we are working with intelligent, capable, incredible little beings and actually stay curious and engaged and, if we're going to mark anything, why not collect what is being given, allow opportunities to share and comment on that, not on the gaps. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p>  |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Not homophobic... yeah, yeah. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old; regarding the need for people to be open-minded, respectful and inclusive]</p> <p>She looked pretty cross and she called out my name and she said, OK, I need to come talk to you, come outside... and she accused me of cheating on a test. There wasn't really any room for like, like it wasn't asking, did you cheat on a test? It was more like you cheated on a test. We're going to call your parents about this. And I was. I was confronted like, yeah, I was mortified. [Interviewer] how could that teacher have handled that situation in a more helpful way to you, do you think? [Student] probably not to confront me... in the middle of class. Probably like sometime at lunch or somewhere else... away from the [other] students. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>She was kind with all the kids and she would treat us differently than all the other teachers. I think she was cool when she wanted to be kind. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p> |

## Guiding Principle 7

**Rights-based:** All approaches to inclusion are grounded in a human rights approach that aims to promote and protect a student’s right to accessing inclusive education at their local, regular school, ensuring accountability for educators to fulfill their obligations.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Consistency and Equity Across Schools. [Participant 188, health professional]</p> <p>Ensuring consistency in access to supports regardless of location or individual attitudes towards autism. [Participant 106, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>Choice and autonomy (no forced participation). [Participant 33, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Feeling that they can contribute to bettering things for everyone. [Participant 50, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Focus on building self-determination - addresses intrinsic motivation, builds autonomy, competence and belonging/connection - inspiring students to work towards the goals which are important and relevant to them, building their capacity to plan for and achieve their goals and aspirations. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Honour non-verbal, visual, artistic, and AAC communication as legitimate learning and expression. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>If a child is in distress, don’t try and force them out of the car into the school. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p>  |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>I should be able to eat and drink when I’m hungry, not just when it is lunchtime. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>It’s unfortunately something that is overlooked a lot in schools. Unfortunately, especially private ones, cause what usually happens is they’re so wrapped up in trying to prevent physical harm that they often forget about the psychological matters. I once was at a school where they had like therapists and everything, but they didn’t actually do anything because I wasn’t getting physically harmed. It didn’t matter really. They didn’t really see it as much as a problem, the psychological damage that was actually being done. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>Kids don’t always, uh, know how to stand up for themselves. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> |

## Guiding Principle 8

**Student-centred:** All activities should be based on a holistic understanding of the individual, including their needs, history, trauma, experiences, interests, strengths, goals, and areas for support.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Understanding of them - their interests, strengths and weaknesses. Understand that all autistic children are different, look at the child and not the label. [Participant 47, education professional]</p> <p>Believing students when they say they are struggling. [Participant 29, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>The ability for the child to go at their own pace. [Participant 24, parent/caregiver]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Prioritise wellbeing over attendance figures. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Respect autonomy and pacing in how students engage, where they learn, and how they express themselves. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Moving away from attitudes /value hierarchies which place neurotypical communication/social/behaviour norms and standards as being the ultimate goal - recognise that autistic and neurodivergent behaviours, communication, social exchanges are different, but NOT deficient, and that differences are valid. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>He said asking. So just asking him, giving him choice. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>She listened to me. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>Understood like what I needed over other kids. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Guiding Principle 9

**Supportive:** Social, physical, and educational spaces should be intentionally structured and designed to meet sensory, emotional, regulation, and learning needs.

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Inclusive learning environments using universal design for learning. [Participant 18, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Wellbeing support/spaces. [Participant 16, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Safe space to regulate as needed. [Participant 738, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Respond to distress with support, not consequences. Crying is communication - not defiance. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Validate non-traditional participation without penalising or requiring justification. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Offer regulation tools, quiet recovery spaces, and co-regulation options across the school day. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Support anyone and everyone, not just like the good students. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>There is too much sitting still. I need to move. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>They've let me go to the wellbeing hub when I get overwhelmed. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

# Section 2: Student wellbeing, belonging, and relationships

## How can autistic students' mental health and wellbeing be supported in school?

### Recommendation 1

Reduce stress and uncertainty for autistic students by providing personalised supports that create predictable, flexible, neurodiversity-informed approaches to learning, participation, and behaviour expectations.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

#### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Danker et al.,2019] Besides this, the teachers believed that students could cope better in schools that offer partial enrolment as these students who feel overwhelmed from attending a full day of lessons could opt for fewer lessons a day.</p> <p>[Tomlinson et al., 2022] The provision of personalised accommodations to help reduce anxiety... included a pass to leave lessons, flexibility in exam arrangements, and the provision of a designated space for support with learning.</p> <p>[Lebenhagen, 2024] Students shared that having access to both speaking and non-speaking methods provided additional time to process information, which improved the accuracy of their messages, and minimized feelings of stress and anxiety in social situations.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Do not measure school performance off attendance and 'marks' as often this adds additional pressure. [Participant 790, health professional]</p> <p>Respond to the unique needs of the child (no one-size-fits all). [Participant 734, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>Instead of fussing about the student missing twenty minutes of learning in order to regulate, be more concerned about them struggling to take in anything all day because they are dysregulated, or being absent for days. [Participant 40, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, former teacher and EA of students with disability and current postgraduate student (autism &amp; neurodivergent studies)]</p>                |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Flexibility - kids might need a term at home to do distance education whilst they are unwell or experiencing burnout, and then return. Not have to jump through hoops to access alternate forms of learning. Part-time options. [Participant 5, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Allow students to choose between rest or movement during breaks and PE based on what best regulates their nervous system. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>I think person-centred really, truly, trauma informed. Unfortunately, the majority of our education departments [the] approach... isn't necessarily a person centred, it really needs to be meeting the child where they're at. [Participant 3, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>She let me go away from the class. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p> <p>I get really overwhelmed by being around people. I can't work properly when I hear people talking, stuff like that. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 48, 24.2%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 20 (medium) to 34 (high). The average score was 27.3 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 301, 71%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p>  |

## Recommendation 2

Ensure teachers are aware of the increased prevalence of mental health challenges among autistic students, the factors that are likely to lead to or increase mental health challenges for autistic students, and the influence of mental health challenges on behaviour.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[González et al., 2024] The teachers who did not have specific ASD training were more likely to use sanctions and criticism responses towards social anxiety.</p> <p>[Adams et al., 2020] Only 46 (50.5%) [of autistic students] felt that others at school knew when they were experiencing anxiety.</p> <p>[Reyes et al., 2022] School providers suggested that providing trainings and increasing teachers' knowledge about mental health would increase their confidence in identifying and managing anxiety symptoms.</p>   |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Schools need to be aware of the overrepresentation of this population in with mental health challenges and suicide to be clear on how significant the impact of neuroinclusive practice is. [Participant 766, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p> <p>Train staff to recognise signs of mental health difficulties. [Participant 23, education professional]</p> <p>Stop labelling children with challenging behaviour as 'bad' and problem solve the 'cause'. [Participant 97, parent/caregiver]</p>   |
|                        |                                | Focus group   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>It's unfortunately something that is overlooked a lot in schools. Unfortunately, especially private ones, cause what usually happens is they're so wrapped up in trying to prevent physical harm that they often forget about the psychological matters. I once was at a school where they had like therapists and everything, but they didn't actually do anything because I wasn't getting physically harmed. It didn't matter really. They didn't really see it as much as a problem, the psychological damage that was actually being done. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles: n = 23 12%. The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 22 (medium) to 33 (high). The average score was 27.8 indicating medium strength. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | Individual survey responses: n = 111, 26%<br>Focus groups: Never mentioned.  |

## Recommendation 3

Implement proactive strategies to support autistic students' mental health, wellbeing, and emotional regulation, using both individualised and class- or setting-wide approaches.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Linimayr et al., 2025] Teachers said they must constantly find stress-reducing strategies to prevent challenging behaviours and reduce peer play conflicts.</p> <p>[Hodges et al., 2020] Educators, in particular, described how peers were often aware of student differences and still tended to label students negatively, if they were not supported to do otherwise. Parents and educators suggested that by being open and transparent about differences; supporting students to recognise their own differences and take on the perspective of others, students may be more accepting of difference and more able to proactively support students in the classroom and playground.</p> <p>[Linimayr et al., 2025] Teachers highlighted peers' roles as supporters. Some can become 'very aware and knowledgeable about what [the child with ASD] needs' (P7, RC-2) and, thus, can function as true facilitators during play. Positive peer culture and relationships were promoted by practising kindness among the children.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Explicitly teach emotional regulation and mental wellbeing strategies. [Participant 162, teacher in regional school for students with special needs]</p> <p>Have regular checkins with a designated person who understands mental health and trauma. [Participant 47, education professional]</p> <p>Celebrate often, be excited, be fun, be positive, plan for the feeling of success, promote hope. [Participant 55, education professional and foster carer]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>Trauma informed schools. We need a school wide approach that builds understanding of the nervous system/neurobiology. Emotional safety and belonging first. Learning cannot occur unless there is safety. [Participant 5, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Safety was what I wanted to add and not just physical safety, but social, emotional safety, sensory safety. Them being able to feel, I mean calm so that they can engage in the other stuff that's on offer. [Participant 3, Allied Health Professional FG_1808]</p> <p>I don't know how it's built into the education now, but that there needs to be a focus on wellbeing in order for students to be able to learn. So it's around that safety piece as well. [Participant 4, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>The best way to stop rumours and misinformation from spreading is by spreading knowledge. Cause if people were actually educated on what autism actually means rather than what they assume it means or think it means, then it can stop misinterpretations. And it's unfortunate, but a lot of the schools I've been to and even the school I'm at currently, a lot of the kids use the word autistic as an insult. So if there's like one thing like I could do, it'd be to for people to actually be educated on what autism actually means and that it doesn't mean that people are so different [and], yeah, [understanding] ADHD too. And like more mental health stuff, cause people immediately assume things about people who have depression and stuff like that. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 4, 2% The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 26 (medium) to 32 (high). The average score was 29.3 indicating medium strength. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 301, 71%<br>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned  |

## Recommendation 4

Foster a trusting, respectful relationship between each autistic student and key members of staff who understand the student, their interests, strengths, needs, and goals.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Tomlinson et al., 2022] Elizabeth felt her pupil passport (information provided to teachers documenting need) helped, as ‘teachers who read it understand it’.</p> <p>[Gray et al., 2023] Professionals repeatedly spoke of the importance of building positive relationships with schools so that ‘parents feel supported and listened to’.</p> <p>[Costley et al., 2021] Students were mostly aware that there were adults in the school who they could turn to for help and support. However, students also discriminated between staff members they would choose to talk to, emphasising trust and relationship.</p> |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Role model respectful interactions consistently for all. The teacher needs to be the one to demonstrate with the autistic student what belonging and connections look like. [Participant 306, education professional]</p> <p>Building better connections with parents and community through positive interactions (e.g., for many parents, not just parents of autistic students, they really only ever hear from the school when something ‘bad’ has happened). [Participant 781, health professional]</p> <p>Develop the trust of the student as a first priority. [Participant 147, education professional]</p>        |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>She’s got a very good rapport with one specific one that she sees. [Participant 2, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Learning how to engage in active citizenship... learning how to get other students in the class to identify needs of other students and activate their helping behaviours and modelling how to then teach other students to help other students in the class and create that group that will change. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> <p>First and foremost, psychological safety. Students can’t do well if they don’t feel safe. [Participant 3, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p>                           |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>They might actually show some respect. [Young person 3, 11 years old; regarding if students believe autistic students are as capable of them, which can be facilitated by staff]</p>  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 24, 12%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 19 (weak) to 33 (high). The average score was 26.5 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 195, 46.0%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p>  |

