**2 October 2015**

**SUBMISSION ON THE INQUIRY INTO THE IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA, DYSPRAXIA, AND AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS.**

To: Parliament’s Education and Science Select Committee

This submission is from Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, DFNZ. We wish to appear before the committee to speak to our submission. DFNZ Managing Trustee, Esther Whitehead, can be contacted as below.

Kind regards

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**DYLEXIA FOUNDATION OF NEW ZEALAND SUBMISSION**

Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ) supports the intent of the **Inquiry into the identification and support for students with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools.**

DFNZ was formed in November 2006 to provide a voice for, and services to, the estimated one in ten New Zealanders with dyslexia as well as to those supporting them. Its mission is to increase the awareness, recognition, understanding and acceptance of dyslexia as an alternative way of thinking.

Since inception in November 2006, DFNZ has built its reputation on successful advocacy and action. From lobbying the Government for dyslexia to be officially recognised, achieved in 2007, through to working closely with the Government on the inclusive education agenda, the landscape of dyslexia has been fundamentally changed. DFNZ continues to work alongside schools, Ministry of Education and NZQA, as well as social support agencies and information and resource providers, to improve the dyslexic student’s experience and achievements by ensuring that legal rights to inclusive learning and accommodations are delivered on.

This year, DFNZ has activated a second agenda of youth justice, which dovetails with its ongoing education advocacy. Its youth justice objectives are centered on ensuring that dyslexic youth are not entrapped in a system that treats them unfairly as adults. Difficulty with the acquisition of basic skills like reading and spelling, slower cognitive processing speeds and comprehension, among other things can contribute to this.

The twin focus on education and youth justice stems from the simple fact that the teenage years can be the breakpoint for those with learning differences. Often, dyslexia’s greatest difficulty is self-esteem – it only becomes a disability if not appropriately addressed. If appropriately addressed and supported, dyslexia can become a key driver for creative thinking, innovation, big picture thinking, enhanced spatial understanding and out of the box problem solving.

If youth offending is the dis-ease, education is the best preventative. Dyslexia is one of the few causes of social dysfunction that can be easily addressed. By prioritising and addressing dyslexia in schools – and ensuring that schools deliver on the legal rights that dyslexic students have to appropriate teaching and accommodations – we avoid flow on adult-related expenses from social services and mental health services through to the huge costs of incarceration in the prison system.

DFNZ has an extensive membership base, from parents, students and teachers through to schools, companies and community groups. Working for and alongside our thousands of members, DFNZ has a proven track record in building bridges between those working with and supporting dyslexic children and adults.

**DFNZ WISHES TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING GENERAL COMMENTS:**

Dyslexia is widespread in New Zealand; conservative estimates are that one in ten people are dyslexic. Dyslexia is **often misunderstood as a reading disability or, more simplistically, a problem with spelling or decoding**. In reality, dyslexia is a spectrum of neuro-differences which can impact motor skills, cognitive processing speeds and comprehension [written and verbal], auditory and visual perception, planning and organising, and short-term memory and concentration. Difficulty with the acquisition of basic skills like reading and spelling are a symptom of the different ways the dyslexic brain processes information. **This is a fundamental point to grasp as it shifts the paradigm from a narrow focus on difficulties with reading and spelling to an understanding of the root cause.**

Brain research, including Auckland university studies and fMRI mapping at Yale University, has shown that while it is common to use the ‘verbal’ left side of the brain to understand words, dyslexic people use the ‘pictorial’ right side. Dyslexic individuals thus tend to think in pictures rather than with the sounds of words, receiving and retrieving information in a different part of the brain to neuro-typical, word-based thinkers. Put simply, translating these ‘pictures’ back into words, whether spoken or written, takes extra time and considerable effort.

