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**SUBMISSION ON THE PETITION OF –**

**MIKE STYLES: A GOVERNMENT INQUIRY INTO AND SUPPORT FOR DYSLEXIA AND NEURODIVERSITY**

To: Parliament’s Petitions Committee

This submission is from Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand [DFNZ].

Kind regards



Guy Pope-Mayell

Chair of Trustees

Dyslexia Foundation of NZ

Email: guy@dfnz.org.nz

Phone: 027 544 9496‬

**BACKGROUND**

The Petitions Committee is considering the petition ofMike Styles, namely:

**Mike Styles: A government inquiry into and support for dyslexia and neurodiversity**

**The petition requests:**That the House of Representatives urge the Government to conduct an inquiry into dyslexia/neurodiversity, including their impact on society and the economy, consider legislation to cover their rights, and ensure best practice in education for dyslexic/neurodiverse learners, and note that 7,844 people have signed a similar petition in support.

**The petitioner states that the reason for their petition is:**Internationally 10% of humans have dyslexia and another 5% have related neurodiverse conditions. In New Zealand the statistics department gathers no statistics on dyslexia/neurodiversity and our human rights legislation does not mention dyslexia. Dyslexia/neurodiversity are not mentioned in any legislation. People with dyslexia are over-represented in school dropouts, unemployment rates and in the prison population. I believe that dyslexia is both an equity issue and a productivity issue.

The Petitions Committee advised that Professor David Mellor, Whaikaha, SPELD and the Ministry of Education have provided written submissions which are available on the Parliament website. The Petitions Committee has decided to invite the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand to provide a written submission on the petition of Mike Styles. This submission will also be published to the website.

**DYSLEXIA FOUNDATION OF NEW ZEALAND SUBMISSION**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ) supports the intent of the Mike Styles petition in that it seeks to improve the rights and educational outcomes for individuals with dyslexia and other neurodiversities.**

DFNZ notes, however, that the Government in 2016 held a specific Inquiry into identification and support for neurodiverse learners in New Zealand schools. Parliament’s Education and Science Select Committee conducted this ‘Inquiry into the identification and support for students with the significant challenges of dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools’ and reported back to the House in November 2016.

At that time, DFNZ warned that the Report was well meaning but ineffectual unless tougher recommendations were implemented to give it teeth. The Report outlined 46 recommendations to improve education experiences for students with dyslexia, autism and dyspraxia.

Critically, several members of the select committee declined to support the Report, including Green Party education spokesperson Catherine Delahunty, who helped initiate the select committee inquiry. The views of these members of the Labour Party, Green Party and New Zealand First were instead captured in an additional Minority View section of the Report, outlining 26 recommendations designed to give the main report more teeth.

DFNZ backed the Minority Report calls for the rights of students with learning differences to be enshrined in the Education Act, for the urgent collection of data so the issues and progress are measurable, and for increased special education funding to be made available to address the needs of said number of children.

At that time, DFNZ urged the Government to take urgent actions on the Minority Report recommendations, noting that otherwise the system would continue to go in circles with limited funds available to support New Zealand’s one in five neurodiverse students.

**The fact that Mike Styles has initiated the current petition shows that too little progress has been made since the 2016 Inquiry.**

**DFNZ, however, submits there is no need for another Inquiry which would only serve to cover old ground. Rather, there is an urgent need to address the failings of the 2016 Inquiry – and the subsequent Education Ministry Learning Support Plan – with action not words.**

The 2016 Inquiry Report also noted that the Inquiry coincided with a broader Ministry of Education Work Programme called the Learning Support Update. The Ministry said it would create an Action Plan to significantly redesign the system of additional support for students with additional learning needs. The Inquiry Report noted it expected that many of the Inquiry recommendations would be incorporated into the Education Ministry’s action plan.

