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### **Submission to the Ministry of Education on the Review of Special Education 2010**

NCWNZ is an umbrella organisation representing 45 Nationally Organised Societies and National Members. It has 26 Branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies. The Council's functions are to serve women, the family and the community at local, national and international levels through research, study, discussion and action. NCWNZ welcomes the opportunity to consider this Review of Special Education.

Education, especially for women and those with special needs, has been one of the major concerns of NCWNZ since the Council's inception in 1896. In the short time available for consultation, NCWNZ canvassed its Education Standing Committee and nationwide membership for their responses to the issues raised. Responses came from a number of NCWNZ members, who have children with special needs and those that have been involved as teachers and specialists in special education. These members have come from both academic and community work backgrounds, have diverse skills and bring a consumer's perspective, which is useful for the review of special education. The submission has also been reviewed by a member of the NCWNZ Board and the Parliamentary Watch Committee.

#### **General Comments**

New Zealand has a Special Needs Education policy and system which is considered by many to be world class. The services are focused on the needs of children. What the Special Needs community identifies as right for itself should be heard and respected. The information on pages 8 and 9 therefore, seems especially crucial – being what “Students with special needs say” ... what “Parents and caregivers say” ... and what “the disability community says ...”. What they say is all about inclusion for better outcomes.

#### **Review of Special Education Schooling**

##### **Question 1a - What is needed to help schools succeed?**

- a. Parents need to be able to have a choice as to which educational setting they may wish to enrol their child with “Special Needs.” Therefore two options need to be available – attending a “mainstream” school or a “Special Education” setting. Parents want their children to attend the local school “down the road “ – the one where their siblings went or go to at present but there has to be sufficient funding and support in place to make that practical for that child to learn, for the other children to learn (and receive teacher time) and for the teacher to manage without undue stress. The fact that parents are experts in their children, regardless of their qualifications, needs to be recognised and acted on.
- b. Some children with complex high needs should have the opportunity to attend a Special Unit where they can receive extra resources and where there are trained

professionals to meet the children's very high needs. These alternate units could be available for all or some of the day to cater for those who may have behaviour problems which disrupt the learning of the other students and which build resentment. The mainstream setting does not suit all students.

- c. Special education needs should be a mandatory component of teacher training, and in ongoing post-service professional development courses for those who are teaching certain children. Research-informed understanding and technological advancements continue to change the landscape and its possibilities.
- d. Also para-professional training should be provided for Teacher Aides to work with special needs children in regular schools. A pay scale / salary that recognises their abilities should be in place. This also needs to be attractive to young people and especially to males who are needed as role models and to support boys.
- e. Boards of Trustees need a position on the board responsible for disability issues and members need to be informed and trained in special needs.
- f. Parents want a school where all the staff are trained to teach all children regardless of their mental or physical ability. They want a school that is adequately funded – not by locally raised finance or fees to meet the needs of all pupils without a struggle.
- g. Overall a balanced model of provision / retention of special schools, facilities and units with well resourced mainstreaming should be the aim.

### **Q 1b - How could schools work together to succeed?**

Because of declining rolls, closures and fear of closure by the Ministry, schools in some areas have become competitive rather than collaborative. Nonetheless, for schools to be successful in meeting their children's special education needs, schools and families and the wide range of agencies need to be overtly supported to work together.

Successful cooperation and collaboration consumes a lot of time, especially in the follow up and follow through that are needed. Collaboration needs administrative support.

It is therefore recommended that there is a network of schools within an area accessible to students, providing choices to families – especially as travel is provided for special-needs students. Also there needs to be a centre for co-ordination which provides access to resources and specialist services such as physiotherapists, psychologists, speech therapists etc.

The Correspondence School and Visiting Special Needs Teachers are also important and a necessary support for all students with special needs whether they attend a regular school, special school unit or are at home doing long distance study.

### **Transitions and agencies working together**

#### **Q 2 - What needs to be done to make transitions work better?**

- a. Training and up-skilling needs to take place before transitions happen. It is not in the best interests of a special needs person to have everything change at once. For example children move from an early childhood setting to a school setting with a new professional support team and a new teacher's aide, as well as a new teacher. Some children find this very difficult. This appears to be the result of how funding is arranged - early intervention is a different section from school support and also while the Ministry employs the Education Support Workers (Early Childhood Education teacher aides), the schools employ those working in schools.