## Recommendation 5

Provide autistic students with access to qualified mental health practitioners or school counsellors who use neurodiversity-affirming approaches to equip students with strategies and skills to manage mental health challenges and strengthen wellbeing.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Adams et al., 2025] Data for this study comes from a randomised controlled trial of an autism-specific program designed to reduce and/or prevent anxiety in autistic preschoolers; CLK-CUES...a significant difference with moderate effect for the number of school days missed, with children from the intervention group missing over 50% fewer school days than the control group...children in the intervention group demonstrating less separation anxiety at school than the control group... Enablers to children managing their anxiety at school. Parents reported factors that they perceived supported their child to manage their anxiety in the school setting. Responses were coded into 14 subcategories that formed three categories: “supports and strategies used at school,” “routine, modifications, and adaptations at school,” and “other.” The category “strategies and supports used at school” was the most frequently reported category across enablers one (n = 30; 48%), two (n = 29; 48%), and three (n = 32; 58%).</p> <p>[Drmic et al., 2017] Students with autism displayed statistically significant reductions in anxiety... The majority of parents responded that there was some observable reduction in anxiety levels (93.3%) and an increased ability to manage their fears and/or an improvement in emotional wellbeing and behaviors (45.5%). Improvements were noted in worries and behaviors that were specifically targeted in the program, as well as other worries and behaviors that were not identified and targeted. Many parents (79.3%) also reported that their children independently applied some of the coping strategies learned in the program, such as deep breathing, and “using the color coding to verbalize his stress/anxiety level”.</p> <p>[Mackay et al., 2017] A mixed methods pilot randomised controlled trial (N = 29) of the evidence-based Resourceful Adolescent Program–Autism Spectrum Disorder (RAP–A–ASD) designed to prevent depression was conducted in schools with adolescents with ASD in years 6 and 7...There was a significant main effect for time on the adolescent-reported measures of depression (CDI) and strengths and difficulties (SDQ)... 80% of participants experienced their coping as improved and felt better able to manage their emotions and affect in a resourceful manner, and 50% could identify strategies for coping and for emotion regulation that they had learned.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Each school needs a psych/counsellor with experience in autism, and the interplay this has on mental health. [Participant 129, health professional]</p> <p>They need to meet the kids where they are at and try to work with the child to see what helps support their mental health in the classroom. [Participant 81, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>I think all schools should have professional counselling available on site. (And find appropriate rooms for it to take place in.) [Participant 156, autistic individual and education professional]</p> <p>Support visitation by outside providers - counselling, occupational therapists, psychologists. [Participant 225, parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                        | Focus group             | Support them as best [as you can], and then it comes also around to having those external therapists and things. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]   |
|                        | Young persons interview | It's unfortunately something that is overlooked a lot in schools. Unfortunately, especially private ones, cause what usually happens is they're so wrapped up in trying to prevent physical harm that they often forget about the psychological matters. I once was at a school where they had like therapists and everything, but they didn't actually do anything because I wasn't getting physically harmed. It didn't matter really. They didn't really see it as much as a problem, the psychological damage that was actually being done. [Young person 2, 14 years old]  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 38, 19%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 15 (weak) to 37 (high). The average score was 27.7 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 195, 24.8%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>   |

# How can schools support and promote positive peer relationships for autistic students in school?

## Recommendation 6

Promote positive peer relationships for autistic students by creating a school culture that authentically celebrates autistic students and promotes inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming attitudes.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Davidson &amp; Morales, 2023] This study evaluated the effectiveness of a virtual autism acceptance program presented to typically developing, 8–10-year-old children through remote learning technology..The greatest increases in children’s learning included general knowledge about autism and strengths about autism.</p> <p>[Cunningham, 2022] Four pupils felt that it was important that they and their peers understood more about autism so that their behaviour was not viewed as ‘weird’.</p> <p>[Miles et al., 2019] Participants emphasised social inclusion as a key aspect of belonging, giving examples of instances where their peers had made them feel valued.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Teach the other kids to be kind! Teach them to accept difference. Why is it always on the autistic person to change? [Participant 28, autistic individual, parent/ caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>All students need to understand diversity, develop an inclusive mindset and be supported to understand how to welcome and support students who are different to them. [Participant 230, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Education about diversity, teach values around the many differences across people (not just autistic students). [Participant 679, education and health professional with two roles - one in a school, the other in private practice]</p>                |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>We should also make our other students aware of how to be inclusive. [Participant 2, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p> <p>It’s not just about, you know, educating the students, it’s also about even first and foremost educating the staff. Because I think a lot of student negative experiences come from, you know, their peers that aren’t educated and you know, make all those jokes about autism. [Participant 3, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p>  |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>When like... some of my friends... only really ever play like easy to copy games or games that everyone’s played before. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | High      | <p>Research articles: n = 80, 40.4%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 15 (weak) to 35 (high). The average score was 26.6 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 198, 59.1%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p>  |

## Recommendation 7

Ensure that all students in the school community are provided with opportunities to learn skills to support social interactions and relationships.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Raghavendra et al., 2025] All stakeholders reported positive effects of LEGO® robotics therapy on students’ social connection, engagement, and confidence.</p> <p>[Kacar &amp; Gul, 2025] After the implementation, the preschool teacher stated that TD children’s playing skills improved.</p> <p>[Burcu &amp; Ebru, 2025] A remarkable finding was that TD children displayed positive social and physical behaviors after a six-month implementation... Observation and daily data were consistent with interview and sociometry results. The children demonstrated prosocial behaviors, could control emotions, and became role models without any adult guidance.</p>                   |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Teaching neurotypical kids about the different ways autistic kids communicate (double empathy) Autistic kids should be free to be themselves and should never have to adjust or mask themselves to fit in. [Participant 129, health professional]</p> <p>All students should be shown how to recognise the different qualities of all people and not how to socialise with people with ‘special needs’. [Participant 250, autistic individual, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Focus on supporting the development of social communication skills for all children, as well as teaching students to explore and understand individual differences. [Participant 742, organisation representative]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>And teaching social skills class as part of PE would also be very help in building , forming communication skills in building friendships. [Participant 5, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> <p>Some students will need to be taught how to understand the interactions of the group and the reactions of other people to the way they present themselves. [Participant 2, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p>  |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>Yes. [Young person 3, 11 years old; in response to question “So are your friends quite important to you at school?”]</p>   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | High      | <p>Research articles: n = 52, 26.3%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 15 (weak) to 35 (high). The average score was 24.7 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 86; 20.3%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>  |

## Recommendation 8

Respect autistic students' preferences when supporting the formation and maintenance of positive peer relationships.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Tomlinson et al., 2022] Bella acknowledged the importance of... support managing friendship challenges...Helpful interventions identified by Elizabeth included support from staff with managing conflict.</p> <p>[Stack et al., 2020] Some children spoke about the reassurance of having understanding friends or peers who had transferred with them from primary school... parents expressed concern that, despite requests beforehand, their children had been separated from the majority of their primary school peers in their new schools.</p> <p>[Fox &amp; Ashbury, 2024] The types of games that children wanted to play were closer to the preferences of younger children, such as roleplay or structured gameplay and this was something children spoke of being missing from their current friendships.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Stop trying to force them to have more friends... Stop taking their friends off them because you think they need to 'branch out'. [Participant 104, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Provide structured (but not forced) opportunities for connections. [Participant 162, teacher in regional school for students with special needs]</p> <p>Authentic friendships between students should be celebrated and promoted, even when this might exceed the typical school structures. For example, good friends may be placed together in the same class even if this goes against typical processes/policy, in order to protect student sense of positive peer connection. [Participant 271, education professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group                    | You can't expect that the same strategies and the same accommodations are going to work for every autistic student. [Participant 3, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | A friend I once knew, and she used to make jokes about autism all the time. She wasn't very nice about it, but when she actually, like, learned that her friends had autism and stuff like that, and she actually managed and she actually like had the initiative to take time out of her day and do research and like be able to talk to them about like what they need and stuff like that. She's a really nice person and she she actually, um she's actually learnt more about the topic and what she said to me before is that she just didn't know about it and because she didn't know about it, she just went off what everyone else was saying. [Young person 2, 14 years old]  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 71 35.9%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 6 (weak) to 34 (high). The average score was 25.6 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 117, 38.4%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>   |

## Recommendation 9

Intentionally provide accessible spaces and activities that encourage opportunities for autistic students to meaningfully engage with peers across all aspects of school life.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Fox et al., 2023] Highlighting the importance of providing children with safe and supportive spaces in which they can engage with peers.</p> <p>[Fox &amp; Ashbury, 2024] Alongside this, having shared interests was supportive. For some, having a shared interest they could use as an anchor point for conversations was helpful, and children often included their favorite activity or object as their favorite thing to do with friend.</p> <p>[Ólafsdóttir et al., 2024] Most participants wanted to be involved in decision-making regarding their school participation and support needs... The adolescents claimed that more emphasis should be placed on social participation in school and school-related events.</p>                              |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>A safe environment for students to go to at lunchtime where they can retreat and interact with like minded children. [Participant 109, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Provide supervised activities at break times that students can participate in together [Participant 106, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>Having school clubs outside of the curriculum - from robotics, insect appreciation, chess, drama, singing, dance, games, etc. having a mentor programme within this structure so the older kids can mentor the younger ones, etc. [Participant 614, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p>   |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Inclusive practices, policies, creating a community where everyone is encouraged and accepted. [Participant 1, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>Making sure that the relevance comes back to them and who they are in their community. [Participant 1, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>It was good. Yeah, yeah. I went to cross country at the new school. They just did a loop around the school, so I had to do 3 loops worth of 3 kilometres. They started doing that. All the kids come up to me and they're like you look red. I'm like, well, yeah, I've just been running 3 kilometres. And they're like, are you puffed? And I'm like, yes, then they ask all these questions and I'm like, yes... With the kids support, what they do is they form this little like sort of little group sort of thing where all the kids would huddle together and every time they see me they'd like run over. And they'd be cheering and everything. And then, um, they met me at the finish line. Yeah, and everything. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p> |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 57, 28.6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 6 (weak) to 32 (high). The average score was 24.2 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 134; 31.3%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>  |

# How can bullying or negative interactions be prevented for autistic students in school?

## Recommendation 10

Implement proactive strategies to prevent bullying by providing autistic students with access to trusted peers and safe, supervised spaces during less structured parts of the school day.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Lu et al., 2022] Participants who had higher positive friendship quality (AOR=0.40, 95% CI 0.23–0.70, P=0.001) were less likely to experience insults or teasing.</p> <p>[Carrington et al., 2017] Parents suggested that one way to alleviate incidences of bullying at school was to provide supervised activities at unstructured times (e.g. at lunch, before and after school), specifically for students with ASD.</p> <p>[Danker et al., 2019] About half of the teachers discussed strategies to heighten students' sense of safety in school, which included... creating safe places.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Ensuring they are in classes with friends and not children who are known to bully or tease them. [Participant 24, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Provide safe space, low sensory environments for them to connect with others without fear of being harassed or labelled. [Participant 39, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Be *very* aware of blind spots, re bullying out of sight. Minimise these... [Participant 621, parent/caregiver]</p>   |
|                        |                                | Focus group  |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>The feeling of safety for people to know that it's safe for them to be able to talk to teachers about what's going on and not to have to worry about being hurt. For people not to have to fear going to school because of how they'll be judged. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 49, 24.8%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 20 (medium) to 33 (high). The average score was 26.5 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 11, 33.3%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>  |

## Recommendation 11

Build a safe and supportive school culture that responds swiftly to any acts of bullying, harassment, or assault.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Hebron et al., 2015] In particular, the importance of a clear and effective antibullying policy that everyone understood and implemented emerged strongly... The significance of understanding and acting upon bullying behaviour was highlighted by parents in terms of the school ethos.</p> <p>[Carrington et al., 2017] Both students and parents commented on the need for improvements in education around bullying.</p> <p>[Danker et al., 2019] Having a sense of safety is another domain of student wellbeing as most teachers believe that all students, including those with ASD should feel secure, comfortable, and nurtured in school. About half of the teachers discussed strategies to heighten students' sense of safety in school, which included establishing and adhering to school policies to promote safety (e.g., anti-bullying policies), creating safe places, and ensuring that students have a person in school whom they felt safe with... Likewise, the teachers believed that students with ASD when anxious or troubled, could confide in their safe person, such as a teacher, counsellor, or peer, and this could have a calming effect on them.</p> |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Intervening promptly to prevent bullying or exclusion. [Participant 23, education professional]</p> <p>Ongoing anti bullying education and comprehensive neurodiversity affirming processes and policies when bullying occurs. [Participant 244, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Address bullying in a proactive way, have inclusive events, promote help seeking within the student body. [Participant 313, parent/caregiver]</p>   |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Strict bullying policies and that seems to be a really big issue for a lot of the kids that I work with that leave mainstream. So there needs to be clear processes, procedures. And it's complex, I know that. [Participant 2, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>Hey buddy, they don't actually understand your sarcasm. [Participant 2, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>  |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>Standing up to kids, that use the word autistic in a derogatory way. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 14, 71%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 20 (weak) to 33 (high). The average score was 26 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 68, 16.0%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>  |