Dyslexics are often less able to navigate the education system due to many factors including:

1. Cognitive processing – often slow
2. Literacy levels – often very low
3. Listening comprehension – a vivid imagination and thinking in pictures can hijack attention during a conversation, leading to low comprehension
4. Written comprehension – often low
5. Co- morbidity with other conditions – communication disorders, aspergers and autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dysgraphia etc

Once dyslexia is understood, it is not difficult to see what changes to the educational environment would benefit these students. In simple terms, this is a fully inclusive learning environment, where accommodations are provided with understanding and empathy. It’s the early identification of the need for additional support and a timely and appropriate response to that need. Effective teaching takes into account that dyslexic naturally prefer to receive, process and present information in the way that makes sense to them, often orally or visually, rather than via the written word, and accommodates this with differentiated learning.

Despite progress in recent years, the New Zealand education system still has a long way to go before it can claim to be truly inclusive and responsive to individual learning needs. There is still a significant equity issue with students in lower decile schools, Maori, and Pacifica - all statistically disadvantaged. Students with learning differences are still not getting support they need.

**Schools that are succeeding in this area have one thing in common – a clear and transparent educational pathway to create successful learning outcomes. This pathway reflects and facilitates strong leadership, provides students, parents and teachers’ with confidence, and allows difference to manifest into success.** Unfortunately, this type of pathway is most often absent or dysfunctional, and as a result we see all the problems that have driven the urgent need for this inquiry.

Where no educational pathway is identified and implemented:

* Too many children wait too long for appropriate intervention for their learning difference
* Early identification within schools is not sufficiently emphasised, prioritised and resourced
* Children are progressing through the education system with unmet needs which often create longterm negative effects
* There are poor transitions through school years, with minimal to no forward planning for learning outcomes
* Access to services and decision-making is unnecessarily complex, for example, there are currently 10 ways for a child to access funding for a teacher aide
* Decision-making is highly compartmentalised; we currently have good coverage but not a good system to deliver services
* There is a lack of transparency and certainty of services, and therefore a constant threat that support can be lost, for example once an intervention is complete, often no further support is mapped out
* Too many Principals, teachers and support staff are not sufficiently trained or knowledgeable on learning differences.

**SPECIFIC COMMENTS UNDER INQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE:**

DFNZ wishes to raise the following matters under term of reference 1,

1. **Identify best educational practice for dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum students.**

Best educational practice is about individualised, personalised learning that is responsive to difference – from socio-economic to cultural and learning differences. For dyslexic, dyspraxic and autism spectrum students, best practice is a fully inclusive learning environment, with an early identification of the need for additional support and a timely and appropriate response to that need. Best practice comes down to three things – early identification; a ‘notice and adjust’ teaching approach to accommodate difference and, if no improvement; interventions to more specifically target problem areas. It is about improving the student’s experience and achievements by ensuring that legal rights to inclusive learning and accommodations are delivered on.

At NCEA level, provision of NCEA Special Assessment Conditions (SACs) such as reader or writer assistance, computer use, and/or extra time, for students with learning differences have created a defined ‘route for success’. In secondary schools, SACs are a simple scorecard showing whether the school is delivering on the Government’s Inclusive Education agenda and to what extent, based on the number of applications a school has made for its students. Schools already au fait with SAC applications and the regular practice of accommodating student needs are seeing benefits both in NCEA results and equally importantly, in student engagement.

However, this ‘route to success’ only applies to students at NCEA level. **Critical and urgent to achieving meaningful change is to create a clear-cut, defined, accountable educational pathway to successful learning outcomes that starts at year 1**. Absence of such a pathway creates silo activity, with (well-meaning) stakeholders separately doing what they think best, but failing to create a smooth learning journey for the student.

The concept of providing accommodations from year 1 dovetails with recommendations of the 2014 NZQA and Ministry of Education review of SACs. This review signaled the widening of the SACs model to earlier years, with MoE saying it will work with RTLBs, NZQA, and schools to make better use of the National Standards achievement data to identify students who may require SACs in the future, transferring information about students as they move through school and particularly as they leave year 8 and transition to secondary school. Primary schools will have to invest time and resource into identifying and supporting students and ensuring base-line accommodations and differentiated learning opportunities are aligned with the secondary school process.

