Memorandum of Understanding

between

NSW Department of Education and Communities

and Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

November 2011

1. INTRODUCTION

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (the Department) and Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) have enjoyed a collaborative working relationship spanning over 40 years. While each organisation has different purposes, roles and responsibilities, both organisations share a common goal in their respective commitments to providing high quality services for students with an autism spectrum disorder and their families.

Services provided by the Department and Aspect for students with an autism spectrum disorder (commonly referred to ‘ASD’) have grown significantly over the years in response to increasing prevalence of ASD in the community. As a result, many more people across the two organisations are likely to come together, in partnership with parents and carers, in their work supporting students with ASD.

It is important now to provide guidance to the many people who need to work together at local, regional and state levels in order to ensure effective outcomes. This includes ensuring that all stakeholders have access to clear information about the respective roles and responsibilities of the Department and Aspect and organisational relationships. Such information is not only vital for supporting the work of each organisation’s staff but important for supporting parents/carers in their choice of education options for their child with ASD and ensuring that collaboration between the organisations is transparent at every level.
2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is to facilitate effective collaboration between the Department and Aspect by setting out common understandings between the two organisations and describing the parameters of the working relationship between them.

Underpinning this MOU is a shared commitment between the Department and Aspect to provide high quality education services and outcomes for students with ASD and their families. This MOU describes how this commitment is intended to be implemented by the Department and Aspect.

The MOU is not designed to prescribe what the organisations do. Rather, it provides a framework for collaboration to ensure that when the Department and Aspect work together, collaborative work is effective and transparent at every level.

The MOU provides:

- an outline of the services provided by the Department and Aspect;
- the organisations’ roles and responsibilities in current collaborative arrangements; and
- agreed priorities;

Additional guidance for collaborative practice is provided in an appendix to this MOU.

3. DIFFERENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES; SHARED OBJECTIVES

The Department and Aspect are both guided by principles and values that reflect each agency’s respective mission and responsibilities. Some of these principles and values are shared – such as commitments to quality, excellence, responsibility and respect.

However, some of the Department’s principles and values relate specifically to the different role responsibilities and accountabilities it has as a government organisation and provider of public education. Aspect is a not-for-profit non government agency and independent school education provider.

About the Department of Education and Communities

The Department delivers high quality, internationally-competitive public education and training, under the NSW Minister for Education. The Department promotes lifelong learning and aims to provide students with a smooth transition from school to work or further study, and from post-compulsory education and training to work or further study.
As a significant public service organisation, the Department recognises the importance of upholding community values in the way it provides services to the New South Wales community. The Department is therefore strongly committed to core values of fairness and principles of social justice, respect for diversity, integrity and honesty, and responsibility to the community.

The Department has broad responsibility for providing public education for all students in New South Wales. It currently enrolls close to 750,000 students – around two thirds of all school students in New South Wales – in more than 2,200 government schools throughout the State.

The Department is also the largest provider of education services to students with autism spectrum disorders in New South Wales, providing support to over 10,000 students with an autism spectrum disorder and their teachers.

The Department has developed a wide range of services and programs to support students with ASD across New South Wales. In 2011, this includes 122 specialist autism support classes located in regular and special schools. Over 6,400 students with a confirmed diagnosis of autism are enrolled in regular schools and provided with additional support through the Integration Funding Support Program. In addition, specialist teachers support students with autism in regular classes. More than 3,000 students with autism in regional areas across the State are supported through these provisions.

The establishment and location of support classes and related specialist positions are part of the annual process of regional planning. Each year, Department regions conduct an analysis of enrolments to determine any change in demand for, and location of support classes and specialist positions. This is undertaken in consultation with school principals, teachers, parents/carers and school communities.

The Department also provides a wide range of professional learning opportunities for teachers regarding support for students with special education needs. This includes courses on ASD and related support needs accredited by the NSW Institute of Teachers.