# How can autistic students be supported to feel connected and/or a sense of belonging in their school?

## Recommendation 12

Enable autistic students to be their authentic selves by creating emotionally safe, predictable school environments.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Cunningham, 2022] All eleven pupils wanted access, throughout the day, to a quiet/safe space as this helped them to manage their feelings of anxiety. This became more important to the pupils as they moved through the school. Seven of the pupils spoke about adults being aware of their safe/quiet space; three kept the need to access it hidden from adults.</p> <p>[Danker et al., 2019] Having a sense of safety is another domain of student wellbeing as most teachers believe that all students, including those with ASD should feel secure, comfortable, and nurtured in school.</p> <p>[Goodall, 2018] Anxiety can stem from an autistic person's need for predictability and routine. They often need to feel that they have control within their environment.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Actively encourage activities and environments known to be comforting/enjoyable to the student. [Participant 527, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Understand and Recognise masking so can work with students and families in how the student can be their true authentic self. [Participant 625, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Teachers and schools should create a safe, predictable, and understanding environment where students feel accepted and supported... building strong, trusting relationships; using consistent routines; and offering emotional regulation tools... or quiet spaces... recognise signs of stress or overload early and respond with care rather than discipline. Supporting wellbeing also means reducing social pressure, allowing students to interact in ways that feel comfortable, and respecting their need for downtime or sensory regulation... creating a school culture that embraces neurodiversity and promotes kindness, flexibility, and inclusion can make a significant difference in the wellbeing of autistic students. [Participant 45, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Allowing them to express themselves, be themselves, and know that they're valued and wanted. [Participant 1, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>We can't forget that they're also a child first or an individual first. [Participant 3, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p> <p>Safety to be themselves without judgment. [Participant 4, AH.FG_1808]</p> <p>Creating a student experience that, from the beginning, is normalized that difference is normal and OK. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>The best way to stop rumours and misinformation from spreading is by spreading knowledge. Cause if people were actually educated on what autism actually means rather than what they assume it means or think it means, then it can stop misinterpretations. And it's unfortunate, but a lot of the schools I've been to and even the school I'm at currently, a lot of the kids use the word autistic as an insult. So if there's like one thing like I could do, it'd be to for people to actually be educated on what autism actually means and that it doesn't mean that people are so different. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | High      | <p>Research articles: n = 73, 36.9%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 6 (weak) to 33 (high). The average score was 26.1 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 196, 46.2%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>  |

## Recommendation 13

Ensure autistic students feel trusted, respected, heard, and valued by ensuring authentic listening to their perspectives.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Miles et al., 2019] Participants saw friendship as an important basis for belonging and as beneficial for their school experience.</p> <p>[Goodall &amp; MacKenzie, 2019] Autistic young people need to be: Understood and listened to and rather than them [teachers] just patronising you and telling you to go and sit on your own until you are ok.</p> <p>[Stack et al., 2020] Both parents (3) and the children (3) described “not feeling heard” or “believed”, and as a result often no longer reported issues to the school, as they did not expect their problems to be addressed.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Students must be seen as individuals and heard in the process and it takes a village to support this with curiosity, knowledge and kindness. [Participant 766, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p> <p>Don't diminish a student's response to how they are feeling by ignoring or not addressing their concern in a genuine and empathetic manner. [Participant 686, education and health professional]</p> <p>Relationships with trusted adults is key - this is for all students. When we have strong relationships and connections, where all students feel that they matter and are valued, we can make steps towards a sense of belonging. [Participant 117, education professional]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Build peer inclusion programs that normalise differences and actively promote belonging. [Participant 1, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Unconditional positive regard for children. DIFFERENT, NOT LESS. [Participant 5, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>Yeah, some of the kids would help me in a &lt;name of garden&gt; garden. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p> <p>Kindy to year four, there's uh one to two year fives and year six who sort of like teach you some stuff. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 21, 10.6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 20 (medium) to 33 (high). The average score was 27 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 128, 30.2%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p>   |

# Section 3: Pedagogy and teaching practices

## What do teachers and schools need to know and do to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices for autistic students?

### Recommendation 14

Implement personalised and flexible approaches to planning, teaching, and evaluation to support and develop the individual learning needs and goals of autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

#### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Ališauskienė &amp; Grigėnaitė, 2023] Organization of education, taking into account the child's characteristics, abilities, needs, and interests.</p> <p>[Nthibeli et al., 2022] Involve learners in the planning of the lesson and to allow them to choose their preferred method of learning.</p> <p>Flexibility and modification... Incorporating interests... Activities and clubs.</p>   |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Being flexible with how assessments are given &amp; options in how to respond &amp; share their knowledge. [Participant 38, education professional]</p> <p>Use approaches such as Universal Design for Learning to provide multiple ways of accessing and engaging with learning and assessment for all students - this should be done proactively during planning and then monitored &amp; adjusted as needed. [Participant 224, autistic individual and health professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>Flexibility supports access: The environment must adapt to the learner - not the other way around... OR allowing someone time and options. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>There is no single 'right' way to learn - teaching must be flexible to honour different processing styles. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Offer multiple ways to access and demonstrate learning - multimodal (written, verbal, visual, project-based). [Participant 6, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p>                        |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>I like being in control of what I'm doing. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>I need to follow my interests and learn that way. [Young person 1, 11 years old, voiced by parent]</p> <p>Don't make me write if I don't want to. Let me type. And he said don't make me talk if I don't want to, and don't make me read out loud if I don't want to. [Young person 1, 11 years old, voiced by parent]</p> <p>He said asking. So just asking him, giving him choice. [Young person 1, 11 years old, voiced by parent]</p> |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles: n = 29, 24%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 12 (weak) to 28 (medium). The average score was 19.3, indicating weak strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 242, 31%<br><br>Focus groups: Always mentioned.   |

## Recommendation 15

Deliver structured and consistent teaching to ensure clarity, predictability, and regular opportunities for autistic students to practise and generalise learning across contexts.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Pettersson-Bloom &amp; Bölte, 2022] Different types of visual support (e.g., digital pictures, photographs, objects) applied flexibly in different contexts.</p> <p>[Stephenson et al., 2021] Uses visuals, has routines and structure, uses explicit teaching, uses rewards.</p> <p>[Harper-Hill et al., 2021] Multimodal Communication... Structured Teaching.</p>   |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Clear... written instructions for all tasks in conjunction with verbal. [Participant 786, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, education professional and graduate researcher - autism research]</p> <p>Use visual methods of information delivery in addition to verbal and keep it simple - e.g. videos, practical demonstration, pictures, step-by-step instructions, hand gestures. [Participant 287, health professional and organisation representative]</p> <p>Be clear on what is and what is not necessary so that effort is directed at the most important things and not spent on things that are more like 'busy work'. [Participant 687, parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Predictability and clarity are not 'extra help' - they are part of universal design for learning. [Participant 6, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Provide visual schedules, structured routines, and predictable transitions as a standard support. [Participant 10, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Normalising adaptation: Teaching strategies that benefit autistic students (visual supports, chunked tasks) should be considered good teaching for all. [Participant 9, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p>  |
|                               | Young persons interview        | No data  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 56, 47%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 13 (weak) to 31 (strong).</p> <p>The average score was 19.9, indicating weak strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 84, 11%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.</p>   |

## Recommendation 16

Collaboratively develop and regularly review individual education plans with autistic students, families, and professionals to align with student goals, needs, and preferences.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Fortuny-Guasch et al., 2024] Involve student in decision making that affects them.</p> <p>[Pettersson-Bloom, 2021] Planning and preparation amongst professionals.</p> <p>[Stokes et al., 2017] Support staff... Discussions with parents... identify students' individual learning needs.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Spend time understanding each child's profile and work closely with parents and allied health professionals to figure out effective neuro-affirming supports and practices that will suit each child. [Participant 230, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Set goals together- involve kids in the planning for their individualised plans. Revisit the goals regularly. ASK THE STUDENT WHAT THEY NEED to achieve their goals. Communicate the goals to all involved including families and external therapists. [Participant 88, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, and education and health professional]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Take time to sit down and listen, not just hear it, we need to listen and we need to help them and support them that way. [Participant 2, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p> <p>There has to be an inherent openness to have that conversation and then actually show evidence to the child and to the family that you've listened to that and put it in place. [Participant 4, Allied Health FG_2508]</p> <p>We've got to have those connections with the therapists and the families or we can't do our jobs. We're one person in a classroom. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p>                                |
|                               | Young persons interview        | Autistic people are just as capable as normal people. [Young person 3, 11 years old]  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 26, 22%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 13 (weak) to 26 (medium). The average score was 19.9, indicating weak strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>n = 216, 27%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.</p>  |

## Recommendation 17

Create emotionally safe learning environments through neurodiversity-affirming, trauma-informed pedagogy and teaching practices that foster belonging, wellbeing, and engagement.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | [Conn et al., 2020] Boost pupils' self-confidence and make them feel good about themselves... acting respectfully towards children, listening to them, and valuing what they said and did... children feel sufficiently comfortable to learn.<br>[Stephenson et al., 2021] Kind, caring, supportive.<br>[Dukpa et al., 2024] Strength-based approach.  |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | Shift from punishment to support; manage meltdowns or challenges with compassion and strategy. [Participant 109, parent/caregiver]<br>Focus on relationship building to create a safe space, be vigilant about potential bullying and exclusion from other students. [Participant 243, parent/caregiver]   |
|                        | Focus group                    | I almost think teaching needs to be put to the one side until you've got a good, strong level of trust, mutual respect between you and the students. [Participant 1, Teacher 2.FG_1908]<br>Understanding that every person's needs are different but the rules not that they need to be individualised, but the approaches need to be individualised to the student rather than a catch all rule, I suppose. So, many schools have their values. It's understanding [what] those values look like with different students. And like, I mean, most schools have the value of responsibility, and responsibility for my son will look different ... my son's understanding of responsibility looks different to an understanding of a neurotypical classmate, so I don't know how to put that in words of principles, but I suppose it's just around that understanding that everybody's brains are different. [Participant 3, Parent 2.FG_1408] |
|                        | Young persons interview        | Uh, she had enthusiasm, unlike every other teacher... she actually cared about her job rather than like, you know, sitting there watch us do stuff. She actually engaged with us, made stuff fun. [Young person 3, 11 years old]   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles: n = 23, 20%<br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 12 (weak) to 24 (medium). The average score was 20.3, indicating medium strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 65, 8%<br>Focus groups: Always mentioned.   |

# How can autistic students be supported with equitable access to curriculum and assessment?

## Recommendation 18

Establish inclusive curriculum planning processes that centre on student perspectives, lived experience, and collaboratively designed adjustments.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Pettersson-Bloom, 2021] Planning and preparation amongst professionals... First understand the situation, then adjust the situation/context... Evaluate visual support and adjustments.</p> <p>[Zeedyk et al., 2024] The content is carefully planned with clear choices for children that are motivated by the children’s own interests and their play.</p> <p>[Hassani &amp; Aydin, 2025] Student-centred approaches, where students have a say in designing activities and choosing games.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Know and understand the learner. Where appropriate speak to the learner or their advocate and make the relevant adjustments for the student. [Participant 687, autistic individual and education professional]</p> <p>Talk to the students and their parents. Ask them what they need and how you can help. [Participant 628, autistic individual]</p> <p>Ask for student voice. Collaborate with families on ideas... sensory items and equipment that meets individual needs. [Participant 725, education professional]</p>   |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>I think it’s that knowing your students, it’s making sure that we are age stage appropriate. That we are needing what they get. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Rather than trying to get autistic students to fit into the box, trying to work like a strengths-based approach. So not deficit. And, if you’re going to do like a like a skill building class to do it with all the students, not just autistic students. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> <p>All she needed was for teaching staff to believe her. When she needed a particular adjustment and then adjustments would be denied because, for a variety of reasons. So, being believed, student voice, is absolutely crucial and compliant. [Participant 2, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>People to be more well educated on um, what autism actually is and what it means for people and how and to actually be able to take the initiative of asking people their needs rather than immediately assuming that they that they do or don’t want something. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles: n = 23, 20%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 14 (weak) to 24 (medium). The average score was 19.4, indicating weak strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 147, 19%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.   |