The Education Ministry subsequently released a Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025 which identified six priority areas for action. Fast-forward to now, and the $225 million invested has delivered little measurable return on investment. There has been an abject failure to significantly move the dial in these priority areas: more learning support coordinators; improved screening and early identification of learning needs plus strengthening early intervention; flexible support; meeting the needs of gifted learners; and improving education for those at risk of disengaging.

Discrimination is the elephant in the room here, the reality of inequity and the lack of a level playing field for the neurodiverse. For neurodiverse children, discrimination starts early with barriers to education. Whilst people commonly equate accessibility with making adjustments for physical impairment, neurodiversity equally must be accommodated. Teachers often have insufficient training and resources to recognise and adjust for neurodiversity. Neurodiverse tendencies such as being uncomfortable with eye contact, hypersensitive in stressful situations and difficulties processing information can be misunderstood as ‘behaving badly’. Failure to recognise and properly support neurodiversity through adjustments in accommodations, teaching style and classroom layout can lead to disengagement and exclusion, or self-exclusion in the form of truancy.

New Zealand has shocking rates of school disengagement, with attendance at school dropping since 2015. Data from Term 4, 2022, shows only 50.6% of students were regularly attending class. Undiagnosed and unsupported neurodiversity feeds into alarming literacy and numeracy standards, intractable mental health outcomes, youth offending and unemployment. There is still a significant equity issue with students in lower decile schools, Maori, and Pacifica - all statistically disadvantaged.

In the 17 years since DFNZ was established, we have been making clear the upsides of positive action in the classroom, and the downsides of inaction in terms of disengagement and economic and social costs. Our work should be lessening, but the reality is we are busier than ever with enquiries from parents, who are at breaking point in trying to access equitable help for their children. We are also seeing a noticeable increase in enquiries from adults who, having struggled at school, are ill equipped to navigate the world. So many of these people end up in our welfare system, our justice system, and our mental health system.

**DFNZ submits it is imperative that urgent action is taken to address the needs of the neurodiverse with a whole-of-system, fully resourced, long-term change process. In May this year, DFNZ co-founded the Neurodiversity in Education in Coalition (NIEC) with three other peak bodies – ADHD NZ, Autism NZ and NZ Centre for Gifted & Talented – to further advocate for change. See www.neurodiversity.org.nz**

**NIEC immediately released a White Paper setting out three key initiatives to kick-start action and halt the rapidly rising tide of education disengagement and disenfranchisement.**

**The White Paper is attached in support of this submission. The initiatives are:**

1. **Build Neurodiversity Awareness and Understanding**
2. **Require School Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plans**
3. **Scale up programmes that work**

**In addition, the three iniatives should be underpinned by funding a new Neurodiversity in Education NZ national body, to work with community groups.**

The three initiatives, plus the new natonal body, are practical, pragmatic and cost-effective moves that can resuscitate an ailing education system and generate the momentum needed for long-term change.

Over the past few decades, Governments have made various attempts to provide more support for neurodiverse students, most recently with the Learning Support Action Plan. Under the mantle of Learning Support and then Inclusive Education, the Ministry of Education has made strategic commitments, drafted policies, created action plans, funded programmes, developed resources, created new internal teams and frontline positions. The net result has been minimal.

**DFNZ urges the Petitions Committee to recognise that good intentions have not delivered good outcomes. And neither has the 2016 Inquiry, or the Learning Support Action Plan. The Mike Styles petition highlights the real need for action. But holding another Inquiry will take time that New Zealand’s one in five neurodiverse students cannot afford to lose.**

Supporting neurodiverse students to thrive does not require new research and innovation. Over the past decades, the Government, alongside community organisations and the philanthropic sector, has already invested significantly in the development and testing of high-quality programmes that support neurodiverse learners and build capabilities in their teachers, parents and other professionals to support them.

What successive Governments have failed to do is to support and scale these proven programmes up so every child, parent and teacher in New Zealand can have access to them. Many successful programmes are not funded beyond their initial pilot, and those that continue often remain small-scale, financially marginal, and available only to those who can afford them or who live in a particular area.

