



Media Release

Inclusive Education Action Group

25 February 2013

Charter schools could discriminate against disabled students

The Inclusive Education Action Group (IEAG) submitted their concerns about the Education Amendment Bill to the Education and Science Select Committee on Thursday. “We are deeply concerned at the National Government’s push to introduce charter schools through these proposed changes to the Education Act. Charter schools are likely to result in discrimination against disabled students” said Dr Bernadette Macartney of the IEAG.

IEAG Co-Conveners Mr Ian Armstrong and Dr Macartney pointed to evidence from countries where charter schools have been implemented that shows charter schools have a poor record of including disabled students.* “Charter schools are a serious threat to an inclusive and public education system. We have seen the outcomes of charter schools decimating the public education system in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina” said Dr Macartney. “Perhaps it is no coincidence that the first locations the government has chosen to experiment with charter schools are in Christchurch and South Auckland, both vulnerable communities. Every New Zealander who cares about New Zealand children’s rights to a quality, free, public education system should be jumping up and down right now.”

Charter schools tend to cherry-pick high-achieving students leaving other students, including disabled students to be catered for by an increasingly stretched public education system. The National / Act Confidence and Supply Agreement appendix outlines a typical charter school mission with a “rigorous academic focus” and a “traditional curriculum”. Such a narrow focus is unlikely to be student-centered, aligned with the New Zealand Curriculum, or designed to meet the needs of a diverse student group.

Where charter schools do accept disabled students, these students are generally congregated together and segregated from other students in special schools or special classes. Such an approach in New Zealand would be completely inconsistent with the Government and Ministry of Education “Success For All” target of 100% of schools demonstrating inclusive practices by 2014. Any schools that reject disabled students would

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also be contradicting the Government's own policy document, the New Zealand Disability Strategy, which aims for an inclusive society and inclusive schools.

IEAG supports the call from researchers, education, disability and community groups to oppose the introduction of charter schools. IEAG is particularly dismayed that charter schools have been proposed without any consultation with the disability and education sector. Furthermore, the Government's flagship Review of Special Education 2010 did not mention the option of charter schools, and public submissions to the review did not request charter schools. The Government should remember that the New Zealand Disability Strategy obliges it to involve disabled people in decision-making, "ensuring that disabled people have a meaningful partnership" with Government. "It is extremely frustrating having to put energy into trying to stop charter schools being introduced when our most important and urgent focus is about supporting New Zealand schools and Boards of Trustees to understand and develop inclusive educational practices." said Bernadette Macartney Co-Convenor of the IEAG.

The educational rights of disabled students should not be jeopardized by introducing a charter school model which is highly likely to exclude or ghettoize them. Disabled students will be much better served when the Government honours its community responsibility, and its obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 24, to build a well-resourced, inclusive public education system at all levels that meets the needs of all students.

*(For further information about the impact of charter schools on disabled students, refer to Stanford University's CREDO research <http://credo.stanford.edu/research-reports.html> and US researcher Diane Ravitch <http://dianeravitch.net/>)

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