## Recommendation 19

Design and implement flexible and responsive assessment practices to accurately capture autistic students' learning.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Conn et al., 2020] Careful assessment of the pupil in the here and now.</p> <p>[Petersson-Bloom, 2021] Visual support with variations. Individually designed visual support... Sign-supported speech... Planning and preparation amongst professionals... Verbal explanations - Altering methods of explanation, emphasis on concrete information... Clarifying the beginning and the end of the activity... Structured physical environment... Alter explanations, use concrete communication, be calm... Evaluate visual support and adjustments.</p> <p>[Aporta &amp; de Lacerda, 2018] Developed activities following the same structure both for the activities and assessment in the classroom and for the tasks to be done at home. She used the same instruction just changing the alternatives, images or words.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>All autistic students have different needs which will change, understanding demands and deadlines may cause anxiety for some, and provide options for students to move in and out of different sensory environments. [Participant 789, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Assessment should reflect a student's ability, not their ability to navigate barriers. Providing extra time, access to quiet spaces, and assistive technologies – such as noise-cancelling headphones, speech-to-text software, or alternative formats – can make assessments more inclusive. [Participant 779, education and health professional]</p> <p>Show examples/exemplars of finished assessments/learning. [Participant 686, parent/caregiver]</p>  |
|                        |                                | Focus group   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>I need to follow my interests and learn that way. [Young person 1, 11 years old, voiced by parent]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles: n = 49, 41%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 12 (weak) to 28 (medium). The average score was 19.5, indicating weak strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 283, 36%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.   |

# How can school-wide pedagogical approaches support practices that provide equitable classroom engagement, participation, and progress for autistic students in inclusive classrooms?

## Recommendation 20

Use strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming language across all school communication and reporting practices.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Gledhill &amp; Currie, 2020] Schools develop an inclusive ethos.</p> <p>[Hersh &amp; Elley, 2019] Find a method of communication that is accepted by the autistic person” ... awareness of the child’s perspective, empathy with probable feelings, and respect... recognition of the importance of a communication system appropriate to the particular child... valuing diversity... focussing on the strengths rather than weaknesses of all students... encouraging integration... “teaching the children how to understand the child with autism...what his or her behaviour means.</p> <p>[Bolourian et al., 2022] Showcasing Special Talents and Strengths, Visual Aids... Taking an Interest in Student Interests.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Create a welcoming learning environment that supports all students and their learning needs. [Participant 743, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Schools should actively celebrate cultural and neurodivergent diversity to foster pride and belonging. [Participant 779, education and health professional]</p> <p>Strengths-based communication/reporting. [Participant 71, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional who works in education - government department]</p> <p>Trauma-informed practice as a whole school approach. [Participant 39, parent/caregiver]</p>  |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>I think it needs to be decentralised power, so everybody has an equal voice because we all are experts in different areas. We all approach things from different points and it can bring in new ideas. [Participant 2, Allied Health Professional FG_1808]</p> <p>Good teachers find ways to build up a child profile so their peers see them as successful contributors. [Participant 10, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Understanding a autistic way of connecting and collaborating and modelling to the class what the different ways of autistic way of connecting and collaborating looks like and bridging that skill and also learning how to channel different ways of connecting and collaborating, while also not derailing the class and so if somebody's way of connecting is to make loud remarks about their observations, maybe working with them to come up with an individual strategy where you know the teacher can collaboratively ask if the individual wants to maybe text those things, and those text messages will be acknowledged in some form in the class. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Offering like support rather than punishments. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>There wasn't really any room for like, like it wasn't asking, did you cheat on a test? It was more like you cheated on a test. We're going to call your parents about this. And I was. I was confronted like, yeah, I was mortified. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 7, 6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 16 (weak) to 23 (medium). The average score was 19.1, indicating weak strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 38, 4.8%</p> <p>Focus groups: Always mentioned.</p>   |

## Recommendation 21

Embed inclusive teaching as part of a whole-school approach to facilitate equitable participation, engagement, and progress for autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Conn et al., 2020] Identification with a community of knowledgeable practitioners within a school was apparent for all participants... Important knowledge about practice was felt to be generated from discussions... informal conversations on an ad hoc basis with colleagues who also knew a child well were most useful in supporting effective practice.</p> <p>[Stephenson et al., 2021] Suitable professional learning or information is available.</p> <p>[Hasson et al., 2024] Many staff advocated whole school approaches to ASD, believing this would help all pupils: Autism peer awareness.</p> |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>We must resource teachers with coaching, mentoring, and reflective spaces where they can safely examine biases, internalised ableism, and begin to deconstruct behaviourist training. [Participant 69, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>Whole school approaches work best so it should be for all teachers and staff and school wide. [Participant 315, education professional]</p>  |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Having the confidence in what you're doing, and having that knowledge of your students to just be like, well, that's what they need now. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Knowing where they're at to be able to support them. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Yes, they have specific ways of learning, but we can't forget that they're also a child first or an individual first. And it's not just about behaviour and what we see, it's everybody, all holistic development underpinning what we do. [Participant 3, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>They need to believe us and listen, and different brains are equally important. [Young person 1, 11 years old, voiced by parent]</p> <p>Uh, she had enthusiasm, unlike every other teacher. Like, um, she actually cared about her job rather than like, you know, sitting there watch us do stuff. She actually engaged with us, made stuff fun. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 7, 5.9%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 17 (weak) to 24 (medium). The average score was 19.6, indicating weak strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 33, 4.2%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.</p>   |

# What knowledge, skills, training, and supports are required to prepare and sustain teachers for supporting autistic students?

## Recommendation 22

Ensure teaching staff understand autism and its impact on learning, regulation, and engagement through ongoing professional learning, coaching, and collaboration.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Hummerstone &amp; Parsons, 2021] Understand the needs of individual students on the autism spectrum... understanding students was a good way to support them... impact of sensory differences students on the autism spectrum experience.</p> <p>[Nolan &amp; Hannah, 2019] Listening to young people with ASD speak about their experience... Gaining an understanding of ASD and associated needs... Hearing about how having a communication disorder affects individuals from their own perspective... Learning about strategies that can be used to support individuals with language and communication difficulties.</p> <p>[Nolan &amp; Hannah, 2019] Learning about how the environment can impact the child... Time for professional dialogue with colleagues... Learning about needs and how to meet them.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Teachers also need ongoing coaching, preferably from a teacher or school leader or school counsellor with lived experience, particularly as a beginning teacher. Ongoing professional development is crucial as things are constantly changing and evolving. [Participant 88, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, education professional and health professional]</p> <p>Neurodiversity-affirming training on understanding autism and strategies to support autistic students (preferably autistic-led). [Participant 224, autistic individual and health professional]</p> <p>Skills in working with parents, therapists, and inclusion support staff to create consistent and individualised learning plans. This training needs to be accompanied by time for teachers to reflect, collaborate, and implement what they've learned. [Participant 123, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Let's not assume that we know best. [Participant 1, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>When there's clear, concise information that's easily communicated between humans... because it is frustrating when you see that, if that had just been handed over, then that child would have had a much better day. [Participant 4, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>In terms of what teachers need to know and understand about autistic brains. They need to really understand and accommodate for fluctuating capacity. These kids can't do the same thing every single day. You can't just expect them to do what they did yesterday... The other is understanding Gestalt processing and how a lot of autistic kids need to understand the big picture before they can actually do all the little bits and pieces. So again, changing the system, because the way they teach is, I'm going to teach you this tiny little bit about money for three weeks this year and then next year we'll build on it some more. And if you don't know where you're heading, the little bits and pieces are often quite useless for our kids. Which, again, comes back to just understanding strengths and weaknesses and how different kids learn. [Participant 4, Allied Health Professional FG_1808]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>People to be more well educated on um, what autism actually is and what it means for people and how and to actually be able to take the initiative of asking people their needs rather than immediately assuming that they that they do or don't want something. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 63, 53%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 14 (weak) to 29 (medium). The average score was 20.9, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 550, 69%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.</p>   |

# Section 4: Collaboration, connections, and leadership

## What leadership approaches, including beliefs and use of inclusive language, best support and promote a culture where diversity is embraced?

### Recommendation 23

Develop and communicate a setting-wide vision for inclusion that reflects neurodiversity-affirming values and is co-designed with input from autistic students and families.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

#### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | [Lüddeckens, et a., 2022] Visionary leadership: This is important for developing an inclusive practice. It sets an example that influences the staff and surrounding community.<br><br>[Martin et al., 2019] Developing and sharing of good practice between schools; opportunities for parents of autistic pupils to discuss their concerns, particularly with someone with insider perspective; and exploration of creative ways to achieve pupil involvement and the idea that good autism practice has the potential to benefit all pupils. |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Advocate for inclusive practices by considering student needs when planning. [Participant 2, education professional]</p> <p>School leaders need to drive attitudinal and practical change, embedding inclusion in their own practice and into policy. Inclusive school environments are built on school leaders. [Participant 40, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, former teacher and EA of students with disability and current postgraduate student (autism and neurodivergent studies)]</p> <p>Model acceptance and inclusion for the whole school and the school community. [Participant 291, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Understanding that every person's needs are different but the rules not that they need to be individualised, but the approaches need to be individualised to the student rather than a catch all rule, I suppose. So, many schools have their values. It's understanding [what] those values look like with different students. And like, I mean, most schools have the value of responsibility, and responsibility for my son will look different ... my son's understanding of responsibility looks different to an understanding of a neurotypical classmate, so I don't know how to put that in words of principles, but I suppose it's just around that understanding that everybody's brains are different. [Participant 3, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Embracing the voice of the student, the voice of the parents, the community embracing those around us. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Listen to the child. If they're old enough to explain for themselves, listen to them. If not, listen to their family because the family know the kid best, what works for them. What do they need? You know, valuing them as an individual. I guess it comes back almost to say, human rights. That sounds rather extreme, but they've got to be heard and a to be valued. You know, you can't come in making sweeping decisions for them... Let's not assume that we know best. [Participant 1, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Promoting student advocacy, embracing student advocacy, not shutting a student down for advocating for their needs, and being vocal about what they need and also embracing understanding and again going back to the idea of realising that, hey, you might not have all the answers just because you wear the teacher badge or the leadership badge, coming back to that and really embracing the voice of the student, the voice of the parents, the community embracing those around us. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Teachers have all the powers we can do nothing. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> <p>They're responsible for the welfare of their students and the initiative, the initiative additionally to be able to be able to go and do something about the problems rather than just not doing anything about them to be able to to flexibility, to be able to be more flexible and open-minded towards different ideas, to be able to accept the students for who they are, not try to fit them into a box. It's like it's someone who is willing to look at a different book and not just give the. It's like a doctor trying to give a patients a treatment for something that they don't have because they don't recognise what's wrong with the patients. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 2, 2%</p> <p>Both studies were rated a medium quality strength based on the QuADS, with scores of 27 and 21. The average score was 24, indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 191, 24%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: High</p>   |