The result is significant inequity of access for neurodiverse students and a failure to sustainably build and grow a consistent infrastructure of programmes well understood by schools and parents, and the experienced staff needed to deliver them.

Scrimping on support for neurodiverse students is a ridiculous false economy – a few dollars saved in the classroom is no match for the millions spent mopping up the consequences in the social, health and justice systems. However, with the right support, neurodiverse students can unlock immense potential, bringing the kind of creativity fresh thinking and focus that employers are increasingly valuing and seeking out.

It’s time to acknowledge that the $225 million invested in the Learning Support Action Plan 2019 – 2025 has not delivered an acceptable return on investment. And to instead retarget investment to what we know works – programmes with proven track records and demonstrable, measurable results. Supported by a new Neurodiversity in Education New Zealand peak body.

It is time to take action. And to actually listen to those organisations who have decades of lived experience and on-the-ground expertise in working with neurodiverse students.

**DFNZ urges the Petitions Committee to truly take this into account and honour the experience and expertise of those on the ground. And to recommend the Government action with urgency the NIEC White Paper three key initiatives plus establishment of a new funded peak body, thus devolving power from policy makers who have meant well but intolerably failed.**

We comment further on the context for our position and required actions in the following pages of this submission.

**DFNZ INTRODUCTION**

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 and raising the Youth Court age, the landscape 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. 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 neurodiverse students’ experience and achievements by ensuring that legal rights to inclusive learning and accommodations are delivered on.

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 stakeholders working with and supporting neurodiverse children and adults.

In May 2023, DFNZ joined forces with with three other peak bodies – ADHD NZ, Autism NZ and NZ Centre for Gifted & Talented – to form the Neurodiversity in Education in Coalition (NIEC), www.neurodiversity.org.nz. Each of these organisations have been operating for decades to support young people, their whānau and their teachers. We are committed to working together and in an active partnership with Government, making sure that all neurodiversity organisations in New Zealand have a voice, a seat at the table, and the financial support they need to do their work. NIEC has also selected 15 Young Neurodiverse Champions (YNCs), comprising school and university students from throughout New Zealand and ranging in age from 14 to 22, to be the face of change. Their viewpoints are featured in the NIEC White Paper, as well as via social media and events.

**ABOUT DYSLEXIA AND NEURODIVERSITY**

Dyslexia is a neurodiversity, where the brain is wired differently. It is conservatively estimated that one in ten people are dyslexic. Dyslexia often co-occurs with other neurodiversities, such as dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, autism spectrum, attention deficit hyperactivity and giftedness. Altogether, it is estimated one in five New Zealand students are neurodiverse.

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 ‘visual’ right side of the brain. In short, they tend to turn words into pictures to understand them, and then have to turn the picture back into words to respond – a process that requires extra effort and time if they are required to present something in words.

Once dyslexia and neurodiversity 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.

Often, a neurodivere individual’s greatest difficulty is self-esteem – it only becomes a problem if not identified and understood. If appropriately addressed and supported, dyslexia and neurodiversity can become a key driver for creative thinking, innovation, big picture thinking, enhanced spatial understanding and out of the box problem solving.

**THE 2016 ‘INQUIRY INTO THE IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH THE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES OF DYSLEXIA, DYSPRAXIA, AND AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS’**

The 2016 Inquiry Report also noted that the Inquiry coincided with a broader Ministry of Education Work Programme called the Learning Support Update. The Ministry said it would create an Action Plan to significantly redesign the system of additional support for students with additional learning needs. The Inquiry Report noted it expected that many of the Inquiry recommendations would be incorporated into the Education Ministry’s action plan.

The Education Ministry subsequently released a Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025 which identified six priority areas for action. Fast-forward to now, and the $225 million invested has delivered little measurable return on investment. There has been an abject failure to significantly move the dial in these priority areas: more learning support co-ordinators; improved screening and early identification of learning needs plus strengthening early intervention; flexible support; meeting the needs of gifted learners; and improving education for those at risk of disengaging.