Under the Education Act 1990 (NSW), every child is entitled to enrol in the government school that is designated for the area where their home is situated and that they are eligible to attend. Department schools are required to ensure that every eligible local child has a place at the local school. Every public school is required to set an enrolment number to cater for anticipated local demand and to ensure that every eligible local child can enrol.

The Department also has responsibilities for administering NSW Government funding for non-government schools.

Under the terms of the Education Act 1990, the NSW Government provides financial assistance to registered non-government schools, including Aspect Schools, in the form of ‘per capita’ funding. Non-government schools that have been registered as special schools or special assistance schools, including Aspect, attract per capita funding at the highest level.
In addition to per capita grants, the NSW Government provides funding to non-government schools for building works, the **Supervisor Subsidy Scheme** which subsidises the salaries of teachers/supervisors employed in non government special schools catering for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability and students with autism, and through the **Assisted School Transport Program** for eligible students.

The Department also encourages education groups and members of the community to use school facilities for appropriate purposes, when not required for school purposes. This is a way of sharing valuable community assets and strengthening the partnership between schools and local communities. The **Community Use of Schools Facilities policy** and procedures provide guidance for these arrangements.

The sharing of facilities between schools and the community is formalised in a written agreement to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of both parties are understood and documented.

More information about the Department including its goals, guiding principles and core values is available on its website at https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/about-us.

**About Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)**

Aspect is the largest not-for-profit non government autism-specific service provider in Australia. Its mission is to build confidence and capacity with people who have an autism spectrum disorder, their families and communities by providing information, education and other services. Aspect is committed to providing high quality, evidence-based interventions for its clients and is increasingly engaged in evaluating the services it provides.

Aspect places a strong emphasis on understanding the needs and priorities of people with an ASD and their families who choose to use its services. Partnerships between families and staff are essential in order to prioritise client challenges, identify and share strengths, interests and develop person centred programs. Active participation in decision-making increases the family’s ownership and commitment to client programs. Collaborative partnerships enable support, direction, advice and problem solving to be developed and shared for optimal outcomes for families and clients.

Currently Aspect operates 8 independent schools and 87 satellite autism classes in regular Department and Catholic schools in the Northern Rivers, Hunter, Central Coast, South Coast, Riverina, metropolitan Sydney north, south-west and Macarthur regions. Aspect is currently operating 21 satellite autism classes in Department schools.

Aspect has developed and delivers a specialised autism-specific intensive educational service for school-age students with an autism spectrum disorder. The focus of the educational services is a particular approach developed by Aspect, the **Aspect Comprehensive Approach to Education**, which recognises the educational needs of all school-age children on the autism spectrum.
A key feature of the Aspect educational approach is the transition of students to more inclusive educational settings. Aspect supports and reinforces the importance of educational inclusion by giving students the skills and structures that enable them to manage in more inclusive educational and community environments. Therefore, the educational services Aspect provides are aimed at preparing children for more general educational settings.

This philosophy is further supported by the Aspect Educational Outreach Service, which delivers collaborative consultancy support to students, families and teachers in government and independent mainstream and special school settings. Consultancy services are delivered in the school to support the school community. In addition to individual student consultations, the Aspect Educational Outreach Service provides social skills groups, peer education, and teacher learning and development including a number of NSW Institute of Teachers accredited courses in ASD for teachers. Aspect makes application for funding for eligible students provided with this service through the Intervention Support Program (ISP) administered by the Department. Aspect may also provide the service on a fee-for-service basis.

Aspect also supports children and young people with significant complex needs through its Adolescent Support service and Behaviour Intervention Service. Adolescent Support is a specialist case-management service catering to children and young people aged 12 to 18 years who have autism and an intellectual disability in the Metropolitan region of Sydney. Aspect’s Behaviour Intervention Service provides a specialist home-based service for families and carers of children and young people with a disability and challenging behaviours. These services may also be delivered in school settings.

The establishment and location of Aspect schools including satellite classes and outreach services is linked to the Aspect Schools Future Planning process. Each year, Aspect conducts an analysis of enrolments to determine any change in demand for Aspect’s educational services. This is undertaken in consultation with school principals, teachers, parents/carers and school communities. Where demand for new regional Aspect services is indicated, a broad community consultation process is undertaken.

