

MEDIA RELEASE

28 November 2008

Dyslexia Foundation: new prison literacy statistics show negative impacts of childhood learning issues

Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand chair of trustees Guy Pope-Mayell said today that new research showing 90% of prison inmates were not functionally literate was further evidence of the potentially destructive impacts of childhood learning difficulties.

“The picture is crystal clear: learning difficulties as a child are a major cause of social dysfunction as an adult. There are so many causes of crime that we can’t do anything about – putting funding into addressing learning differences like dyslexia at school is one very simple action we can take right now.”

“These new statistics are shocking but, sadly, not surprising. Overseas, British research shows that between 30-50% of serious offenders in youth prisons have dyslexia, and there is no reason to suggest the New Zealand incidence would be any different. There is a clear route to offending, which begins with classroom difficulties caused by undiagnosed learning problems.”

One in ten New Zealanders has dyslexia, including 70,000 schoolchildren. The former Labour Government finally recognised dyslexia in April 2007, but did not deliver on commitments to provide dyslexia-specific funding for schools.

“It’s great news that the Department of Corrections is spending \$3.5m to improve literacy levels in prison, but it’s a bit like shutting the gate after the horse has bolted. We need to help children before failure at school turns into frustration, leading to low self-esteem and disruptive behaviour.”

Mr Pope-Mayell warned against treating literacy and numeracy in isolation:

“Often these issues are a symptom of important differences in the way a child’s brain is working. Pouring resources into literacy alone will be a waste of money if there is no recognition of the learning difference which is causing the problems in the first place.”

The new research came from a Ministry of Education screening tool trialled on 197 New Zealand prison inmates, which showed that 90% were not functionally literate and 80% were not functionally numerate. The statistics revealed a far greater problem than that previously identified by the Burt Word Recognition Test, which showed an incidence of 12% for literacy and 17% for numeracy problems among inmates.

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For more information please contact:

Guy Pope Mayell

Chair of Trustees

Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand. 0275 449 496