According to its Report, the Education and Science Select Committee received written submissions from 445 organisations and individuals, and heard oral evidence from 194 submitters from a wide range of the organisations and individuals. Of the written submissions, 110 focused on dyslexia, 33 on dyspraxia, and 80 on autism spectrum disorder. A further 136 submissions commented on a mix of the three learning differences.

The Select Committee thus had a significant body of submissions to draw from. However, its Report failed to allow for much needed legislative changes and failed to set out clear directives for definitive action. Its Report outlined 46 broad recommendations to improve education experiences for students with dyslexia, autism and dyspraxia and highlighted three key issues revealed by submissions to the select committee. These were that parents need more information about what support is available and assistance to access that support; that schools support is inconsistent and variable; and that the capability and capacity of teachers, teacher aides and other specialist support providers varies widely between schools.

Green Party education spokesperson Catherine Delahunty, who helped initiate the select committee inquiry, declined to support the Report, as did several other members of the Labour Party and New Zealand First. These dissenting views were captured in an additional Minority View section of the report, outlining 26 recommendations designed to give the main report more teeth.

The Minority Report said that extreme situations, such as year-long waiting lists for specialist support, parents paying for extra support in state schools, or a child only receiving one hour of education per day, could not be addressed without increases in specialist resource. The Minority report recommendations included that the rights of students with learning differences be enshrined in the Education Act, that urgent collection of data be initiated so the issues and progress were measurable, and that increased special education funding be made available to address the needs of said number of children.

DFNZ said at the time that the Main Report recommendations were sound, commonsense items which in effect revealed the Education Ministry had been paying lip service to neurodiverse students but not taking action. And that turning theory into practice seemed an ongoing issue for the Ministry. DFNZ supported the Minority Report recommendations, noting that they took a stand on the issues of children’s rights, funding and accountability to ensure that inclusive education was developed in all schools.

DFNZ also said it would be “a crime if the thousands of hours invested by the many individuals, students and organisations that made submissions to the select committee, and by the select committee in analysing and organising this information is all for nothing. “We need the Minister to show some leadership here”.

DFNZ acknowledges that some schools have made some progress in supporting neurodiverse students since the Inquiry, but there is little progress in ensuring that

all schools have the resources they need to secure the success of all their neurodiverse learners. There is still a significant equity issue with students in lower decile schools, Maori, and Pacifica - all statistically disadvantaged.

For 17 years, DFNZ has been lobbying successive Governments for change. Yet we are busier than ever with enquiries from parents who simply cannot access adequate support for their children. Enquiries from neurodiverse adults are also on the rise, many vulnerable after failing to thrive at school and now lacking the financial resources to access the right support.

The 2016 Inquiry Report, including the Minority Report, is available at <https://selectcommittees.parliament.nz/v/2/1c18522d-18be-4316-8b7d-e02f016f2331>

**THE LEARNING SUPPORT ACTION PLAN 2019-2025**

At the time of the 2016 Inquiry, the Ministry of Education was also working on a broader programme to redesign the support system for students with additional learning needs. In 2015, the Ministry had engaged widely about proposed improvements through the Learning Support Update consultation process. It said that 156 engagement forums were held with more than 3,650 people throughout New Zealand. The result was the Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025, with identified six priority areas of action.

Despite the $225 million invested in this plan to date, the results have been negligible. Specific comments against the six priorities are set out below.

**Priority One: Learning Support Coordinators**

What the plan said: Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs) will work together across a school cluster to ensure children and young people with learning support needs get the help they need. LSCs will work with teachers, school and kura leadership, and within the Learning Support Delivery Model to implementprocesses that help all children and young people progress, participate and make successful transitions.