As non-government schools, Aspect schools receive funding from the NSW Government as outlined above and also from the Australian Government through the Commonwealth Targeted Programs for Non-Government Schools (the Literacy & Numeracy Special Learning Needs Program) and the General Recurrent Grant.

Parents also make a contribution to their child’s educational service by way of annual school fees.

More information about Aspect including its mission, vision, values and services is available on its website at http://www.autismspectrum.org.au/a2i1i3l253l114/about-aspect.htm
Collaborative work

Collaboration between the Department and Aspect recognises that both organisations have extensive expertise as major providers supporting school aged children with ASD.

The Aspect educational approach in the transition of students enrolled in Aspect schools to regular or ‘mainstream’ settings in NSW government schools benefits from a strong collaborative approach with the Department.

The Department recognises the particular expertise that Aspect has in supporting families who have a child with ASD and the important role that this expertise has in supporting children’s education.

The Department and Aspect collaborate on a wide range of activities at local, regional and state office levels. These include the following:

Support for transition

At the local level, staff work together on transition planning and support for students moving between Aspect and Department schools. This planning, in partnership with parents/carers, identifies the specific needs of individual students around transition, how these will be met, timelines and responsibilities for actions.

Educational outreach

The Aspect Educational Outreach Service may be provided in Department schools in agreement with an individual school according to specific student needs and priorities identified in consultation with parents/carers.

Satellite classes

At the local and regional level, staff collaborate in the planning, implementation and operation of Aspect satellite classes in Department schools. This includes:

- Collaboration on the location and operation of satellite classes where they are established in agreement with the local school community.
- Assistance provided to Aspect by the Department in identifying suitable accommodation options.

Aspect administrative and base school services

At a local and regional level, staff collaborate in the planning, implementation and operation of Aspect administration and base school services on Department school sites.
Learning and development

At the local level, Department and Aspect staff may collaborate on the planning and delivery of learning and development activities provided by each organisation where this is agreed according to local priorities.

Professional networks

Professional networks of Department and Aspect personnel supporting students with ASD and their families and teachers are facilitated through a range of activities according to local priorities. This may include participation in formal autism networks, collaborative networks established in response to locally identified needs and participation in a wide range of professional development activities such as conferences and seminars.

4. AGREED PRIORITIES

1. The Department and Aspect will value opportunities to build and share expertise around ASD to inform the provision of education and family support services that meet the identified needs of students with ASD and their families.

2. The Department and Aspect will positively promote and support a range of educational provisions for students with ASD.

3. The Department and Aspect will each communicate to families and stakeholders their organisations’ respective enrolment procedures, eligibility criteria and educational services through a range of means, including websites, written materials and in direct communication with families and other identified stakeholders.

4. The Department and Aspect will collaborate on planning and supporting the transition of students between Department and Aspect school settings, in partnerships with parents and carers.

5. The Department and Aspect will liaise at state, regional and local levels in planning and providing their education services.

6. The Department and Aspect will explore the development of strategies to strengthen partnerships between families of children with an ASD and schools, including information and support for families and professional learning for education personnel.

7. The Department will facilitate the establishment of Aspect school satellite classes where such decisions are reached in agreement with the local Department school community and in accordance with the Department’s Community Use of Schools Facilities policy.
The establishment of satellite classes occurs in the context of demand for services and the Department’s legal obligations to ensure that every child is able to enrol in the government school that is designated for the area where their home is situated and that they are eligible to attend.

8. The Department and Aspect will work towards having formalised non-commercial licence agreements for each satellite class in accordance with the Community Use of Schools Facilities policy and procedures.

9. Where the local school community agrees to the operation of an Aspect school satellite class within the NSW government school, Aspect will contribute to the host Department school through:
   a. Contributing to the utility costs of running the Aspect classroom in the Department school.
   b. Providing in-kind support to the Department school community including building the capacity of staff and families through learning and development programs.
   c. Encouraging families of children enrolled in Aspect school satellite classes to be involved in the life of the Department school community.