## Recommendation 24

Ensure school leaders initiate and prioritise evidence-based professional learning about autism and inclusive education, foregrounding lived experience and neurodiversity-affirming approaches.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type           | Evidence source   | Evidence  |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Systematic review       | Peer-reviewed journal articles  | [Lüddeckens et al., 2017] Organizing for diversity and having a high level of knowledge about ASC is important in terms of different needs and the teaching techniques that meet these needs.   |
|                         |   | [Carrington et al., 2024] The school leaders... committed to staff engagement to professional learning with the goal of improving knowledge and teaching practice for inclusion... to eliminate discrimination and oppression; encourage others to understand prejudice and oppression... their engagement in the inclusionED professional learning alerted them to what needed to be changed to support greater equity... They then went on to describe how their engagement in the inclusionEd professional learning supported their leadership work with colleagues. |
| Community consultation  | Survey  | Prioritise improving staff understanding and awareness. [Participant 71, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional working with students and staff in education setting - government department]  |
|                         |   | Ensuring staff are trained on inclusive values and legal obligations, ensuring extra training is provided for behaviour concerns. [Participant 229, parent/caregiver and education professional]  |
|                         | Be educated about autism. [Participant 273, education professional and organisation representative] |   |
| Focus group             | Focus group   | I think a key thing also with leadership is being open to the fact that just because you wear the leadership badge does not mean that you know everything. If you are not a part of the autistic community, you don't have the right to speak for the autistic community. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]   |
|                         |   | Leadership - lifelong learners, kind, empathetic, firm but fair, supportive, understanding. [Participant 10, Teacher 3.FG_2708]   |
| Young persons interview | Young persons interview   | When the leadership are not using appropriate language, whether or not that's neurodivergence or neuroaffirming, or how to explain a meltdown actually is and it could actually look like, if they're not using the proper language, then how do we expect the staff to use proper language themselves. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]   |
|                         |   | Well, knowledge awareness. Initiative. And responsibility. [Young person 2, 14 years old]   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 6, 5.2%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 19 (weak) to 32 (strong). The average score was 23, indicating medium strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 38, 4.8%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned<br><br>Delphi Study: High   |

## Recommendation 25

Ensure school leaders promote respectful, collaborative, and neurodiversity-affirming communication with autistic students and their families, recognising their expertise and central role in inclusive education.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Schwind et al., 2024] Parent stakeholders discussed how important it was to have realistic expectations which can develop through hands-on learning opportunities and how these expectations may be linked to future success.</p> <p>[Tso &amp; Strnadová, 2017] It is recommended that parents' knowledge of their children with ASD should be prioritised and utilised in transition planning. Findings also suggest that a greater implementation of practices including mandated transition planning and home–school collaboration in schools would contribute to more authentic inclusion of students with ASD.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Acknowledge and accommodate biases/power relationships. [Participant 18, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Listen and don't ignore or dismiss the opinions and advice of autistic students and their families. [Participant 102, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Promote all modes of communication as valid - not just speech. [Participant 608, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p>  |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Having leaders believe children when they're telling them what they need, because that's something that I've seen missing as well. [Participant 1, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p> <p>Some words that I'd toss in would be love, wisdom, integrity; those principles of good leadership are extremely important when somebody is a bit different in the work group. [Participant 2, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p> <p>Lead by example! [Participant 2, Allied Health FG_1808]</p> <p>Leadership: recognising unconscious bias, listening more than you talk, think outside the box, loud doesn't mean in charge. [Participant 6, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> <p>So, I think if they're willing to then do the training, then hopefully then the rest of the staff will be as well and that then is providing a culture and connection within the school. That, you know, families are going to feel like they belong. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Training in person centred neuroaffirming practices for leadership for executive level leadership, especially around... suspensions and behaviours of how to talk to parents and carers, and especially for school leadership teams... maybe even some lived experience training provided to all leadership members. [Participant 3, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>By researching, I guess. Or knowing someone autistic. [Regarding what leaders should do to understand Autism and ADHD, Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 10, 8.6%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 17 (weak) to 32 (strong). The average score was 23, indicating medium strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 101, 12.8%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned<br><br>Delphi Study: High   |

## Recommendation 26

Establish and maintain a whole-school approach to inclusion through policies, practices, and culture that actively support autistic students' strengths, needs, and wellbeing.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Lüddeckens et al., 2022] Visionary leadership: This is important for developing an inclusive practice. It sets an example that influences the staff and surrounding community.</p> <p>[Castro &amp; Rodríguez, 2025] In addition, focusing on and empowering them is key to their development and maturity.</p> <p>[Francis et al., 2016] Practices at their schools increased acceptance of diversity and differences because it “teaches all the other students to accept people for who they are...”</p>   |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Policy of acceptance and awareness of difference, understanding that each person is different and has different strengths, have a school policy of no tolerance for bullying. [Participant 754, education professional]</p> <p>Celebrate difference. Create a culture of acceptance and inclusion for all. Not tolerate bullying and discrimination. [Participant 39, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>This starts with fostering a whole-school commitment to neurodiversity, where differences are understood, respected, and valued. They can ensure that policies, timetables, physical spaces, and communication systems are accessible and flexible to meet diverse needs. [Participant 45, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>Foster school-wide inclusion policies that are reinforced through consistent action, not just statements. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Leadership really need to start thinking about professional learning, the induction, the mentoring, the commutes of practice, that need to be involved in a school to keep all this fresh. It needs to be part of their policies. [Participant 4, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p>  |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>Support anyone and everyone, not just like the good students. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p>   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 10, 8.6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 19 (weak) to 31 (strong). The average score was 24, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 161, 20.5%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: High</p>   |

## Recommendation 27

Facilitate and engage in effective shared information/collaboration between staff and external specialists (e.g., therapists, psychologists, allied health professionals) to ensure consistent and coordinated approaches to effectively support autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Bond &amp; Hebron, 2016] Being able to offer in-house therapeutic interventions was identified as a development area at three-year follow-up.</p> <p>[Latorre-Coscolluela et al., 2015] Find meetings with external professionals very enriching.</p> <p>[McLennan et al., 2023] A positive benefit related to inclusion of the autism consultant in their evaluation team. Specifically noted by this team was the autism consultant's ability to provide an external, critical perspective of the practices being evaluated. This partnership was also identified as a benefit in terms of their role as a support member for their school community on a continuing basis.</p>                                       |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Consult with the experts on staff, the special ed and learning support staff, school counsellors and SSO's. [Participant 743, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Schools should also work closely with allied health professionals and developmental educators and psychologists to embed programs for students. [Participant 11, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, education professional and organisation representative]</p> <p>Involve the student's allied health team (psychologists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists) in meetings where possible. [Participant 192, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p>                                 |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Every staff member involved in that student, understands that student and understands that student's needs. [Participant 3, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Model collaborative leadership: Include students, families, and support staff in decision-making. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>We've got to have those connections with the therapists and the families or we can't do our jobs. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Multidisciplinary teams, which is the best approach for supporting autistic individuals. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p> <p>What works really well is the collaboration between the teaching staff and his specialists. [Participant 4, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>Every once in a while they let my therapists into school. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> <p>[re: therapists at school] they sort of just take notes of what I'm doing. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 23, 19.8%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 11 (weak) to 32 (strong). The average score was 24, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 100, 12.7%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: Low</p>   |

# What approaches facilitate positive and collaborative relationships in school communities (e.g., school leaders, staff, and autistic students, parents, families, and allied health specialists) to support successful outcomes for autistic students?

## Recommendation 28

Establish setting-wide systems for effective communication and collaborative student support planning that include autistic students, families, educators, and specialists, ensuring consistent support and shared understanding.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Bond &amp; Hebron, 2016] Planning and tracking progress also became embedded within staff practice. This included baseline assessment and setting individual education plan (IEP) targets in consultation with parents, pupils and other professionals.</p> <p>[Francis et al., 2016] The continuous and informal communication about where students have “struggled” or had “challenges” also benefited formal meetings such as IEP meetings because “there are really no surprises”.</p> <p>[Sheng-Min, 2021] Including inviting relevant personnel to jointly formulate IEP and IGP, and plan learning, life, psychological and career guidance.</p>   |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Mandatory updates on the progress. [Participant 168, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Planning meeting with the parents and any medical professionals or therapists who work regularly with the student with their personalised learning and support plan. [Participant 305, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Have clear, shared goals for each student. Develop student profiles in consultation with the student, family and external support staff with explains strengths/interests, triggers/sensitivities, strategies, support needs. [Participant 451, parent/caregiver and teacher supporting autistic students in special education settings]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Encourage cross-professional collaboration (teachers, aides, therapists) so supports are consistent. [Participant 9, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>We’ve got to have those connections with the therapists and the families or we can’t do our jobs. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Families know our students. Usually way better than we do. They have a different view of it, but that also comes with those families being able to tell the truth. [Participant 2, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Multidisciplinary teams, which is the best approach for supporting autistic individuals. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>Every once in a while they let my therapists into school. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> <p>[re: therapists at school] they sort of just take notes of what I’m doing. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 6, 5.2%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 17 (weak) to 27 (strong). The average score was 23, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 113, 14.3%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: High</p>  |

## Recommendation 29

Establish and maintain respectful and equitable partnerships between schools, specialists, autistic students, and their families to support inclusive and strengths-based planning, wellbeing, and learning.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[de La Torre González et al., 2018] A necessary strategy is to be very aware of the “voices”... of families and teachers as an expression of their hopes and expectations, as well as their achievements, difficulties, and proposals for improvement that underlie their daily work.</p> <p>[Lüddeckens et al., 2022] Principals highlight the importance of cooperating with the parents and surrounding community.</p> <p>[Francis et al., 2016] Principal’s enthusiasm and caring, as exemplified by the principal greeting students by name and informally interacting with families. These interactions put parents at ease, making them feel “safe” and “good” about their child going to school.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Consult with students, their families and support professionals when creating plans. [Participant 528, education professional]</p> <p>Build good relationships, conduct regular meeting both formal and informal, share information. [Participant 532, education professional]</p> <p>Shared understanding between school and home about what communication will look like, including mode and frequency, is supportive. [Participant 546, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p>   |
|                        |                                | Focus group   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>[re: letting parents into school] That allows them to understand what I’m talking about sometimes. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 47, 40.5%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 11 (weak) to 34 (strong). The average score was 25, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 352, 44.8%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: Medium</p>  |

## Recommendation 30

Establish setting-wide systems for ongoing, job-embedded, evidence-informed professional learning about autism and inclusive education, with a strong emphasis on consulting with those who have autistic lived experience or use neurodiversity-affirming practice.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | [Bond & Hebron, 2016] Initial training by local professionals was well received and was complemented by the opportunity to network with colleagues from other resource provisions.  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | Consult autistic people, autistic families and neuroaffirming external providers. [Participant 12, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]<br><br>All staff receive professional development on autism, inclusive education, and how to support diverse learning and sensory needs. [Participant 23, education professional]<br><br>Seek out the contribution of autistic led organisations where possible be educated about autism. [Participant 261, education professional]  |
|                               | Focus group                    | Autistic voices must be central, not peripheral, in decision-making. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]<br><br>A commitment to training and ongoing training and who they receive that training from should ideally be informed by the Community. So there's organisations that deeply listen to the community, then use those ones. [Participant 2, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]<br><br>Partner with autistic-led organisations for professional input and training. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | Acceptance, you know, for there to be more, not because one thing I see that happens a lot in schools is usually education on one certain cultural topic or area or something like that, and not as much in other areas. I think that so there should be courses for people to learn more about their own family's culture and stuff like that. So and not just one specific thing, but also education to help people understand other things like physical disabilities and conditions that affect how people live and stuff like that, but just overall, just more knowledge and so that students are treated equally, like that comes down to be curious. [Young person 2, 14 years old] |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 3, 2.6%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 21 (medium) to 26 (medium). The average score was 23.7, indicating medium strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 67, 8.5%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned<br><br>Delphi Study: High   |

