**DFNZ RELEASE**

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**STRUCTURED LITERACY NO MAGIC BULLET FOR NEURODIVERSE STUDENTS**

Government moves to mandate a structured literacy approach to teaching reading and writing will marginalise neurodiverse students and do little to address shocking shortfalls in a broken education system, says Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand.

The Government has decreed that all state schools must teach structured literacy from Term 1 next year, and plans to spend $67 million on professional development for teachers; books and resources and phonics checks to assess student progression.

A scathing new report from the Education Hub, released today, says the education system is outdated and heading towards major crisis. Titled ‘The Illusion of Inclusion’, the report collects the perspectives of 2400 people engaged with neurodivergent young people – from parents to teachers, education leaders, support services and young people themselves. The report says the results are ‘devastating’, with a multitude of issues from lack of funding to inadequate support, substantial lack of resources, poor leadership and long term harm.

Guy Pope-Mayell, DFNZ Chair-of-Trustees, says there is no doubt New Zealand has a growing literacy issue. But this is not being driven by more dyslexic students struggling, rather it’s an issue across the board. With more than ten percent of the population neurodiverse, the Government’s blanket mandate on structured literacy is ill-informed and short-sighted.

“The approach is being partly driven by a false narrative that structured literacy ‘solves’ dyslexia. What’s more, there is no single structured literacy provider, so the approach is plagued by complications on defining what this is and how it will be implemented” he says.

“On top of this, the Education Hub report makes it clear that literacy is only one aspect of the serious issues plaguing the education system. The report is a shocking exposé, packed with disturbing details – including the fact that accommodations for neurodiverse students are being arbitrarily denied or discouraged in some schools,” Pope-Mayell says

In terms of literacy, DFNZ believes a structured approach based on phonics is the best way to commence teaching all students to read.

“However when this fails there must be a swift change in approach for dyslexic students as too much focus on reading accuracy can be detrimental – damaging self-esteem by giving them more and more of what they find extremely difficult to achieve. Likewise, a reliance on one form of phonics over another may be problematic if the chosen method simply does not suit the student.”

Pope-Mayell says personalised and multisensory learning approaches are critical in order to scaffold students for success – one size does not fit all and a blanket approach marginalises those who need assistance the most.

“Magic bullets are highly sought after but often fail to perform to expectations. This is the case with reading accuracy, which for many years has been a preferred academic response to dyslexia – based on the idea that if we can teach children to read accurately through the use of phonics, then the ‘problem’ of dyslexia will disappear.

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“This, however, overlooks the fact that dyslexia is not simply an issue with reading and writing skills. Rather it’s a learning preference which can bring a broad spectrum of difference – from enhanced creativity and ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking through to issues with auditory and information processing, planning and organising, motor skills, short-term memory and concentration,” he says.

In essence, dyslexic thinkers receive and retrieve information in a different part of the brain to neurotypical, word-based thinkers. They tend to think in pictures rather than words. And often prefer to receive and present orally or visually rather than via the written word.

This is why it is essential to implement personalised and individual learning strategies, based on noticing what is not working and adjust teaching by making simple changes, for example using visuals, colour and real objects as props through to reducing classroom noise and distractions.

“Experience shows us that we can push and push a dyslexic child to improve reading accuracy up to a point, but there comes a time when the law of diminishing returns kicks in. Teaching harder does not work, we need to teach differently,” Guy Pope-Mayell says

DFNZ supports the positions of NZEI Te Riu Roa and the New Zealand Principals’ Federation on the Government’s structured literacy approach: have both commented that mandating a one-size-fits-all approach does not work.

NZEI Te Riu Roa president Mark Potter has said structured literacy has its uses, but research also shows that personalising and differentiating learning to meet the diversity of children in classrooms is the key art that teachers bring to their work.

NZPF President Leanne Oten has said that mandating a single literacy approach for all schools would be a mistake and on its own not produce increased achievement rates.

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**ABOUT DFNZ**

DFNZ, established in 2006, is the country’s foremost lobby group for dyslexia and neurodiversity. DFNZ has built its reputation on successful advocacy and action and has become the foremost lobby group in this area. From lobbying the Government for dyslexia to be officially recognised, achieved in 2007, through to working closely with government ministries on the inclusive education agenda and raising the Youth Court age, the landscape for neurodiversities has been fundamentally changed.

In advocating for dyslexia, DFNZ has noted that experiences and issues for those with dyslexia are often similar to those for other neurodiversities. And that getting it right for dyslexics means getting it right for all. For a number of years, therefore, DFNZ has included other neurodiversities within the scope of its work. DFNZ is a registered Charitable Trust and has four focal areas for its work – education, justice, workplace, and wellbeing.