This will be reflected in the licence agreement that is developed between the Department and Aspect. Cost recovery rates for utility and other operational costs for not for profit users are included in the Community Use of Schools Facilities procedures and will be reflected in licence agreements for satellite classes.

10. The Department and Aspect will develop a licence agreement template for use by regional personnel and school principals in the development of their specific licence agreements for the operation of an Aspect school satellite class in a NSW government school.

11. The Department and Aspect will communicate the terms of this MOU to identified key stakeholders.

12. The Department and Aspect will develop a clear and accessible statement which can be given to any parent in the school community interested in understanding more about the nature of the arrangements surrounding a satellite class.

13. The Department and Aspect will regularly review and strengthen collaborative working arrangements through regular meetings at state and regional levels, and where required.
5. DISPUTE RESOLUTION

In the event of a dispute arising under this MOU, in the first instance all staff shall use their best endeavours to resolve the dispute at the local level. This may include the assistance of regional officers from each organisation.

If a dispute is not resolved locally, the matter will be referred by local officers to the Director, Disability Programs, Department of Education and Communities and the Chief Executive Officer, Aspect, to nominate an appropriate senior representative of each organisation to endeavour in good faith to agree on a resolution of the dispute.

6. TERM OF THIS MOU

This MOU will be formally reviewed after three years of operation in consultation with regions and schools to identify any changes needed.

Any variation to this MOU must be in writing and signed by both parties.

Either party may terminate this MOU by one month’s written notice to the other party at any time.

Endorsed Term 1, 2012

Signed: ______________________________
Dated: ______________________________
Greg Prior
Deputy Director-General, Schools
NSW Department of Education and Communities

Signed: ______________________________
Dated: ______________________________
Adrian Ford
Chief Executive Officer
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Appendix

BUILDING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Collaboration is more likely to be effective when it is well planned, inclusive of all relevant stakeholders or their representatives, has the support of the whole school community where relevant and its intended purpose and outcomes are clear to all who have a part to play in setting up and maintaining effective collaboration.

In planning and undertaking collaborative work it may be helpful to consider the following:

Identifying stakeholders and their communication and participation needs

A wide range of individuals and groups should be considered depending on the nature of the activity, including the following:

- Parents and carers – including those who are directly involved with identified students and the wider school community (including the Parents and Citizens Association and Aspect Parents and Friends).
- Principals – including those directly involved in the school/s (Department and Aspect) and those in the wider community or network of schools
- Teachers – including those directly involved with identified students (Department and Aspect), others in the school community and specialist teachers that support the school
- Regional personnel from the Department and Aspect
- State office personnel from the Department and Aspect education executive
- Other government and non government agencies that may be delivering services to children in the schools.

Preparation and planning processes

Comprehensive planning should identify a wide range of elements that may impact on collaboration and who holds responsibilities for actions. It may be useful to consider the following:

- Conduct situational analysis to identify opportunities and needs for new satellite classes.
- Establish a relationship between Department regional executive and Aspect executive to support the building of more localised agreements where relevant.
• Identify who the stakeholders are in the local community and what their interest will be.

• Establish mechanisms for disseminating information and communicating with stakeholders to identify and gain commitment to settings and services.

• Establish a service delivery strategy including mapping how resources will be shared.

• Clarify responsibilities and decision making processes at different levels.

• Develop a clear statement of shared understandings and expectations at the local level (including about the use of resources) consistent with the state-wide partnership agreement.

**Processes for maintaining a strong working relationship**

Effective interagency relationships are supported by processes that enable ongoing communication and information exchange and for quickly resolving problems if they occur. It may be useful to consider the following:

• Establish ongoing meetings and communication between the organisations at school/region and state level.

• Establish effective ongoing communication with other stakeholders.

• Develop a local process for supporting effective transitioning of students between Aspect and Department services.

• Determine procedures for ongoing improvement and review of relationship.

• Clarify how problems or disputes will be dealt with if not able to be resolved locally.