## Recommendation 31

Foster belonging, flexibility, and respectful collaboration with autistic students and their families to strengthen inclusive school procedures and practices.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Majoko, 2019] In school development and whole school meetings, our ideas are considered in the same way as those of parents of children without autism, teachers, the headmaster, deputy headmaster.</p> <p>[Tso &amp; Strnadová, 2017] It is recommended that parents' knowledge of their children with ASD should be prioritised and utilised in transition planning. Findings also suggest that a greater implementation of practices including mandated transition planning and home–school collaboration in schools would contribute to more authentic inclusion of students with ASD.</p> <p>[Foycas, 2024] The research showed that involving children in school leadership through a range of activities can enhance the participation of all children in the daily life of the school... it is evident that the inclusive activities chosen by the children themselves, with the help of the school leader, foster collaboration among all children in the school, between the educational community and the local community... Children's participation in school leadership seems to have positive effects both on the promotion of moral education and on the development of children's interpersonal skills.</p> <p>[Walton et al., 2022] The knowledge of members of the learning community is a valuable resource.</p> |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Time and resources should be protected to enable schools and teachers to build strong, positive and authentic relationships with families. [Participant 271, education professional]</p> <p>Allow autistic students to work in smaller groups, areas where they can work that are quieter, darker, less stimulation. Having aides available. [Participant 34, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Encourage structured social activities such as board games during break times, adequately facilitated/supervised by staff. [Participant 713, autistic individual]</p>   |
|                        |                                | Focus group   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>Make sure I go home with certain parents on certain days and only call certain parents on those certain days. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> <p>[re: why to ensure they go home with certain parents on certain days] So I don't end up being told to go with like, I don't know, mum on a Monday. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 13, 11.2%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 19 (weak) to 31 (strong). The average score was 24, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 188, 23.9%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: Medium</p>  |

# What leadership approaches best support a whole-school approach and culture of inclusion for autistic students?

## Recommendation 32

Establish a distributed leadership approach that supports leaders to model and embed inclusion in strategic planning to foster a culture of belonging and respect for neurodiversity across the school.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Dennehy et al., 2024] Distributed leadership is lauded as the most beneficial style of leadership for any organization but particularly schools.</p> <p>[Carrington et al., 2024] The need to eliminate discrimination and oppression; encourage others to understand prejudice and oppression.</p> <p>[Kerr et al., 2022] The integrated co-design model provides a series of strategies for multiple stakeholder group engagement and participation, including methods for designing for co-design, facilitating blended co-design, applying asynchronous co-design, and working with participants requiring customised collaborative experiences to support their involvement, including co-designing with people with cognitive difficulties and trauma.</p> <p>[Lüddeckens et al., 2022] Cooperation also in the sense that the school staff work close together with each other, in planning, organizing and in the execution of the teaching. In addition, the principals highlight the importance of cooperating with the parents and surrounding community.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>School leaders can establish the expected behaviours and practices for the entire school community when it comes to creating an inclusive school environment for students, those with autism and every other student. The school leader clearly states their stance, expresses their expectations and discusses consequences if expectations are not met. This is supported by staff, students and their families. [Participant 10, education professional]</p> <p>School leaders need to drive attitudinal and practical change, embedding inclusion in their own practice and into policy. Inclusive school environments are built on school leaders. [Participant 40, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, former teacher and EA of students with disability and current postgraduate student (autism and neurodivergent studies)]</p> <p>Make inclusion a core value, not an add-on. Embed autism inclusion into the school's vision, policies, and strategic plans. Model inclusive attitudes in decision-making, language, and daily interactions. Ensure that inclusion is part of every teacher's role, not just learning support staff. Celebrate successes publicly to normalise and value inclusion. Foster an inclusive peer culture. Support peer education programs to build understanding and acceptance. Address bullying and exclusion promptly and transparently. Encourage student leadership in diversity and inclusion projects... Review timetables, yard duty, and physical layouts to reduce sensory and social stressors. Monitor and evaluate inclusion. Collect feedback from students, parents, and staff about what's working and what's not. Track outcomes beyond grades — e.g., engagement, wellbeing, attendance. [Participant 192, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p> |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Often in high schools I find, and this went for my own child as well. He goes from year 6 to Year 7. There is a lot of information that the primary school teachers have, because in high school you've got so many different teachers, it goes to a coordinator, but then sometimes it doesn't go further than that coordinator to the actual individual high school teachers. That collaboration is really important that it goes down to the teachers. It doesn't just stay at that coordinator principal sort of level. [Participant 4, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> <p>Recognising that the leadership sets the tone for the school - they need to lead from the front and model best practice. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Authentic belonging means being accepted as you are, not having to mask or change to fit in. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>They [all staff in the school] need to believe us and listen, and different brains are equally important. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p> <p>That is a face with a tear and he's written 'me' in school with the arrow. So that's what he wants people to know. [Regarding inclusion in school, Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 1, 0.86%</p> <p>The quality of this study, based on the QuADS, was 27 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 74, 9.4%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: High</p>             |

## Recommendation 33

Establish systems that support teachers through professional learning, coaching, and mentoring to implement inclusive practices for autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Bond &amp; Hebron, 2016] Management challenges for resource provision leads included having sufficient flexibility to support pupils in mainstream, whilst also having staff available to respond to unexpected and/or difficult situations (e.g. incidences of challenging behaviour).</p> <p>[Carrington et al., 2024] The school leaders of each school site committed to staff engagement to professional learning with the goal of improving knowledge and teaching practice for inclusion.</p> <p>[Al Jaffal, 2022] Such as providing broader training programs that give teachers the opportunity to practice interventions and teaching plans for inclusive classrooms and receive feedback from the training instructor(s).</p>   |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Provide professional learning to staff, capacity build teachers using other educators through modelling and coaching and mentoring. [Participant 719, education professional]</p> <p>Resources and supports - teachers need time to have discussions with families, young people, develop/ implement plans, support, they also need training. [Participant 731, organisation representative and researcher/university lecturer]</p> <p>Make disability inclusion and wellbeing the foundation of the school. With this base, students are supported and ready to learn which creates the right environment for students to flourish. Integrate DI considerations in all school events (e.g. a bubble play area during a colour run for students with aversion to the coloured powder and crowds). Employ adequate ES staff and spread them strategically across the school. Provide whole school PD in inclusive teaching and UDL. Provide inclusion coaching for staff. [Participant 30, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>Making sure that professional development happens and not just when a parent begs for it. [Participant 1, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p> <p>Inclusion must be practiced: Not just spoken about. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>I think it would be great if there was more inclusion of the needs of [autistic] teachers ... and the ones that are open about their experiences in a school, have a big impact on that, the teaching and learning frameworks within the school, and it's a huge strength and it would be really great if that was made more universal and shared a lot more amongst all schools. [Participant 3, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p> <p>I would say it's across the system. Teachers rely on their leadership team to provide opportunities for doing things differently. And those people have their higher ups who don't necessarily understand the needs on the ground. Yeah, it's top down. [Participant 3, Allied Health FG_1808]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>He said know how Autism and ADHD works. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 11, 9.5%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 13 (weak) to 34 (strong). The average score was 23, indicating medium strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 157, 19.7%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned<br><br>Delphi Study: High   |

## Recommendation 34

Create a school culture that is inclusive and culturally responsive and prioritises building positive relationships with autistic students so they feel valued, respected, and supported across all environments.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Clark &amp; Adams, 2020] Recognising and supporting anxiety at school.</p> <p>[Majoko, 2019] Collaborative structures and cultures supported the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream ECD classrooms.</p> <p>[McLennan et al., 2023] Value in having the student representative in the process. They saw inclusion of a student voice as ‘very important’ (leader of inclusion) and appreciated the ‘different perspective’ (principal) this student brought to the discussion.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Quiet time, change the bell sound! Not be strict on uniform. Keep class sizes less. [Participant 24, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Prioritise inclusivity and acceptance. Prioritise practices and strategies that work for neurodivergent students (as they usually benefit all students anyway). [Participant 97, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Normalise accommodations such as sound cancelling headphones, brain breaks, stimming noises. [Participant 225, parent/caregiver]</p>  |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>When I was thinking about leadership, I was kind of thinking about the principal and people in those roles that everyone sort of looks up to. I was thinking what they could do. They could teach or lead the whole school sort of in regulation and model self-regulation. And respect different regulation needs rather than singling out autistic students. Let’s do it as a whole school thing. They could also take the time to build warmth and trust and respect and connection, obviously with all kids, but especially autistic kids that they feel safe at school rather than fearing leadership. [Participant 3, Mixed Group 2.FG_2808]</p> <p>Autistic identity is a valid and valuable part of human diversity. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Honesty I really think we need more warts and all kind of honesty. If something’s not working, it doesn’t need to be interpreted as a failure of an individual staff member in a school either. Sometimes things just don’t work the way you want it, and if everyone is covering up for an idea that this is somehow a system value in a school. It actually causes so much distress for a student who knows the difference. Like gaslight, you know, you hear so many parents, especially talk about feeling gaslit by education systems around their child’s support or lack of in a school. I know there’s the safety there, but we need actual honesty built into this. [Participant 3, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>She was kind with all the kids and she would treat us differently than all the other teachers. I think she was cool when she wanted to be kind. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 5, 4.3%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 20 (weak) to 28 (medium). The average score was 23, indicating medium strength overall. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 71, 9.0%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned<br><br>Delphi Study: High  |

## Recommendation 35

Establish and communicate a clear, setting-wide vision for inclusion, supported by consistent strategies, shared language, and neurodiversity-affirming practices that promote belonging, sense of connection, and respect for autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Iadarola et al., 2015] There should be a meeting in the beginning of the year... that way they are aware of what we have in the community... so the kids can understand too, about what's going on, why these kids behave the way they do.</p> <p>[Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023] Schools' headmasters and leadership teams should endeavour to reduce student-to-teacher ratios both in special and mainstream schools Leadership teams should also consider having the same teacher with the same group for more than one academic year.</p> <p>[Crompton et al., 2023] Peer support may provide a unique opportunity for autistic pupils to interact in a natural, comfortable way; share useful strategies; and build their identities.</p> |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Aim for better communication from home to school and back. Provide more funding to assist with consistency and support to schools and families. [Participant 289, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Have school wide policy that emphasises a safe environment for all students, school wide approaches to quality differentiated instruction, school wide approaches to supports such as visual timetables and social stories. [Participant 315, education professional]</p> <p>School wide implementation of inclusive best practices, and offer/direct families and students with services. [Participant 384, parent/caregiver]</p>  |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>One of the big things is language. The language that the teachers and staff use has to be positive if it's to be inclusive, because once one kid hears that their behaviour is hard or they are the difficult child in the classroom, then you've lost them. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> <p>Build genuine collaboration with families. [Participant 9, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Getting everyone's feedback, whole school perspective, it's everyone's responsibility to support these kids. [Participant 2, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p>  |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>They need to believe us and listen, and different brains are equally important. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 10, 8.6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 13 (weak) to 34 (strong). The average score was 24, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 103, 13.1%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: High</p>   |

# What professional knowledge, understanding, and resources do school leaders need to facilitate inclusive approaches in a school community?

## Recommendation 36

Ensure school leadership prioritises funding, time, and staffing to support professional learning, inclusive practices, and specialist support for autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type     | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Bond &amp; Hebron, 2016] Being able to offer in-house therapeutic interventions was identified as a development area at three-year follow-up... Planning and tracking progress also became embedded within staff practice. This included baseline assessment and setting individual education plan (IEP) targets in consultation with parents, pupils and other professionals. Staff sought to ensure that partnership was a two way process with negotiated priorities, for instance incorporating shopping into a child's IEP in order to develop life skills... These strategies enabled two-way communication... Home-school communication was also important for supporting learning and achievement across a range of areas... In order to reduce potential isolation of parents, schools provided events such as coffee afternoons and one school was proposing activities over the summer holiday, not only to keep the pupils engaged with social activities, but also to ensure that parents did not feel isolated during the long break. Resource provision schools recognised the importance of building positive relationships with pupils and parents, particularly when a child's previous school experiences had been problematic.</p> <p>[Al Jaffal, 2022] Training on how to teach students with ASD is important for providing an appropriate education for these students. Advocate for better training and preparation of general education teachers. Implement expanded instruction at both the pre-service (during university programs) and in-service (professional development, school-provided program) levels. Advocate for funding and specialized equipment. School administrators/directors should seek additional funding from appropriate entities (or redirect existing funding) to support the necessary expansion of services to students with disabilities, including ASD, and to ensure the availability of necessary resources for these students through greater support for their GE teachers.</p> <p>[Fernández Cerero et al., 2024] Greater investment in assistive technologies to better support students with ASD.</p> |