DFNZ comment: The second tranche of LSC’s has not been rolled out, five years after the action plan was implemented. The Ministry is unable to advise what work has been done to prepare for the second tranche nor if there will be enough specialist trained teachers available to take on these new roles.

**Priority Two:** **Screening and early identification of learning support needs**

What the plan said: Early identification and response to need has long-term benefits for children and young people. We need to be more systematic in how we identify a child’s learning support needs, so they get assistance as quickly as possible. We will add a new set of screening tools to assess all children at certain stages, and work with the Ministry of Health (MoH) to ensure these are integrated into a coherent system of measurement with health checks and screening.

DFNZ comment: The LSAP undertook to create a new set of screening tools to assess children at the following stages, working together with the Ministry of Health.

These were to include:

* Universal health checks at age 3, including for ASD
* School entry
* Screening for dyslexia, dyspraxia and gifted

These specific screening tools have not been developed. The Ministry offers vague explanations of various toolkits ‘under development’ – none of which appear to be screening tools or assessments for neurodiversities. This work is essential so these students can access all levels of interventions, programmes, tools and educational pathways suited to their learning preference.

**Priority Three**: **Strengthening early intervention**

What the plan said: We will identify the volume, mix and additional types of services needed, including information and support for families and whānau, and build on services introduced since 2017. We will work with other agencies to integrate and provide more flexible supports, eg with MoH on Mana Whaikaha, and with Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust on an awareness campaign.

DFNZ comment: The Ministry again speaks of vague pilot programmes and interventions, when the reality is that the peak neurodiversity bodies know and have advised the Ministry on ‘what works.’ There is no need to reinvent the wheel with further pilot programmes; what is needed is funding and implementation to all children. In terms of dyslexia, the Ministry has rolled out the Better Start Literacy Approach to Level 3, now including all schools. However it should be noted that the BSLA is limited in its reach – many of our dyslexic and neuro-diverse students will not have achieved required literacy levels at Level 3. The BSLA is an evidence-based approach for literacy, but critically it is not necessarily a specialist intervention for dyslexia.

**Priority Four**: **Flexible supports for neurodiverse children and young people**

What the plan said: The focus in this priority is on building the understanding and capability of early learning services, schools and kura to teach and respond to neurodiverse children and young people to progress their learning at an appropriate depth and pace. We will work with the education and disability sectors, parents, whānau, young people and experts to develop new tools and resources for teachers, design new supports for children and young people, and address gaps in specialist services. There will need to be room for innovation and flexibility in the types of support. We will also have some specific work streams to provide for particular needs, eg dyslexia and autism spectrum disorder.

DFNZ Comment: We acknowledge there are many written resources for schools and teachers to upskill themselves in many neurodiversities, including dyslexia. However, and this is the root of the issue, there are no mandatory or Ministry requirements to do so.

**Priority Five**: Meeting the learning needs of gifted children and young people

What the plan said: We are working with sector experts to design a group of flexible supports for gifted children and young people. This work will address a current gap in support and provide new tools for teachers and other educators, whānau and their children.

DFNZ comment: The Ministry's "flexible supports" have impacted a tiny number of gifted learners and their teachers only. Study awards for gifted learners and teachers and funded out of school experiences and extension events have provided opportunities for a small number. Supports to early childhood education services have not been provided. One Day Schools are available only in main centres. Both the One Day School and online opportunities supported by the gifted package require parents to pay, with only a small number of scholarships available. The TKI Gifted website is out-of-date and does not provide simple, clear guidance for teachers and schools. The Gifted Education Expert Group has been given no opportunity to monitor and evaluate the gifted education package. The main peak body and programme provider, the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education, has prototyped and tested a new partnership programme with primary and secondary schools, allowing any school in NZ to run their own high-quality gifted programme and to train its own teacher at the same time, but the Ministry has to date given no indication of interest in supporting or scaling the programme.

