

Save Our Seton College (SOS) Inc. MEDIA RELEASE

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BRISBANE CATHOLIC EDUCATION LEAVES CHILDREN OUT IN THE COLD

As media reports of mainstream teachers being unable to assist students with different learning needs come out this week, Brisbane Catholic Education says they offer inclusion support at all their campuses. However, parents tell a very different story.

Sarah* is mum to Lachlan*, a twelve-year-old boy with a diagnosis of ASD, ADHD, sensory processing disorder and anxiety disorder. When properly supported in the right environment, Lachlan thrives; he is capable of doing all the things a typical kid of his age would do. But without the appropriate strategies and support people in place, Lachlan becomes withdrawn, disengaged, and frustrated, and struggles to verbalise his emotions and needs. This is particularly evident in his every-day schooling, something both Rebecca (or Sarah) and Lachlan have struggled to sustain throughout his primary years.

Sarah says initially she had to fight to get the support Lachlan needed to be able to cope with the 'every day' routines in his first years of schooling. It was made more challenging by the fact that, like so many children with ASD, he presents as a 'normal' child; he has perfected the art of masking himself in order to fit in. With support from Autism Queensland, and training from various professional therapists, the school and Sarah were able to work together to develop a personalised learning plan (PLP) that supported Lachlan, in conjunction with other modifications such as a 'chill out' zone, a sensory area, and appropriate access to one-on-one teaching aides. With these measures in place, Lachlan was able to participate in classroom activities, and the amount of anxiety and stress placed on him was reduced. It was not, however, a magical fix. Despite all the support and modifications made by the school Lachlan still faced a tremendous amount of difficulty socially and emotionally, and experienced bullying and peer rejection due to his differences. He also struggled with the high sensory input that traditional classrooms offer.

It was Lachlan's experience at primary school that guided Sarah's decision in a choice of high school for her son. She studiously explored a whopping 25 other schools in the greater Brisbane area. She says that "although some were great schools that catered for students with autism, due to the high demand the wait lists were incredibly long." She thought she had found the perfect place in BCE's Seton College at Mt Gravatt East when Lachlan was accepted for a place at the college for the year seven intake in 2021. But her joy and relief didn't last long, when she was contacted in August of 2020 by a representative of the college, informing her that Seton was no longer taking students, effective immediately and that the college would cease to operate by the end of 2024. Due to the lateness of the decision by BCE, Sarah says it was impossible to try and get a place for a start in 2021 at some of the other schools she earlier investigated.

For over 50 years, Seton College has offered a unique and personalised approach to learning and prides itself on being fully inclusive; the school cohort has accepted many students both with and without a formal diagnosis over the years, focussing mostly on whether the student would benefit from an approach such as theirs. Sarah describes it as the 'school that fills the gap' – that gap being between mainstream education and special education schools, where a student needs an intellectual disability to qualify for enrolment. From Sarah's investigations into other schools, she surmises it is the only school in Queensland to offer the amount of support it does, and yet does not mandate a diagnosis of intellectual impairment.

When news first broke of the closure of Seton College, a BCE representative was appointed to assist parents, like Sarah, to find another school for their child. The representative was confident in telling parents that any one of their 140 plus schools would be suitable for children with special needs, and that they all offer inclusion support. Sarah says this just isn't the case, and it angered her that BCE are advertising something they don't truly offer. BCE contacted five other schools on her behalf, asking for enrolment for Lachlan, and all but one of them turned Lachlan away, using his complex needs as the reason.

Lachlan has secured a place in one of the BCE schools he was previously denied enrolment for, but Sarah says it is far from adequate. When asked if she thought her son would be properly supported at this school her response was blunt; "no, absolutely not." She tells of key teachers being unapproachable, one even refusing to read any of Lachlan's specialist reports to gain a fuller understanding of his needs. The same teacher told her that the generic PLP they implement for all students with autism at this school will be adequate, and one-on-one support will be provided only when a staff member is available. "He actually said to me "this is a high school, not a medical centre, and accused me of 'making' my child disabled by requesting that Lachlan repeat an elective subject, instead of participating in one that is a known trigger for him."

For now, Sarah will persevere with Lachlan's high school, and continue to fight and advocate for him, like so many other parents with children who don't quite fit the system. But the immediate question she'd like answered is: why would BCE shut down a successful school, that offers something that no one else in the city does, before they've got the correct procedures and management in place to accommodate the vulnerable kids they've left out in the cold? A sentiment every past, present and future parent of a child in need of a school like Seton College is now facing.

Save Our Seton College (SOS) Inc. is actively trying to stop the closure of Seton College. If you can help in any way or you would like more information, please head to our website www.saveourseton.org.

Media enquiries to saveourseton@gmail.com

* Names have been changed to protect the family's privacy.