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>School leaders play a crucial role in shaping an inclusive environment for autistic students by... building staff capacity, and embedding inclusive practices into the school culture... Leaders should prioritise ongoing professional learning for staff on autism, inclusive pedagogy, and trauma-informed practices. [Participant 45, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Where accommodations are necessary for certain students, work with the teachers on what they need to make this happen (e.g., extra staffing or more paid time). Foster a positive, neuroaffirming environment in which teachers are required to undergo paid training on autism and neurodivergence, regardless of whether they have autistic kids in their class. [Participant 49, autistic individual]</p> <p>Fight for additional funding and required support. [Participant 527, parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Leadership accountability, release time for PD, inclusive language and decision making, school improvement plans, autistic led training, training for all staff, consistency. [Participant 5, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>Removing the pressure valves... allow hard to be handled. Those things need to be built out of the system so that the schools have no choice other than to include. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Have OTs, Speech pathologists and Psychologists to help guide practices. [Participant 3, Mixed Group 2.FG_2808]</p> <p>We need to have more consistency with schools, whether it be therapists within the school, so that they're not just telling teachers what to do, but they can actually do what they want in the environment of the school. [Participant 3, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>I would change that there has to be like a principal, like the principal has to agree on that, like has to agree with the teachers on that and agree on it in front of the kids, all the kids to make sure and then. Uh, they can do that because just taking it away and it's only a teacher decision. Um, I think that's a little much since that's like a basic thing, to, you know, the need to go to the toilet. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p> <p>Every once in a while they let my therapists into school. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 17, 14.6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 11 (weak) and 30 (medium). The average score was 22, indicating medium strength overall.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 124, 15.8%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: Medium</p>   |

## Recommendation 37

Support learning and use of resources across school communities that prioritise authentic collaboration and connection with families of autistic students to support inclusion, wellbeing, and learning.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Schwind et al., 2024] Parent stakeholders discussed how important it was to have realistic expectations which can develop through hands-on learning opportunities and how these expectations may be linked to future success.</p> <p>[Tso &amp; Strnadová, 2017] It is recommended that parents' knowledge of their children with ASD should be prioritised and utilised in transition planning. Findings also suggest that a greater implementation of practices including mandated transition planning and home–school collaboration in schools would contribute to more authentic inclusion of students with ASD.</p>   |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>When families feel heard and professionals are included as part of the team, support becomes more holistic, consistent, and responsive to the student's needs. [Participant 45, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Time and resources should be protected to enable schools and teachers to build strong, positive and authentic relationships with families. [Participant 271, education professional]</p> <p>We need to help the students develop skills and strategies to manage their needs as they fluctuate not make them think they have failed because they need support. [Participant 595, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p>   |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>It would be nice if there was like a standardised and shared range of supports that would be useful that are across schools, not just in an individual school setting. I mean, so many of our kids change schools. And if you establish something that's working in one place, if you know if they're school based only, it's not going to transfer with you and it would be really useful. [Participant 3, Mixed Group 1.FG_2708]</p> <p>Collaboration as a principal. So when everyone's working together, there's no he said he, he said, she said... everyone's on the same page... for the benefit of the child, the child is involved as well. Then you will get a much better outcome than everyone working in their own silos, misunderstanding each other, not being aware of what's going on and, in the end, it's the child that suffers. [Participant 4, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>[Supporting] student wellbeing... needs to be from the ground up. [Participant 8, Parent 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                        |                                | Young persons interview  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | Research articles: n = 2, 1.7%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 17 (weak) to 29 (medium). The average score was 23, indicating medium strength. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 53, 6.7%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned<br><br>Delphi Study: Medium  |

## Recommendation 38

Ensure schools engage autistic people and autistic-led organisations to inform consistent messages, policy development, and inclusive practice.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | [McLennan et al., 2023] Both stakeholder teams reported that the evaluation process was a positive experience to engage in and resulted in a strengthening of knowledge about good practice for autistic students.  |
|                        |                                | [Tso & Strnadová, 2017] Working together with teachers on strategies that could be carried across to the home environment (e.g. routines and reward systems) to be an encouraging process helpful for their child. Parents also appreciated instances when schools were willing to collaborate with parents' preferred therapists, paediatricians and disability organisations.   |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Autistic education and advocacy organisations should be going into schools to deliver education and resources to parents and families, leadership and staff and students. [Participant 11, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, education professional and organisation representative]</p> <p>Regular professional development (ideally facilitated by Autistic professionals) informed by contemporary neurodiversity affirming research and lived experience knowledge. [Participant 153, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p> <p>Ensure all aspects of the disability are understood and not just focus on perceived educational deficits. [Participant 646, parent/caregiver, health professional and organisation representative]</p>  |
|                        | Focus group                    | <p>Not just listening to autistic voices, but empowering and letting autistic people lead where possible. Luckily, we've got amazing autistic professionals and autistic founded organisations in Australia that we should be listening to. [Participant 1, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Pushing for professional development and where possible that professional development for staff to be actually run by those who are autistic. I think getting the autistic voices and also trusting your autistic teachers and some of them have to say. [Participant 4, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> <p>Encourage neurodiverse people to become teachers, because if they're teaching, they will bring the stuff that we need because it's very hard for a neurotypical person to bring neurodiversity into the curriculum. It's a lived experience. [Participant 3, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p> <p>The first thing that comes to my mind is leadership advocating and pushing for professional development and where possible that professional development for staff to be actually run by those who are autistic. We have some people come in and you know, you're sitting there and you're the autistic, the only autistic one in the room and they're giving professional development and you're just thinking, well, this isn't quite right. So I think getting the autistic voices and also trusting your autistic teachers and some of the They have to say, and I think in with that too, it's for those teachers who are openly autistic, for leadership to be showing the adjustments and supports they're providing for the autistic staff. So it's modelled that this is what should be just the norm for our autistic students. [Participant 4, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> |
|                        | Young persons interview        | <p>People to be more well educated on um, what autism actually is and what it means for people and how and to actually be able to take the initiative of asking people their needs rather than immediately assuming that they that they do or don't want something. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 5, 4.3%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 11 (weak) to 28 (medium). The average score was 21, indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 49, 6.2%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p> <p>Delphi Study: Medium</p>   |

# Section 5: Physical environment

## How can all members of the school community design, promote, and sustain inclusive physical environments for autistic students?

### Recommendation 39

Designate specific, safe, and accessible spaces within the school environment where autistic students can go when they need time to regulate, decompress, or manage sensory overload.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

#### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Kwon et al., 2024] Low stimulation in the classroom to assist with self-regulation (e.g., couch or soft space).</p> <p>[McNerney et al., 2015] Safe space, ‘a place that they know they can go to if things are a bit tough’.</p> <p>[Raudeliunaite et al., 2020] The areas adjusted for children relaxation are needed as well.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Ideally each room should have a space where students can go to help when having a sensory overload or when needing some time to regulate. [Participant 784, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>If possible, having withdrawal space that is freely accessible for students to access as required (bonus points if any student can access when required, and it isn’t ‘only for those kids’). [Participant 655, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p> <p>Classrooms need transitional spaces, to make it easier to take a break without exiting fully. [Participant 626, health professional]</p>   |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Is there a space for the child to, if they’re becoming dysregulated, to be able to move to where they feel comfortable and safe, and they’re able to coregulate with an adult or undertake activities that will help them to regulate is the recess environment? [Participant 1, Teacher Aide FG_2608]</p> <p>Call it our calm corner. It’s a little area in the classroom that is specifically designed for children to go into. There’s a bean bag in there. Again, there’s that soundproofing carpeted walls. There’s a couple of weighted toys in there, a couple of fidgets. [Participant 1, Teacher 2.FG_1908]</p> <p>Having an area in the classroom and the school where students know where to go and feel safe to go to regulate. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>A safe space where they can regulate. [Participant 7, Teacher T3.FG_2708]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>There’s the room at the back that you can go to to have a break with all the pillows and stuff. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p> <p>He said when you’re sad, you could go see a dog or a cat. [Young person 1, voiced by parent, 11 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | <p>Research articles: n = 14, 26.4%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 10 (weak) to 27 (medium). The average score was 20.6 indicating medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 187, 35.4%</p> <p>Focus groups: Always mentioned</p>   |

## Recommendation 40

Ensure the physical elements of the school environment are designed, adapted, and maintained to facilitate sensory wellbeing for all students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Lebenhagen &amp; Dynia, 2024] Regression finding means that autistic students who rated their schools as having more pleasant physical spaces had higher school motivation.</p> <p>[Rajotte et al., 2025] The school's physical environment is free from excessive visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory sensory stimuli, to better match the students' diverse sensory.</p> <p>[McAllister &amp; Sloan, 2016] No school bells in the school but instead a sound-system speaker in classrooms that could announce the end of a timetabled period in each school room at a reduced volume to that of the school bell.</p>   |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Have sound management built into physical infrastructure or retrofitted to dampen the sound levels, switch out fluorescent lighting to use more natural lighting or sensory friendly. [Participant 69, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>Include soft furnishing to absorb some noise. Blinds/curtains on the windows to eliminate glare. A/C &amp; fans. Ensure equipment in the classroom runs as quietly as possible. [Participant 71, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional working with students and staff in education setting - government department]</p> <p>Consider sensory environment for those both seeking and avoiding. [Participant 68, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>The best physical environment is definitely like a calming space. I know sometimes they're a hit or miss, but I believe because I work in early childhood setting and I've noticed that with it, with the right like support, children are able to self-regulate themselves to an extent. [Participant 2, Autistic Teacher FG_2008]</p> <p>Having breakout spaces and calming spaces. [Participant 1, Allied Health Professional FG_1808]</p> <p>The goal is a sensory-aware environment that meets needs proactively, without waiting for a diagnosis. [Participant 9, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p>   |
|                               |                                | Young persons interview  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | High      | Research articles:n = 19, 35.8%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged 13 (weak) to 34 (strong). The average score was 24.7, indicating medium strength. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | High      | Individual survey responses: n = 126, 23.9%.<br><br>Focus groups: Always mentioned.  |

## Recommendation 41

Purposefully design the spatial organisation of the physical environment (indoor and outdoor) to ensure that all students can safely access, navigate, and engage with the space in ways that promote inclusion, independence, and meaningful learning experiences.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Piller &amp; Pfeiffer, 2016] Physical set up of the classroom was important to participation. They described blocking off sections of the room, covering up certain items in the room, and creating a separate, quiet space within the classroom.</p> <p>[Calle et al., 2025] Classroom must be predictable and easy to mobilize, contain visual supports, and provide safety in all spatial aspects.</p> <p>[Rajotte et al., 2025] Unpredictable physical contact is reduced by encouraging one-way traffic in busy areas, allowing some students to be at the front or back of the group during transitions, or offering them the opportunity to exit before others.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Area for children to have a movement break to help increase focus in learning. [Participant 593, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Having things organised so they know where the important things are, not just work and stationary but their calming tools, games, colouring etc. and access to outside if they need it. [Participant 743, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Ensure clear pathways and uncluttered classrooms to reduce overwhelm. Use visual supports: clear signage, labels, visual timetables, and predictable room organisation. [Participant 760, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, organisation representative and inclusive education and neurodiversity advocate]</p>  |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Design from the margins: When we design for the least accommodated, we create access for all. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Universal Design for Learning. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Multimodal communication within the physical environment - signs, labels and important environmental print within the environment being conveyed through words, pictures, symbols - a range of different communication forms to meet the needs of a range of different people. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Zones within the environment - making environments accessible by having clear spaces for different activities/purposes - helps with navigation of environment due to predictability of where resources are located, where learning activities take place etc. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>It takes a long time to get from one class to another class because they're so spread out and I remember you had a problem with that at first because of how heavy my bag was and I had to be going constantly up and down stairs and all around... cause there's no lockers or anything like that. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles:<br>n = 23, 43.4%<br><br>The quality of the studies ranged from QuADS 12 poor quality (12) to strong 31 (max score 39). The average score was 24 suggesting medium strength. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 131, 24.9%<br><br>Focus groups: Always mentioned.   |

