

Inclusive Education Action Group

MEDIA RELEASE

Inclusive Education – it's time

The Inclusive Education Action Group (IEAG) welcomes ERO's report "Including Students with High Needs" which confirms what many parents, teachers, researchers and disability advocates know about disabled students' experiences at school. Co-convenors Ian Armstrong and Jude MacArthur said that the 50 % of schools that were working to be inclusive confirmed the capability of schools to welcome and teach disabled students well. These schools exemplified the importance of strong principal leadership; support from Boards of Trustees; teacher professional development and networking; and inclusive school values and culture. It was pleasing to see that principals and teachers in these schools valued student diversity and appreciated the benefits of inclusion for students and teachers.

However IEAG is concerned that children with high needs in 50% of the schools reviewed were not receiving the quality, inclusive education that they are legally entitled to. Above all, it was not acceptable that some principals and teachers still did not understand that all children and young people had a right to attend their local school, and that inclusive regular schools are the best place for disabled students to learn. This is also where they will have friends and be part of their community. In this regard the report shows that there is an urgent need to look at why so many schools are failing disabled students, and to support these schools to engage in positive change. IEAG suggests that if these schools are failing disabled students they are probably also failing other students who have learning challenges.

While the report emphasises the importance of principal leadership, it also highlights the need for sensible funding regimes that respond to the real needs of schools. Even principals in inclusive schools said that inadequate funding was the biggest barrier they faced, and some principals described having to fund raise in order to pay for teacher aide support. Principals should be listened to when they say that funding to support inclusive education is insufficient.

While the report appropriately highlights the need for principals to take a lead role in their schools, and for whole school professional development that supports inclusion, the onus of responsibility is placed largely on schools themselves to initiate change. The level of exclusion evident in some schools suggests they will need considerable guidance to include and teach disabled students, and the self-review questions suggested in the ERO report may not be sufficient to turn these schools around.

The ERO report did not mention the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People which outlines Government's responsibilities to provide an inclusive education system at all levels for people with disabilities. IEAG sees the Convention as having clear implications for Ministry of Education policy and practice, and needs to be upheld as a guiding document in the face of the ERO report released today.

IEAG is disappointed that the report does not highlight the need for a commitment to inclusive education by the Ministry of Education. Consistent with the research, IEAG believes that such leadership is critical to the process of school change and development towards inclusion. A clearly stated policy on inclusion would allow the Ministry to explore and implement sensible funding regimes and support systems that meet the needs of principals, teachers and disabled students. IEAG hopes that these issues will be fully addressed in the outcomes of the current Review of Special Education.

ENDS

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