**Priority Six**: Improving education for children and young people at risk of disengaging

What the plan said: We want to prevent disengagement at any stage of a child or young person’s educational journey, improve at-risk education provision for those who need it, and ensure better support is available to help children and young people re-engage in learning. Strengthening screening and the early identification of learning support needs will help identify learning difficulties that may lead to disengagement. Providing early additional support will address the needs of children and young people with behavioural need

DFNZ comment: We agree that improvements in screening and early intervention will help. But per comments on priorities two and three, these have not eventuated in any substantive way. Attendance at school has been dropping since 2015. This drop was evident prior to Covid 19 and suggests a systemic issue as opposed to a response to the pandemic. Data from Term 4, 2022, shows only 50.6% of students were regularly attending class. Many of these students will be neurodiverse. Understanding, inclusivity and support are what will bring these students back to school.

**NEURODIVERSITY IN EDUCATION COALITION (NIEC) & THE WHITE PAPER**

**www.neurodiversity.org.nz**

The Neurodiversity in Education Coalition (NIEC) was formed in May 2023 in response to the ongoing failure to implement critical and urgent work to support neurodiverse students, as evidenced by lack of progress on the six priority areas in the Ministry of Education’s Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025.

The NIEC comprises the NZ Centre for Gifted Education, Dyslexia Foundation of NZ, Autism NZ and ADHD NZ, plus 15 young neurodiverse champions who are confounding stereotypes and leading the charge for education system change. Frustrated by inaction, NIEC immediately released its own White Paper - Unlocking the Enormous Potential of Neurodiverse Learners– which sets out shortcomings of the current education system in providing for the needs of neurodiverse learners, and the massive social and economic cost of this.

This section recaps key information from the White Paper. For more detail, please see the White Paper attached in support of this submission.

Our New Zealand education system was not designed to meet the needs of neurodiverse students and, despite bursts of effort spearheaded by various Ministers, still only provides for the learning needs of a tiny proportion. Whilst the Learning Support Action Plan 2019 - 2025 was an important start, its implementation has been partial, and, for the most part, the work has not been undertaken in a way which builds an open and constructive partnership between the Ministry of Education and sector organisations. There is no clarity about what action has been taken under each of the six priorities of the Learning Support Action Plan, and what outcomes have been achieved. There has been no opportunity for sector groups who work daily with neurodiverse students to participate in review and reflection, and no indication of what further work is planned.

Given that one in every five children in our education system are neurodiverse, this is a massive system failure. This failure underpins many of the chronic challenges in New Zealand’s education system, including low attendance and engagement, and underachievement in basic skills like writing, literacy and numeracy. It also clearly plays a major part in other intractable social issues like poor mental health, suicide, youth crime and unemployment. This association is indisputable, given both international and New Zealand research.

For neurodiverse children, discrimination starts early with barriers to education. Whilst people commonly equate accessibility with making adjustments for physical impairment, neurodiversity equally must be accommodated. Teachers often have insufficient training and resources to recognise and adjust for neurodiversity. Neurodiverse tendencies such as being uncomfortable with eye contact, hypersensitive in stressful situations and difficulties processing information can be misunderstood as ‘behaving badly’. Failure to recognise and properly support neurodiversity through adjustments in accommodations, teaching style and classroom layout can lead to disengagement and exclusion, or self-exclusion in the form of truancy. With youth crime in the spotlight, it is imperative that education is accessible to all and students stay in school.

This education system failure also has significant economic implications (to say nothing of its social cost). Numerous studies show the economic impact of unsupported neurodiversities. For example, unsupported ADHD is estimated to cost the Australian economy AUS$20 billion annually and unsupported dyslexia is a US $12 billion deadweight on the Californian economy.