- b. The Group Special Education Early Intervention Team provides a valuable service for the students who attend pre-schools. When a student transfers to a Primary School, much of the support or resources required for students with high learning needs is lost. Group Special Education does not provide specialist support for students with high learning needs. They only provide support for students with severe communication needs or severe behaviour needs. The students with high learning needs have to be absorbed into the school environment without the ongoing Specialist support.
- c. Transition from primary to secondary school appears to be very difficult. Many secondary schools have their own transition service for all pupils but may not have a particular programme for transition of special-needs students. There needs to be an early assessment so that schools find out students' requirements eg reader/writers, extra time, computer use etc, so that their needs are met. Currently some students miss out because no-one thought to provide the necessary support. Using disabled adults as "visiting lecturers" who have experienced transitions themselves is an excellent way of helping special needs students. Also involving the whole class in finding solutions develops an understanding of special needs students, and with positive encouragement enables them to be treated with respect.
- d. Mainstream schools with special units should be adequately resourced to provide a transition service, as they best understand the students who have been within their care for several years. The Christchurch Lead School Transition Service model, as described in the Discussion Document, pages 20-21, should be suitably resourced and funded for easy transition between school and adult life or between services and agencies that provide support and advice.

**Q 3 - How could services be better coordinated and focused on the needs of students and families?**

The use of one agency for needs assessment and for supply of supports/services would ensure a more equitable distribution of resources – so that training, information, grants, and new developments are available to all schools and services. It is extremely difficult for both parents and schools having to work with several agencies from education, health, and social services to ACC. Even if a lead agency is appointed for each child, making it easier for the parents to cope, a different lead agency for each child within a school, makes it difficult for the school. The approach currently feels fragmented and requires considerable work on the part of the parents to obtain all that their child is entitled to. By working together and sharing resources the child's entitlements could be used effectively rather coming in different funding options as at present. The option of a single assessment/eligibility process initially, leading in the longer term, to a single set of supports, would mean more consistency across schools, making it more manageable for all concerned.

Individual Educational Planning (IEPs): There has to be adequate time for discussion of the pertinent issues surrounding the needs of the special needs student and school. This has to be related to the needs of the family. When the Individual Educational Plan has been discussed targeted services and supports should be made available as soon as possible.

**Funding and resource use**

**Q 4 - What arrangements for funding, decision-making, verification, and fundholding should we have?**

The processes for resource allocation must be kept open, transparent and as simple as possible.

- a. There needs to be more targeted, realistic funding available for students with high needs. This can be allocated through the Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) as administered by the Ministry of Education. This funding needs to be increased as the demand for extra support for students with high needs has increased dramatically with the inclusion of students in the mainstream. The criteria for ORRS applications needs to be broadened to cater for this increased demand. Currently it can take up to 12 –14 hours per child to fill in an application for funding. This includes interviewing parents, specialists, and each staff member individually and writing up their comments backed up with evidential data (verification). The categories for verification need to be increased. The application process should be streamlined to take account of information already available from other learning or support programmes. This over-valuing of Ministry-based processes links directly to a devaluing of the time and professional judgment of qualified practitioners.
- b. Targeted funding for specific students is more preferable than allocating resource funding to schools based on the roll and decile rating. In some cases, the Special Education Grant (SEG) amount may be too small for anything useful to be done. Schools aggregating to share special education resources as a cluster would seem to be logical. It should be noted, however, that collaboration (to succeed) also needs adequate resourcing. Targeted funding can be managed by Group Special Education and applied to the specific needs of the students who meet the criteria for ongoing Specialist Teacher and Teacher Aide support. This would provide for accountability of the funds. If the funding is allocated directly to the schools through the SEG, there is not the same accountability and the funds can be absorbed into the operational budget or lost in the bureaucracy or middle stages..
- c. The Supplementary Learning Support funds allocated to students with high needs, needs to be continued as it is a most valuable resource and targets those students who have not met the criteria for ORRS funding. More and more students are eligible for this Specialist Teacher resource, but funding is limited.
- d. Only schools, government and accredited private providers should be fundholders as this will ensure clear lines of accountability.
- e. Teacher Training needs to be updated to include more in-depth knowledge of how to adapt learning programmes and behaviour management skills to cater for students with special needs. When teachers are learning their craft in pre-service they are not really able to cope with too many variations of need and so special needs professional development is best to occur after graduation with teachers who have had some practical teaching experience.
- f. Para-professionals because they play such an important role in the life of the special-needs student should also be provided with opportunities and encouraged to train and gain special qualifications – particularly teacher aides who may not have gained any tertiary qualifications. Other specialist providers generally have professional qualifications but still need opportunities to upskill.
- g. The ERO Team who review the schools need to focus on the outcomes for students with special needs, with an emphasis on the use of the Special Education Grant, to include the resources and personnel put in place to support these students.