Getting it right starts at year one and classroom and school accommodations are the foundation of this. The identification of need and provision of accommodations must become automatic – presently students, parents, and teachers struggle against process, and attitudes to varying degrees.Critical also is the provision of differentiated learning opportunities that allow students who learn differently to use their preferred way of thinking. By allowing students to engage initially in a way consistent with how they naturally think, comfort is created and stress is minimized or avoided completely. From comfort comes confidence. Once confident, students can be challenged to use other ways of thinking to engage in the situation. The result is competency.

Central to the provision of accommodations is understanding the concept of fairness and equity. Equity in education means doing the right thing for each individual– one size does not fit all. This personalised approach lies at the heart of the National Curriculum and Inclusive Education rights. The types of accommodations provided by SACs are supported by a wealth of neurological science and research, including the Yale University fMRI mapping which tracks how dyslexics receive and retrieve information in a different part of the brain to neuro-typical, word-based thinkers. In simple terms – learning differences rob a student of time, accommodations give it back.

At both primary and secondary school level, simple changes make a big difference in allowing students with learning differences to access the curriculum and reduce stress, supporting their ability to overcome difficulty. Simple changes come as the result of teachers identifying learning issues and noticing and adjusting classroom teaching to suit – from reviewing seating layout and noise levels through to use of new technology. And looking out for ‘red flags’ in learning and literacy in order to refer students to school specialists, SENCos, RTLBs and/or RTLits for further intervention as appropriate.

There are some schools in New Zealand that do very well in supporting the needs of dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum students despite the complexities and limited resources of the education system. In each instance these schools have defined and aligned around a clear and transparent educational pathway that celebrates inclusivity and diversity. Sharing this knowledge with other schools is an obvious opportunity. Also critical is supporting schools to engage, and bringing those that resist to account. Whichever group is responsible for sharing best practice school models with other schools, it is critical that they be trained and resourced sufficiently to do so.

**Recommendations:**

**That best practice be integrated at a national level through creation of a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13**; one which all education stakeholders understand and are accountable to**.** And that this pathway draws on learnings from the ‘route to success’ epitomized by SACs at NCEA level, and be based on best practice principles of early identification of learning difference, a ‘notice and adjust’ approach to teaching and learning, and further specific evidence based interventions where required – in order to deliver individualised, personalised learning.

Supporting actions in creating a clear pathway would include that:

* MoE continue to work closely with the RTLB/RTLit network, Board of Trustee’s, SENCos and the likes to establish processes for implementing best practice
* MoE work with primary and secondary school teachers and principals to ensure understanding of the importance of accommodations and the need for teacher observations to support school based evidence. Ultimately this provides immediate recognition of needs and access to appropriate services without having to rely on or wait for privately funded or outsourced diagnostic tests
* MoE provide more resources and clearer direction for parents/teachers to help them guide children with learning differences through the plethora of relevant services, interventions and funding so that parents/teachers can make more informed choices
* Schools are made explicitly aware that they are accountable for delivering on the Government’s Inclusive Education agenda, with SACs a key driver for this at secondary school level, and similar, wider accommodations required at primary school level
* Greater recognition and training be prioritised for Teacher Aides, SENCos and school specialists and further funding be made available so that RTLBs can share best practice school models with other schools

DFNZ wishes to raise the following matters under term of reference 2,

1. **Investigate current screening for dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools.**

Dyslexia is one of the few causes of social dysfunction that can be easily addressed. By prioritising and addressing dyslexia in schools – and ensuring that schools deliver on the legal rights that dyslexic students have to appropriate teaching and accommodations – we avoid flow on adult-related expenses from social services and mental health services through to the huge costs of incarceration in the prison system.

It is the already the duty of the school under National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) and National Educational Guidelines (NEGs) to identify these students and address their needs. A full diagnostic assessment involves an Educational Psychologist or a C- Level Assessor and generally costs $450 to $1000 if commissioned by a parent. It is very uncommon for schools to fund, and although it may happen if a student is referred to the RTLB service it is more likely to be an exception rather than the rule.