**The White Paper identifies three key initiatives which, implemented immediately, could start to change the shoddy status quo.**

We see no need for further talkfests, or another Government Inquiry. What is required is practical, effective action. It’s time to unlock the full potential of the estimated twenty percent of students who are neurodiverse. It’s time to retarget investment to what we know works – programmes with proven track records and demonstrable, measurable results. Supported by a new Neurodiversity in Education New Zealand peak body that has real life experience in working with neurodiverse students, thus devolving power from policy makers who have meant well but thoroughly failed.

**The three recommended initiatives:**

1. **Build Neurodiversity Awareness and Understanding**

Fund a multi-year Neurodiversity Awareness programme targeted at parents, teachers, school leaders and boards of trustees, health professionals and young people themselves.

We would like to see investment from Government (at least $3m) in an initial three-year public awareness programme, targeted at parents, teachers, school leaders and boards, health professionals and young people themselves to recognise what neurodiversity looks like.

Real change for neurodiverse students requires behavior change on the ground, every day and in every setting. Changing high-level policy statements like the National Educational Learning Priorities will achieve very little if the people acting and making decisions on the ground every day - teachers, principals, boards of trustees, parents, health professionals and young people themselves - are not on board, do not understand, or feel unable to help.

We need people to be aware of their neurodiversity in order to access healthy pathways forward vs becoming disengaged adults who then often face addictions, poor mental health and the justice system.

1. **Require School Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plans**

Require schools and kura to provide a Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plan (NDAP) as a condition of learning support funding. The current legislative strategic plan framework is well meaning but there are no mechanisms for holding schools to account and for penalising non-compliance. Current Ministry of Education practice where schools create their own guidelines in a collaborative enquiry process provides for a costly talkfest, mired in inaction. Schools should have to provide and adhere to a comprehensive NDAP as a condition of Learning Support and support for Inclusion funding.

There are some schools in New Zealand that do very well in supporting the needs of dyslexic,and neurodiverse 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.

1. **Support and Scale Up Programmes that Work**

Scale up proven programmes to ensure equitable access and grow system capability. The hard work has already been done in creating programmes with proven track records and demonstrable results. The failure has been in not taking high-impact programmes and providing the funding and support required to scale them nationally. The result is ongoing inequity of access for neurodiverse students.

Supporting neurodiverse students to thrive does not require new research and innovation. Over the past decades, the Government, alongside community organisations and the philanthropic sector, has already invested significantly in the development and testing of high-quality programmes that support neurodiverse learners and build capabilities in their teachers, parents and other professionals to support them.

What successive Governments have failed to do is to support and scale these proven programmes up so every child, parent and teacher in New Zealand can have access to them. Many successful programmes are not funded beyond their initial pilot, and those that continue often remain small-scale, financially marginal, and available only to those who can afford them or who live in a particular area.

The result is significant inequity of access for neurodiverse students and a failure to sustainably build and grow a consistent infrastructure of programmes well understood by schools and parents, and the experienced staff needed to deliver them.

Priority must be given to supporting and scaling the existing high-quality programmes that work. The following programmes should be on the list:

**Learning Support Coordinators**

$217 million was allocated in Budget 2019 to fully fund Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs) in around 40% of schools over four years as part of the Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025. Comprehensive evaluation has been positive, but no indication has yet been given as to whether existing funding will be continued, and additional funding given allowing all schools access. A new Government should commit to continue the programme and scale it to all schools nationally.

**Early Steps**

This is an early intervention programme run by Autism NZ for 44 children in West Auckland under a four-year contract finishing in 2024. Evaluation is very positive, and an Impact Lab Good Measure Report is currently being developed to show the social return on investment of early intervention. A new Government should commit to continue the programme in West Auckland and work with Autism NZ to roll it out nationally.

**MindPlus YourSchool**

MindPlus is a programme for gifted learners run by the NZ Centre for Gifted Education (NZCGE). In 2020, NZCGE was funded over 3 years to deliver and increase access to the programme. It has now developed and tested a new delivery mechanism called YourSchool which supports any school in Aotearoa to deliver MindPlus to its Y2-10 gifted learners. At the same time, the school’s own teacher is trained as a specialist MindPlus educator. Outcomes for learners are very positive and an Impact Lab Good Measure Report for the programme is also underway. NZCGE needs $10m to scale the programme to support 10,000 students at 500 schools.