**Q 5a - How can individually targeted services and supports be made more efficient?**

- a. The combining of the 0.1 and 0.2 allocations of extra teacher time for ORRS funded students within a cluster of schools (where there is not a special school as fundholder) so that teacher aide services and specialists can be rationalised is recommended. Within clusters, or if employed collectively by an independent provider, teachers could be more able to support and mentor each other, some could

specialise in particular areas of needs and travel to those students who require this particular support, there would be more consistent standard of support to ORRS funded students and their schools.

- b. The process for allocating teacher aide time more efficiently would be to reduce the assessment of need to every two years instead of annually. For students with longstanding needs it may be more worthwhile to establish a specific extended review period.
- c. There is a shortage of specialist teachers but if more training **opportunities** were available resulting in specialist qualifications, with secure employment being provided through the cluster of schools or an independent provider, there would be more incentives to become ORRS specialist resource teachers.
- d. The Individual Education Plan may identify what Teacher Aide support is needed in the classroom. Unless adequate support is available in the classroom there can be additional stress placed upon the teacher and the mainstream students as the special needs student may take teacher time away from the mainstream students.
- e. Teacher Aide time is crucial for helping special need students at break times and also with feeding. Teacher Aides should improve outcomes for special needs students because:
  - They support the teachers in the classroom;
  - They improve supervision of special needs students in the playground;
  - They will be able to liaise better with the families because they have detailed knowledge of what is happening;
  - They will be able to carry out the suggestions of the outside agencies as outlined in the Individual Education Plan.

**Q 5b - Is the current mix of programmes, services and supports right and does it provide value for money? What changes would you suggest?**

- a. Notwithstanding that the whole Special Education area is under-resourced, it seems that, within the current system, the major losers in terms of unmet needs are both the large cohort with high to moderate needs (pages 38 and 39) and large pyramid-base for whom early intervention could make a difference. These could be as high as 12% of the total cohort of children.
- b. It seems inappropriate that of the \$450 million spent annually on Special Education only \$37 million – 8.2% – appears to be specifically allocated to Early Intervention/Early Childhood (page 52). Surely “the younger the better”?
- c. Our understanding is that the apex/tip of the Government’s Special Education Framework represents approximately 3% of children – including the severest 1% in Behaviour and Communication programmes and 1% on the ORRS – Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes. It is very concerning that little data is currently collected or reported on the needs of and services for moderate needs children. If a child is not assessed as being within the 1% of severest need required to qualify for the services of one the Framework’s programmes, parents in some locations have no alternative private expertise to use. For example, in all of Southland there is just one private Speech Therapist.
- d. There appears to be an ongoing reduction in the number of support staff, and fewer specialists such as physiotherapists and speech language therapists appear to be becoming qualified and encouraged to work in the area of special needs. Often untrained personnel have to be shown how to administer physiotherapy treatment. Resources and equipment are becoming very expensive. As technology improves, so

will the cost of equipment. Will there be forward planning and sufficient funds allocated for this purpose?

### **High quality services and being accountable**

#### **Q 6 - How can the quality of services be improved?**

The current model that all students should have the same opportunities to succeed regardless of the schools they attend does not apply. Learning for students with special education needs means placing students at the centre, respecting and responding to their learning needs. For this to happen health, education providers and specialist agencies need to work together.

Pre-service training cannot equip beginning teachers with the knowledge and skills to cater for special needs students. So there needs to be ongoing professional development in special needs. Many seminars are offered throughout the year on various special needs, however usually only learning support departments and RTLB teachers are able to attend. These seminars are run efficiently and offer world-class speakers with the latest information on research into the disability and the latest techniques and strategies in coping with students with these disabilities. Attending seminars is a costly burden for schools as not only do they pay the teacher to attend and attendance fees they also have to pay for relief staff. Attendance by learning support staff is not enough to equip a school with the valuable knowledge for classroom teachers. Teachers need a pool of onsite professionals, equipment and services to call on to assist them make inclusive education work for those who choose that system.

There is limited research on moderate special needs children being carried out in New Zealand and available international studies are not utilised to their full extent. More money and time should be invested in this area as these children have a greater ability to succeed at learning, for less cost, to reach their potential in life. This does not mean that funds are taken away from high and very high level needs students as their needs are greater and measurement of their successes more easily accomplished because they are more visible. But until more resources and support are provided for the moderate level needs children, the rate and nature of their success will not be measured.