Although not a solution in itself, a full diagnostic assessment, along with parent advocacy, always provides benefits to the student and their journey through school – thus, any parent that can afford one is wise to commission one. Benefits come directly through the recommendations, and also indirectly by bringing schools to account. This is a significant equity issue.

Formal screening of any description within schools is not common practice due to cost, and a lack of knowledge on how to screen appropriately. Instead, struggling children tend be referred to RTLB, RTLit, or SENCo, and even then they are not always screened. This is far from ideal, and is under resourced.

For some students it is critical that they receive a timely and full assessment, others would benefit from a specific but less comprehensive screening. These would be followed up with a specific intervention. For many students, however, existing standardized assessment tools that are already in place, along with teacher observation, will identify that a student has a different line of progression, or that the student is ‘under-performing’. A specific screen can certainly help build the picture but ultimately it is the school’s commitment to inclusion and accommodating difference that will deliver results. **Critical to this is implementation of best practice principles of early identification, notice and adjust, and further interventions where required – to deliver individualised, personalised learning which is guided by a clear and transparent educational pathway to successful learning outcomes.**

If a school is fully inclusive and accommodations are made, the number of students that require specific screening and interventions is reduced significantly – perhaps from 10% to 4%.

**Recommendations:**

Specific screening tools are one step in a clear and transparent educational pathway to successful learning outcomes.But, in many cases, assessment tools along with teacher observation will provide identification of a child with learning difference sufficient to act upon and implement best practice – thus assessment tools are equally part of a clear and transparent educational pathway. Importantly, it is what the school does in terms of inclusion and accommodating difference – whether acting on results from a specific screening tool, in-school assessment or teacher observation – that will determine results.

Facilitating and supporting schools to achieve best practice in early identification, notice and adjust, and further interventions where required, is therefore **an essential component of a clear-cut, defined, accountable educational pathway to successful learning outcomes that starts at year 1.**

Supporting actions to ensure schools are effective in this area would include that:

* ERO and MoE require greater accountability from schools, in line with National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) and National Educational Guidelines (NEGs) which specify it is the duty of the school to identify these students and address their needs
* National Curriculum principles of inclusion are recognized as fundamental to learning success. Accommodating needs is a must, whereas screening is an ‘and’ not an ‘or’
* There be greater focus on a holistic school culture which looks for ‘red flags’ in learning and literacy and refers students to RTLBs, SENCo, RT Lit, or other school specialists where a student is ’under’ achieving according to basic skills and/or National Standards
  + Teachers should be relying on their Overall Teacher Judgment (OTJ), not only standardised tests, in order to create learning pathways within the National Curriculum
  + Concerns must be communicated to parents and a plan of action agreed; this plan of action should be aligned with accommodating needs as much as remediating needs
* Teachers utilize personalised approaches to learning to place appropriate emphasis and importance on students’ ‘learning how to learn’ and developing behaviour for learning.

DFNZ wishes to raise the following matters under term of reference 3,

1. **Investigate support available to and in schools for the transition through education for students with dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum disorders, and the adaptations for their learning including Special Assessment Conditions.**

Currently, transitions through school years are very poor, with minimal to no forward planning for learning outcomes. There is a lack of transparency and certainty of services, and therefore ongoing anxiety that support can be lost, for example once an intervention is complete, often no further support is mapped out. It is apparent that, in many discussions between schools and parents, there is little focus on outcomes for children. Rather the focus is on the type and amount of provision, and often on agreeing a number of hours of support or which funding model may be relevant or if it can be accessed at all.

At NCEA level, provision of NCEA Special Assessment Conditions (SACs) such as reader or writer assistance, computer use, and/or extra time, for students with learning differences have created a defined route for educational support and success. Schools already au fait with SAC applications and the regular practice of accommodating student needs are seeing benefits both in NCEA results and equally importantly, in student engagement. However, this ‘route to success’ only applies to students at NCEA level. Prior to this, however, there is no defined educational pathway that supports best practice in delivering the individualised, personalised learning that accommodates learning difference – yet this is a key plank of the Government’s Inclusive Education agenda.

