

Autism lesson for teachers

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EDUCATION REPORTER

UP TO 80 teachers will receive special training in a \$700,000 State Government push to make SA a national leader in autism education.

Flinders University will launch a postgraduate qualification next year aimed at turning teachers who have completed introductory courses into autism specialists.

Over the next two years, a

teacher and a co-ordinator from each of 40 schools will receive government-funded scholarships to undertake the graduate certificate program.

They will be expected to spread best practices in their own schools and districts.

Flinders School of Education Associate Professor Kerry Bissaker said the focus would be on mainstream schools, which the majority of children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) attend.

"It's the most rapidly growing diagnosis of children with disabilities over the past decade," she said.

"There have been a number of reports saying this is a high-stress area for teachers."

Prof Bissaker said the one-year course would "build the leadership capacity" of participants to mentor their colleagues and create "ASD-friendly schools".

"Research indicates high-quality professional learning,

specifically programs that include a tertiary qualification as an outcome, makes a difference on a number of levels for teachers and most importantly for students' quality of life and learning."

Preschool, primary and secondary teachers will be eligible to apply, with recruitment to start next term.

Most will be selected from public schools but Catholic and independent schools will also be involved.

Prof Bissaker said choosing two staff from each school, a teacher and someone in a leadership position, would help change the approach to teaching children with disabilities.

Education Minister Susan Close said the Government wanted to help educators across school sectors in "moving beyond the basics" of autism education.

"The new program will be rigorous and complement other professional develop-

ment initiatives in this area, while having the flexibility to respond to the diverse range of student needs across the autism spectrum," she said.

Flinders Vice-Chancellor Colin Stirling said the course was a response to community needs.

"(It) will provide support for the development of more sophisticated knowledge and skills, and the benefits will extend into the wider education system," he said.

Students schooled up in readiness for the real deal

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MOCK classrooms are preparing autistic children for school in an Australian-first trial aimed at improving education and social outcomes.

Children in Flinders University's school readiness trial at St Marys are receiving three months of intensive experience in a simulated classroom, then another month of support when they begin "real" school next year. Early results are so promising that researchers aim to extend the program around Adelaide.

About 70 per cent of children with autism go into mainstream schools, but many struggle. Flinders' early intervention program research manager Dr Anna Moffat and Professor Robyn Young devised the trial, funded by not-for-profit Inclusive Directions.

Trial head teacher, Alex Bates, said the children's attention and communication skills were advancing rapidly and they were making friends. "We've already seen huge improvement in kids being able to concentrate," she said.

Andrea Tankos said she was "amazed" at the program's impact on son Andrew, 5. "I was never expecting such a good outcome in such a short time."



PROMISE: Teacher Alex Bates with AJ, Jed and Emma-Rose in the trial that familiarises autistic children with the school environment. Picture: DYLAN COKER