**Better Start Literacy Approach**

The Better Start Literacy Approach - The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is a structured approach to literacy instruction for Y0-2 children, developed by a team from Canterbury University specifically for the New Zealand educational and cultural context. Controlled research trials have proven its effectiveness. The Ministry of Education is funding BSLA professional learning for all New Entrant, Y1 and now Y2 teachers, with Yr 3 being developed. A new Government should continue the BSLA roll-out, development and support continued. By Y2, if a child is not reaching expected levels, that child should be fast-tracked to screening/ assessment.

**ADHD NZ**

ADHD NZ was funded by a philanthropic trust to develop online training resources for primary and secondary schools to build understanding of ADHD and the strategies and accommodations that can enable students with ADHD to succeed. Funding should be provided to allow the roll out of this training to all schools in New Zealand.

**All the above recommendations should be** **underpinned by funding a new Neurodiversity in Education NZ (NIENZ) national body, to work with community groups.**

As is obvious from the failings to date, change cannot be achieved by the Ministry of Education alone. It requires an ongoing commitment to grow and resource an effective community sector, able to support schools, students and parents and work alongside Government. A strong connection to lived experience groups is essential to the successful implementation of these changes.

A key component of this is the creation of a Neurodiversity in Education NZ (NIENZ) national peak body. Lived experience can provide many more valid insights to what works for the neurodiverse, than relying on the best intentions of policy makers. A new peak body would provide a vehicle for the sector to partner with Government, developing policies, initiatives and programmes with the experience and support of its member organisations. Having a ”one stop shop” for quality information, resources and support around all neurodiversities would be game-changing for whānau, young people and teachers and schools.

Baseline funding of $2m pa would enable NIENZ to provide these core functions, without needing to seek funding from philanthropic sources and potentially taking funds away from its members. NIENZ could also contract with Government to provide specific services with the support of its members, including, for example, developing online training modules for educators across neurodiversities.

NIENZ would enable its member organisations to present a strong united voice in discussions with all stakeholders, and allow Government to more effectively consult with and partner with the sector. This should include, for example, with developing and rolling out the Neurodiversity Awareness programme and creating the NDAP Code and Toolkit. A similar peak body model is successfully used in education technology, where EdTechNZ provides the voice of EdTech in NZ, supporting the growth of the sector and working closely with the Ministry of Education, Education NZ and other agencies.

NIENZ could also help address current inequalities in support for different neurodiversities, where a number of organisations receive little to no Government or philanthropic funding and rely on volunteer labour. NIENZ could provide smaller or start-up organisations supporting different neurodiversities with back-office services and support with fundraising and Government advocacy.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The hard work has been done. The organisations who have been supporting those with neurodiversities for decades know what works. DFNZ absolutely supports the intent of the Mike Styles petition in seeking to improve the rights and educational outcomes for individuals with dyslexia and other neurodiversities.BUT DFNZ contends there is no need for further expensive talkfests or another Inquiry.

Improving the academic achievement and overall wellbeing of New Zealand’s one in five neurodiverse students is a critical imperative to ending discrimination for this cohort. And to addressing the devastating social and economic costs of disengagement and disenfranchisement. But it is one that is actually within our grasp. There are proven programmes that can be supported and scaled up to activate real change. The time for action is now. DFNZ’s key points are set out in the executive summary, and supporting detail provided in the subsequent sections, plus the attached White Paper.

We urge the Petitions Committee to take this on board and honour the decades of lived experience and on-the ground expertise of those who have joined together to create the Neurodiversity in Education Coalition – and recommend the three White Paper initiatives, plus establishment of a new funded peak body, be actioned by Government as a matter of urgency.

**ends**