DFNZ thus contends that creation of **a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13 is a critical and urgent need.** Based on best practice principles of early identification, notice and adjust, and further interventions where required – in order to deliver individualised, personalised learning that is responsive to difference – this pathway can draw on learnings from the ‘route to success’ epitomized by SACs at NCEA level.

Creation of such a pathway is in line with recommendations from the 2014 NZQA and Ministry of Education review of SACs. This review signaled the widening of the SACs model to earlier years, with MoE saying it will work with RTLBs, NZQA, and schools to make better use of the National Standards achievement data to identify students who may require SACs in the future, transferring information about students as they move through school and particularly as they leave year 8 and transition to secondary school. This means primary schools will have to invest additional time and resource into identifying and supporting students and ensuring base-line accommodations and differentiated learning opportunities are aligned with the secondary school process.

Overall, the SAC review found huge disparity and inequity in accessing SACs across schools in New Zealand, sparking the launch of DFNZ’s ‘Plus 20 in 2015’ initiative which aims for a lift in the numbers of students receiving SACs by more than 20% this year. DFNZ is working closely with Ministry of Education and NZQA to raise awareness of SAC requirements, the benefits of this to all, and the obligations of school partners. SACs are core to the role and responsibilities of boards of trustees and principals, and SAC support and activation is now part of RTLB contracts and funding criteria.

Funding, however, remains a crucial pressure point for full implementation of the review recommendations. The onus on schools to provide school based evidence requires skills and resources that many schools simply don’t have presently. For low decile schools who are already struggling to prioritise SACs, the funding is even more critical. And with RTLBs now the lynchpin in the SAC process, tasked with making it happen for schools that need support, more RTLBs will need to be trained, efforts co-ordinated, and deployed.

**Recommendations:**

Lack of support available to and in schools for the transition through education for students with dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum disorders is a **proof point of the critical and urgent need for creation of a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13.**

Learnings from the ‘route to success’ epitomized by SACs at NCEA level can be used to help model this pathway from year 1, bearing in mind that the SACs system can itself be improved with full implementation of the 2014 SAC review findings.

Supporting actions to improve transitions through education for students with learning differences would include that:

* Key learnings from the SACs model, the improvements recommended in the 2014 SAC review and the signaled intention to widening the model to earlier years, be fed into creation of a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13
* All stakeholders be made aware that the Government’s Inclusive Education agenda is non-negotiable, and that the 2014 SACs review provides a framework for initial action
* Adequate funding be prioritised and made available to fully implement recommendations from the 2014 SAC review
* A broader definition of the term achievement be developed, with a clearer focus on learning outcomes rather than only a focus on provision of services, such as interventions, teacher aides etc
* RTLB’s share best practice school models with other schools. Working closely with BOT’s and SENCo to establish best practice and aid transition of a child through school years.

DFNZ wishes to raise the following matters under term of reference 4,

1. **Investigate whether teacher training and professional development prepare teachers to identify and support the education of dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum students.**

A lack of teacher training and professional development in this area is a critical issue and a real concern. Too many principals, teachers and support staff are not sufficiently trained or knowledgeable on learning differences. Ultimately this is New Zealand’s greatest challenge. While there is plenty of information available, this is not finding its way into the daily interaction between student, teacher, school, and parent.

More effective and widespread teacher training and professional development is essential to disseminate the understanding needed to teach students with learning differences. In respect of dyslexia, this is about understanding that the dyslexic mind works in a different way. While it is common to use the ‘verbal’ left side of the brain to understand words, brain research (including Auckland university studies and fMRI mapping at Yale University) has shown that dyslexic people use the ‘pictorial’ right side. Dyslexic individuals thus tend to think in pictures rather than with the sounds of words, receiving and retrieving information in a different part of the brain to neuro-typical, word-based thinkers. Put simply, translating these ‘pictures’ back into words, whether spoken or written, takes extra time and considerable effort. Effective teaching takes into account that dyslexics naturally prefer to receive, process and present information in the way that makes sense to them, often orally or visually, rather than via the written word, and caters for this with differentiated learning and accommodations such as extra time.