Research, data collection and reporting on the needs and services should be valued and used as the basis for review and for building capacity of the school and parent community.

#### **Q 7 - How can families and schools be better informed?**

- a. Parents need to be accepted as the experts on their own children and listened to. They need access to information relating to services and agencies available for the various disabilities and what is needed to get special support in place for their child. At secondary school especially they need to be kept in a communication loop, so they know when assignments are expected or assessments are being done so that their children can be supported and succeed. An online knowledge base needs to be available to schools and families:
  - Detailing the services available to support schools and families.
  - Containing information on services and supports provided from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Development as well as their agencies.
  - Links to specialist sites eg Autism NZ
  - Lists of agencies available to aid transition to work or tertiary education and their special focus and area of coverage of the country.
  - Information on what is required for special needs children to gain special exam assistance.
  - Lists of useful books, DVDs courses and other publications.

- Information on rights and appropriate website linkages.
  - Information on the complaints process.
- a. A different approach to the current ERO reporting and style is recommended. They are in a very strong position to lead, teach and inform – not just review. An ERO review should involve not just the staff and BOT but all parents in the school community.
  - b. Communication between home and school is essential. A written plan of procedures should be in place in every school and details of the contact person, emergency crisis team, RTLB etc. Most schools operate a daily notebook contact between parent or care-giver and teacher. School newsletters, parent interviews, formal and informal are other sources of information. Parents are often at work and setting meetings can be time-consuming and unproductive if parents “can’t make it”. The criteria for special needs children needs to be widened to include many who are borderline dysfunctional, especially where behavioural and emotional needs are exhibited. The students themselves should also be included in discussions, especially at IEP meetings, where practical.

**Q 8 - What does successful special education look like and how should we measure it?**

- a. Successful education means that all children irrespective of their needs should be able to attend school with their peers, interact with their peers and achieve to their level of ability.
- b. It looks like *inclusive education* – and we are achieving this by removing children’s barriers to learning and guaranteeing that the children’s rights are being met with dignity and respect – whatever way they choose to be educated according to their needs.
- c. When the needs of people within a group, such as a class clash, it has to be considered whether class members do learn to be more accepting or whether it’s counter-productive for everyone. For example, although it’s true that many children along the ASD spectrum really benefit from a regular class and indeed learn, with help, strategies for working/socialising with others, as suggested in the review, a child with a really high need for order and quiet and no language might find the constant presence of 30 or so other people really stress-inducing. This is not good for their health or learning and making the classroom sufficiently predictable and quiet for that child may well be stressful for all the other children - and counter-productive too because for most people to be flexible is both possible and desirable.
- d. With good attitude modelling, it should be possible for children to do various forms of different learning apart from a main group and for this to cause no particular comment.

**Q 9 - When things do not go well, what arrangements should be in place to resolve issues?**

- e. Schools and special education units need flexibility in planning and programming for individual students so that when innovations don’t work there is not a blaming environment and it can be called a “trial” or learning curve and a new approach taken – until the appropriate method is found.
- f. As for adults with health and disability issues –an advocacy service should be established and a formal procedure about how to make complaints and to whom set up. There must be a process of investigation, mediation and resolution and an independent review of decisions if parents and caregivers want that.

## In closing

### Q 10 - What is the most important change that would improve outcomes for children and young people with special education needs?

- a. The overarching question is perhaps, “Does accepting people's differences mean that everything has to be done together, or even most things, together? Or is it possible to have an accepting society that values difference but also allows for different spaces?” It is important that the emphasis that is given to Cultural needs is also given to Special needs and that the people with first hand knowledge of the latter be given priority ‘listening and learning’ time by all education experts.
- b. How special education services are provided and the availability of these services across the country, are not consistent, transparent or equitable. Systems are not common either – for example, in how children are approved for coverage. The Government’s method of dispersing dollars to a range of provider units also tends to mitigate against the provision of cohesive and seamless services. The most important issue is for better coordination of all the agencies involved which would enable schools, families and the community to make better use of the capacity that we already have.
- c. Whatever changes arise from the Review, children’s special education needs will continue to require both a *continuum of provision* and optimal *flexibility* for professional practitioners to assess, adjudge and move. At one extreme children will be totally excluded from regular schooling (for example, in a fully residential-care school) and at the other extreme children will be fully included in a mainstream classroom at a local regular school. Hopefully, the review is focusing on the vast territory *between* these extremes, and not seeking to deny or dismantle them.
- d. NCWNZ members thank the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to make comments on this discussion document.

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