

# Dyslexia time bomb ticking

Education and crime are hot topics. But GUY POPE-MAYELL says politicians are failing to join the dots between the two – and it's a short step from classroom disruption to social dysfunction.

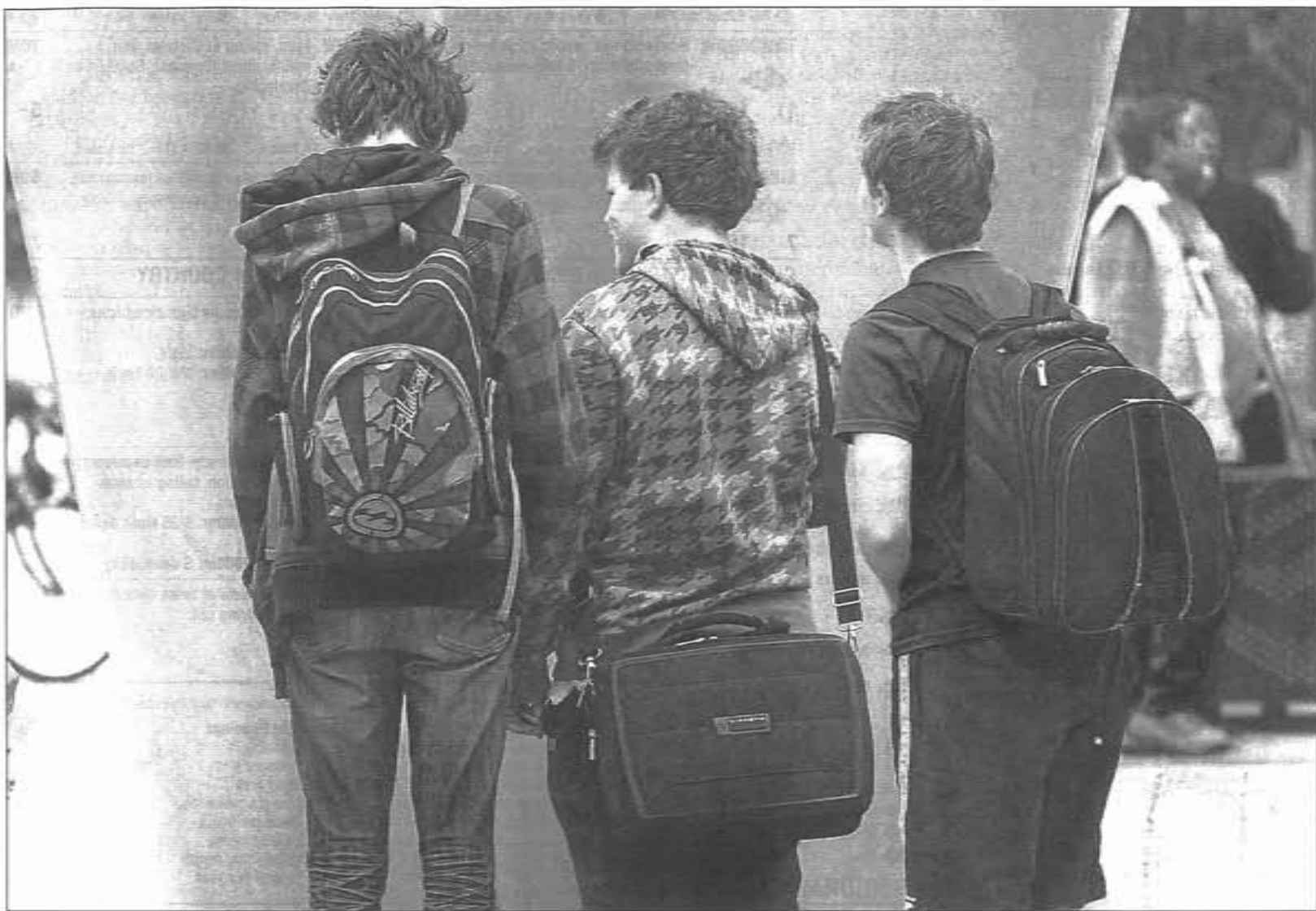
Dyslexia is both widespread, and a potential root cause of serious social issues. One in 10 New Zealanders has dyslexia, including 70,000 schoolchildren. That's 70,000 kids who need some specialist help to keep up with their classmates in basic areas of learning.

Dyslexia has become a ticking time bomb in this country – when failure at school becomes rife, failure at life is the obvious corollary. No matter how eager a child is to learn when they start at school, the consequences of not keeping up with the class are all too predictable. As any teacher will tell you: a struggling child would prefer to be known as naughty rather than dumb. If disruptive kids in schools were the end of the story, things would be bad enough. However, the reality is much more worrying.

Failure leads to loss of self-esteem, and low self-esteem feeds alienation, depression and even criminal behaviour. Shockingly, it is estimated that up to 50 per cent of young people who come before the courts have some sort of identifiable learning difficulty. Why are politicians the only people in the country who can't see the link?

This destructive chain reaction from disruption to dysfunction is being set off in every classroom in the country, and it has created an education system in crisis, with a chorus of important voices now warning of serious consequences.

The recent report on the compulsory schools sector noted that "one of the most pressing issues our



Backing needed: Widespread problem: One in 10 New Zealanders has dyslexia, including 70,000 schoolchildren.

Photo: Don Scott

education system faces is supporting students considered to be at risk of education and societal failure." In a survey of Wellington teachers by the NZ Council for Education Research, just over half said the severe behaviour of some students limited activities they would try with classes. And a paper presented to the PPTA conference in October recommended that funding be directly attached to children with discipline issues. In many cases these discipline issues are ignited by a lack of resources to deal with students who have learning differences, like dyslexia.

If politicians just faced facts, they would see that dealing with learning differences is where the rubber will hit

the road. Addressing education issues early would alleviate many of the social issues that cost the country millions of dollars. Unfortunately, despite officially recognising dyslexia in 2007, the Government appears to have conveniently forgotten its promise to provide dyslexia-specific funding for New Zealand schools.

Politicians often talk about putting money and energy into literacy programmes as some sort of cure-all for underperformance in schools, but this is too narrow a focus. Dyslexia is a different way of thinking, and it's not just confined to reading and writing. In fact, dyslexia impacts across a wide range of vectors, from literacy and numeracy through to

time management and information processing speed.

With little relief in sight, schools are often forced to take matters into their own hands to assist students with learning differences. To support them, Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand has this month launched a brand new guide to help New Zealand schools understand dyslexia – and take simple steps to improve life for their students, some as simple as using coloured paper to make work sheets easier to read.

Developed with the aid of dyslexia experts both here and overseas, it is a programme of changes called 4D | For Dyslexia, [www.4Dschools.org.nz](http://www.4Dschools.org.nz). It costs nothing to join but is expected

to provide immense value in giving schools permission to act, and to make changes.

While the foundation is proud of the work that has been done on 4D, schools cannot turn the tide by themselves. They need proper funding and resourcing, and they need it urgently. Politicians need to see the big picture, from disruption to dysfunction, and articulate a commitment to change. Only this will stop the time bomb ticking.

■ Guy Pope-Mayell is the Chair of Trustees of the Dyslexia Foundation of NZ and the father of four children, two of whom are dyslexic.