Of particular importance is the need to identify students with ‘moderate needs’ – these students may be ‘underperforming’ but often go undetected. Moderate needs are not less important than high needs. It is the duty of the school under National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) to identify these students and address their needs. These ‘hidden disabilities’ need no longer be ‘hidden’ with appropriate pre-service teacher training, and in-service professional development. In order to be effective, teachers need to have the capacity to identify red-flags and the authority to create educational pathways for children who don’t ‘fit’ the system.

**Recommendations:**

The ineffectiveness of current teacher training and professional development in preparing teachers to identify and support the learning journey of dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum students is a furtherproof point of the **critical and urgent need for creation of a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13. Such a pathway would identify and quantify what constitutes effective teaching training and professional development in respect of learning difference.**

Supporting actions to improve teacher training and professional development would include that:

* Teachers receive specific training on the most common SLDs as part of their Teacher Qualifications, as do In-service teachers, Teacher Aides, SENCos and RTLBs/RTLits
* Greater multi-agency collaboration and governance be instituted, involving MoE, Secondary School’s Principals Association, School Trustees Association, Board of Trustees, Parent Teacher Association etc, otherwise PD is ad-hoc and of variable quality
* The Secondary School’s Principals Association share best practice information on inclusive education. One of the SSPA roles is to offer PD on Inclusive Education, in particular governance and self-review, for example: how a school is achieving inclusive education goals using SAC applications as a KPI
* The Schools Trustees association be more proactive on its guidance to Boards of Trustees on best practice in Inclusive Education. A school culture of inclusiveness is part of the core business of Boards of Trustees. Governance and budgeting must be integrated to Inclusive Education goals.

DFNZ wishes to make the following general comments under term of reference 5,

1. **Review the implementation of the 2008 NZ Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline recommendations specific to education, to assess the level of progress.**

As autism is not DFNZ’s area of expertise, it would not be appropriate to provide specific comment on the level of progress in implementing these recommendations. As a general comment, however, DFNZ would note that Guidelines for specific learning differences are important but still need a place within an overall framework that supports best educational practice. **And that best practice must be integrated at a national level through creation of a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13**; one which all education stakeholders understand and are accountable to**.**

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS:**

Schools that are succeeding in identifying and supporting children with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders have one thing in common – a clear and transparent educational pathway to create successful learning outcomes. This pathway reflects and facilitates strong leadership, and provides students, parents, and teachers’ confidence and allows difference to manifest into success.

As noted under each of the individual terms of reference, this type of success could be shared by integrating best practice at a national level through **a clear and transparent educational pathway for successful learning outcomes from year 1 though to year 13.** Such a pathway would draw on learnings from the ‘route to success’ epitomized by Special Assessment Conditions (SACs) at NCEA level, and be based on best practice principles of early identification of learning difference, a ‘notice and adjust’ approach to teaching and learning, and further interventions where required – in order to deliver individualised, personalised learning. It would improve the student’s experience and achievements by ensuring that legal rights to inclusive learning and accommodations are delivered on.

Creation of such a pathway is in line with recommendations from the 2014 NZQA and Ministry of Education review of SACs. This review signaled the widening of the SACs model to earlier years, with MoE saying it will work with RTLBs, NZQA, and schools to make better use of the National Standards achievement data to identify students who may require SACs in the future, transferring information about students as they move through school and particularly as they leave year 8 and transition to secondary school. Widening the model in this way would help address current poor transitions through school years, with minimal to no planning for learning outcomes.

In terms of specific screening tools for learning difference, these can certainly help build the picture, but ultimately it is the school’s commitment to inclusion and accommodating difference that will deliver results. Facilitating and supporting schools to achieve best educational practice is therefore an essential component of a clear-cut, defined, accountable educational pathway to successful learning outcomes that starts at year 1.

Such a pathway would also identify and quantify what constitutes effective teacher training and professional development in respect of learning difference, addressing current issues with teachers being inadequately prepared to identify and support the learning journey of dyslexic, dyspraxic, and autism spectrum students.

**ends**