

Special Education Review

An IEAG opinion piece on the Ministerial Review of Special Education

Review of Special Education needs more work

The long awaited release of the Ministerial Review on Special Education comes with a welcome promise to develop a “fully inclusive education system” in New Zealand. Consistent with this goal, some plans that are on offer will assist schools in their work towards inclusive education. In particular, it is good to see an emphasis on inclusion in teacher education and professional development; support for student transitions; training for Boards of Trustees and principals; interagency cooperation; more support for students with hearing and vision impairments; and a smoother application process for ORRS funding. It will be important for the Government to adequately fund and support these initiatives.

Overall, however, the Review does not go far enough. In its present state it cannot deliver the changes and systemic supports which are needed at all levels, in order to achieve the vision of a fully inclusive education system. Despite Minister Hide's claim that ideas in the Review align with what the research says about improving student outcomes, the Review's interpretation of 'inclusion' is not consistent with current thinking in education research. Nor is it consistent with the experiences of countries that have moved to inclusion. Inclusion involves a transformation to one regular education system that values and includes all students, and supports teachers and schools to ensure that all students participate fully and learn well. This interpretation of inclusion as 'one system for all' needs to be honored in the review.

Instead of 'one system for all', the Review promises a dual education system that accommodates both 'special' and 'regular' education. 'Special' can be found in the retention of segregated provision for some students in special schools because parent choice is said to be important. Following the Review's release, Minister Hide has also commented in the media that “for some students and families, a special school is best” (The Dominion Post, 21/10/10, p.5). Yet 'special education' thinking and language is inconsistent with inclusion, and these ideas about segregation for some students have no support in the research.

The research evidence shows clearly that separating out disabled students as a group, and labeling them as 'special' and 'different' and in need of 'specialist' or 'different' approaches, encourages low expectations for their learning, fosters exclusion, and has detrimental effects on their learning and social experiences. Students with disabilities do best when they are taught in inclusive schools. In countries that have moved to a single inclusive system, parents no longer have to make painful decisions about whether to place their children in separate places away from their peers, friends and communities, because their local school expects, welcomes and teaches them. This is why so many parents and advocacy groups such as IEAG are asking for a reformed education system in New Zealand.

The continued existence of special schools, units and classes is an indicator of the failure of the regular education system to properly teach and include all students. The Minister therefore needs to explain why **all** children's rights to an inclusive education (as outlined in both the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled

Persons and in the New Zealand Disability Strategy) are still not being upheld. We also note the references to fiscal constraints in the Review that are leveled at the regular education system. However, at present, the vast majority of disabled students attend regular schools, so we do need to be concerned with the overall costs that are incurred in the Review's decision to retain segregated schooling and two education systems, one 'special' and the other regular .

The idea promoted in the Review that staff in special schools can provide 'specialist' advice about inclusion to teachers in regular schools is difficult to understand in this context. Some teachers may need information from professionals who have a good understanding about the effects of communication challenges on students' learning in the classroom, or the impact of low vision or deafness, for example. However, the research is clear that support for teachers in regular classrooms needs to be based on the New Zealand curriculum; on the goals and practices of regular education; and on the day-to-day experiences of students in regular classrooms, and not on so-called 'specialist' approaches. We should be seeking skilled teachers with experience in regular and inclusive education to fill these important advisory roles.

Leadership is identified in the Review as a key component in moving towards inclusion, with schools being expected to have "strong ethical leadership and standards" and "innovative and flexible practice". However, inclusive education systems also require the presence of these elements at the top. For schools to develop as inclusive communities, the research identifies as necessary ingredients a commitment to inclusive education policy, leadership and support by the Ministry of Education. The Review's 'vision' is for schools, parents and children to be "confident", but the Ministry, itself, needs to be cast in the role of a "confident leader" that is willing and able to enhance teachers' practice. This means listening to teachers and addressing their requests for practical supports that will assist them to teach a diverse group of students.

Minister Hide has highlighted "poor attitudes" as the main problem in the education sector (The New Zealand Herald, 21/10/2010), but New Zealand research shows that schools need manageable class sizes; knowledge and information about teaching, learning, and diversity; release time for teachers to get to know their students and their families, to meet with other staff, and plan for their teaching; and flexible resources and supports that meet schools' and teachers' day-to-day needs. This point has been reiterated by several principals who have responded to the Review in the media. The details in the Review are sketchy, and we are looking for evidence that the Ministry of Education will undertake confident leadership to provide this level of support.

When can we expect all students with disabilities and their families to experience a sense of belonging in regular schools? The Review's low target of 80% inclusion by 2014 lacks ambition, and will bring no joy to the 20% of disabled students and their families who are expected to struggle with exclusion and receive less than their educational entitlement for the next three years or more. The Review needs to go back to the table for further scrutiny so that any changes will result in a fair go for all children, young people, and their teachers.

There is little evidence that the substantial issues raised in submissions have influenced the Review, and, in the end, we are left with a document that does not seem to be about inclusion at all. The Review is a missed opportunity to transform New Zealand education into one inclusive education system that supports teachers and schools to fully include and teach all students. This is the

vision of IEAG, and until inclusion is understood by Minister Hide and the Ministry of Education, we are unconvinced that the Review will be able to deliver the inclusive education system that many students, families and schools are looking for.

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