## Recommendation 42

During recreational time and unstructured learning times, provide safe and accessible spaces that are equipped to accommodate a range of activity levels, sensory preferences, and engagement styles.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Ross, 2019] The TA team found that having a quiet area with beanbags, which was a priority for some students, did not align with others' expectations of a games room.</p> <p>[Birkett et al., 2022] The playground is equally loud, but claustrophobia is not felt. The expanse of space serves to dilute the 'pain' caused to his ears. Molly describes avoiding the playground if possible, spending her time in clubs away from the playground.</p> <p>[Rouvali &amp; Riga, 2021] Her preference towards the playground seemed to be linked with her sensory needs, as she preferred to spend most of her time outside, on the swing.</p>   |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Design outdoor spaces for varied engagement - Include calm, sheltered spots, nature areas, and varied play options that encourage both solitary and social activities. [Participant 192, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and organisation representative]</p> <p>Provide options for both indoor and outdoor play with various degrees of sound, light, play options and number of students. [Participant 738, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Outdoor areas that are adequately staffed (ideally with student services/staff with appropriate training or experience) to allow for the feeling of safety and to intervene to help resolve any issues. [Participant 208, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>One sort of environment is suitable for one autistic person, whereas a different sort of environment suitable for a different autistic person. [Participant 4, Autistic Adult FG_1408]</p> <p>The goal is a sensory-aware environment that meets needs proactively, without waiting for a diagnosis. [Participant 9, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>There's the library area, the new school where you can go and sit down and get games and stuff out and you can go up there and play. [Young person 4, 12 years old]</p> <p>School definitely needs um, a like a swing. And like one of the like tunnel spider web slide things, you know that you see those at playgrounds. So just a giant mash of stuff. [Young person 3, 11 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles:<br>n = 13, 24%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 13 (weak) to 31 (strong). The average score was 24.7, indicating average strength. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 169, 32.1%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned.   |

## Recommendation 43

Design and maintain the school physical environment with input from interest-holders, using ongoing feedback to ensure it is inclusive, safe, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of autistic students.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source         | Evidence  |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Community consultation | Survey                  | <p>Consider evidence and consult with stakeholders. [Participant 639, autistic individual and health professional]</p> <p>Collaboration with autistic people when designing spaces. [Participant 193, education professional]</p> <p>Consult with sped educators OTs PTs SLPs about design new spaces new schools. [Participant 268, education professional]</p>                                      |
|                        | Focus group             | <p>Encourage collaboration between parents, teachers, allied health professionals, and support staff. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>My dream would be support networks in school for parents/carers where we can... add a voice consistently to schools through meetings etc. [Participant 4, Parent, 1.FG_1208]</p>   |
|                        | Young persons interview | <p>Since I'm agender, I prefer not to, I prefer not to go into, um, the female or the male bathrooms. I try to see if there's like a third option like a non gender specific one which my school sort of has, but it's very beaten up and it's not very good place to use. So if I could I would like to have a clean bathroom space that also has a third option. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Very low  | There were no research articles that directly reported on this recommendation, suggesting further research is required. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 46, 8.7%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned.</p>                              |

## Recommendation 44

Provide flexible furniture options to accommodate diverse students' needs, promoting comfort, accessibility, and engagement across various activities.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type          | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Systematic review      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Istuanly &amp; Wood, 2020] Alternative places to sit such as couches and puffs, and would be further softened by pillows.</p> <p>[Kwon et al., 2024] Provision of a sized table and chair so his feet were flat on the floor for stabilization, with the tabletop at his elbow height.</p> <p>[Piller &amp; Pfeiffer, 2016] Use of different types of seating.</p>  |
| Community consultation | Survey                         | <p>Provide flexible seating options: standing desks, wobble chairs, beanbags, or quiet desk areas.[Participant 760, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, organisation representative and inclusive education and neurodiversity advocate]</p> <p>Provide varied seating options both for class work and for floor work (e.g. in lower primary) so kids who want to sit “differently” aren’t singled out. [Participant 733, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Adapt all classrooms to include different seating options for all. [Participant 19, parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                        |                                | Focus group   |
|                        | Young persons interview        | No data   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 3, 5.6%</p> <p>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from weak to medium quality. The average score was 22, suggesting medium strength.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Strength of evidence: Survey n = 58, 11%</p> <p>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned</p>   |

# How can autistic students' agency, autonomy, and independence be supported through the design and creation of, and access to, indoor and outdoor physical environments?

## Recommendation 45

Design and manage physical spaces to actively support and respect autistic student autonomy and independence, enabling autistic students to make choices about how they engage with and move through the environment.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Moderate ●●●○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Price &amp; Romualdez, 2025] Having the autonomy to choose where they sat in lessons was very important in managing their sensory comfort and wellbeing.</p> <p>[Birkett et al., 2022] All participants discussed spaces in the school which they tended to migrate towards when they had some choice over their location - namely at lunchtime.</p> <p>[Atkinson et al., 2025] The 'environment, support and adaptations' supported some young people to be their real self. They referenced access to a quiet room, an inclusion hub.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Students can make good choices about what environment and supports they need at any time and we should provide them with choice and ways to show what they need. [Participant 283, health professional and organisation representative]</p> <p>Being proactive in offering options to students who may not feel comfortable asking (out of fear of their needs being invalidated). [Participant 382, autistic individual]</p> <p>CHOICE AND CONTROL - this is not the same for every child, each individual will need something different. [Participant 599, autistic individual and organisation representative]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Providing a space that's co-designed with students. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p> <p>The environment must adapt to the learner - not the other way around. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Places around the school are meaningful, explicit, consistent, supportive, diverse. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p> <p>Allowing that flexible, flexible kind of transitions based on choice. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>How and to actually be able to take the initiative of asking people their needs rather than immediately assuming that they that they do or don't want something. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>   |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Moderate  | Research articles: n = 8, 15%<br>The QuADS scores ranged from 19 (below average) to 31 (strong) evidence. The average score was 25.6, indicating average quality. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 55, 10.4%<br>Focus groups Frequently mentioned.  |

## Recommendation 46

Embed autistic student perspectives in the analysis, design, and evaluation of physical school environments to actively support student agency.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | [Zazzi & Faragher, 2018] By seeking student voice, individualized measures of support are given personal context and become truly applicable to the individual student, as their voice has been given meaning.  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Ask for student voice. [Participant 552, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Both settings [indoor and outdoor] should be adaptable and responsive to student feedback, ensuring that autistic students feel safe, comfortable, and able to fully participate in school life. [Participant 45, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> <p>Co-design with students what inclusive learning would look for their class... see what happens if students design a classroom that meets different needs. [Participant 635, autistic individual and parent/caregiver]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Neurodivergent kids know what they need. We just need to listen. [Participant 5, Allied Health Professional FG_2508]</p> <p>At play times, during unstructured play, providing a space that's co-designed with students who may prefer to be, say, in a quiet space in the library, making sure that that's a co-designed space, each year. It may be updated depending on the cohort of students. [Participant 4, Teacher 3.FG_2708]</p>  |
|                               | Young persons interview        | Actually, yeah, maybe I could get a bunch of people to like, sign a thing to say all these people want more equipment and have like 90% of the school at least like sign it and then then we deliver it to <name of principal> and to show that we desperately want some new play equipment. [Young person 3, 11 years old]   |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 1, 1.9%</p> <p>The quality of this study, based on the QuADS, was 31, suggesting strong evidence.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: n = 40, 7.6%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned.</p>                                      |

# What knowledge and/or understanding is required to provide inclusive physical spaces that support positive educational outcomes for autistic students?

## Recommendation 47

Implement neurodiversity-affirming training for staff and students that builds understanding of individual sensory differences in autism and how environmental factors can influence individual students' experiences and learning.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: High ●●●●

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence  |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Rosas et al., 2023] Many participants described their experiences in schools as highly distressful and traumatising due to the high amount of intense sensory stimuli.</p> <p>[Dogan &amp; Cag, 2022] All of the participants stated that their [autistic] students were affected by environmental factors such as sound, light, indoor environment, and noise.</p> <p>[Hamilton &amp; Roberts, 2025] Although there were similarities among many of the girls regarding noise and concentration, Ivy's comment shows how important it is that a universal view of autistic girls is not held.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>A lack of education means many teachers think sensory for sensory seekers, but we need support and space for avoiders as well. [Participant 595, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and health professional]</p> <p>Each student will have different needs and preferences, and the spaces and approaches should be responsive to the specific people who are going to use it. [Participant 284, autism researcher]</p> <p>Education/PD for teachers to understand recent shifts in understanding of autism and best practice to support autistic students. [Participant 230, parent/caregiver]</p>   |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>Sensory awareness within school and classroom environments - being aware of the auditory (volume, layers of noise, echoes), lighting (flicking, fluorescent vs incandescent), visual clutter/contrast etc - even busyness, ratio of people within the classroom to the classroom size. [Participant 1, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>In the playground there's often people around who don't have an understanding or awareness or education of autism or just nuances to prevent kids from getting dysregulated and overwhelmed... it's really important that teachers and all staff at all schools have an awareness and understanding; lived experience would be good as well in of autism of neurodiversity. [Participant 4, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> <p>Using adjustable lighting, creating predictable layouts, offering clear visual supports and understanding that quiet children are not necessarily doing well. [Participant 5, Parent 1.FG_1208]</p> |
|                               | Young persons interview        | <p>People to be more well educated on um, what autism actually is and what it means for people. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p> <p>I get really overwhelmed by being around people. I can't work properly when I hear people talking, stuff like that. [Young person 2, 14 years old]</p>  |

## Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence   |
|---|-----------|---|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | High      | Research articles: n = 27, 50%<br><br>The study quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 13 (weak) to 34 (strong). The average score was 24.7 indicating average quality. |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Moderate  | Individual survey responses: n = 64, 8.07%<br><br>Focus groups: Frequently mentioned  |

## Recommendation 48

Regularly assess the physical school environment to identify and adapt sensory elements that may impact on autistic students differently.

Strength of evidence for Recommendation: Low ●●○○

### Evidence for Recommendation

| Evidence type                 | Evidence source                | Evidence   |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Systematic review</b>      | Peer-reviewed journal articles | <p>[Serratore et al., 2025] The findings emphasise the feasibility of assessing individual barriers in everyday school life using smartphone-based assessments.</p> <p>[Calle et al., 2025] That they [classrooms] be adapted to the sensory and psychosocial disability of children with ASD.</p> <p>[Badillo-Jiménez et al., 2022] It is essential that educational institutions, teachers, and parents offer appropriate and adapted educational spaces.</p>  |
| <b>Community consultation</b> | Survey                         | <p>Assess their classrooms and the whole school environment for accessibility and sensory challenges. [Participant 723, autistic individual, parent/caregiver]</p> <p>Audit the school and classroom environments systematically, using comprehensive guides/structures which prompt critical analysis and reflection over the extent to which the physical spaces meet the needs of students with a range of needs (sensory, mobility, communication etc). [Participant 40, autistic individual, parent/caregiver, former teacher and EA of students with disability and current postgraduate student (autism and neurodivergent studies)]</p> <p>Then, work with external experts (for example OTs) to conduct a sensory audit, then act on it. [Participant 28, autistic individual, parent/caregiver and education professional]</p> |
|                               | Focus group                    | <p>The environment must adapt to the learner - not the other way around. [Participant 3, Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Welcoming innovation - we don't have to do things the same way we've already done. Being willing to try things that are different. [Participant 1 Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Responsive environments - meeting the needs for all individuals. [Participant 1 Autistic Adult 2.FG_1408]</p> <p>Screens and technology to only have up the things that are actually relevant to what you're learning now. [Participant 3, Teacher 1.FG_0708]</p>   |
|                               | Young persons interview        | No data  |

### Evidence to decision judgements

| Question  | Judgement | Summary of evidence  |
|---|-----------|--|
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the research that this Recommendation will be effective?       | Low       | <p>Research articles: n = 7, 13.2%</p> <p>The survey quality, based on the QuADS, ranged from 10 (weak) to 26 (strong). The average score was 17.3 indicating low quality.</p> |
| What is the overall certainty of the evidence from the community data that this Recommendation will be effective? | Low       | <p>Individual survey responses: 28, 3.53%</p> <p>Focus groups: Sometimes mentioned.</p>  |

## Our values



### **Inclusion**

Valuing lived experience



### **Innovation**

Solutions for long term challenges



### **Evidence**

Truth in practice



### **Independence**

Integrity through autonomy



### **Cooperation**

Capturing opportunities together



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