

Opinion Piece

New Disability Bill Falls Short for Deaf Children

A great deal of change is required in New Zealand if the new Disability Bill is to see deaf people get a decent education. If the Government is truly going to ratify the Convention, it needs to meet the needs of the child, not merely the dollar need.

Parents of deaf children are hopeful for change but they're not holding their breath for any real fixes to what is really a desperate situation.

Minister for Disability Issues, Ruth Dyson, has been quoted saying the Disabilities Bill's passing this month will ensure all New Zealanders lead highly valued and productive lives, and that disabled people's rights will be valued on an equal basis with others.

If you can't educate hearing or deaf children, what is their future? Their chance at a fully independent life is limited, they won't be contributing to society, they live on an invalid's benefit and face unnecessary hurdles through their lives.

Profoundly deaf students in mainstream education are learning less than quarter of the information learnt by a hearing child at school. And it's simply because deaf children using sign as their first language can't interpret the spoken language.

Deaf children need support from 9am to 3.30pm and they need interpreters. We currently have deaf students in a world of silence learning from teachers and students in a mainstream setting with very limited signing skills.

A Dunedin family has a case before the Human Rights Commission against the Ministry of Education, fighting for their daughter's, and many other deaf children's, access to education.

Isis is profoundly deaf and her first language is New Zealand Sign Language. At 14-years-old Isis has a reading level of an 8-year-old.

The family has taken up the battle for all New Zealand deaf children to get equivalent access to the school curriculum, at the same level as their hearing peers. The way it is now, they're missing out on something which is a basic right for all New Zealand kids.

The family wants a proficient user of sign language with deaf children for the whole 25 hours of school a week and the same chance for them to participate in the class and lessons.

As a Yr 10 student, their daughter is expected to do work that children the same age can cope with, but unless she can learn it visually, she relies on someone to make an effort to teach her – or she just misses out.

Teacher aides are often not proficient signers and deaf students' lessons are inconsistent, with many having multiple aides a year – learning is a hit and miss situation.

These are smart kids but you can't expect them to be learning well while they're teaching their teacher aide the language. There is no way a teacher aide is going to be able to teach a science lesson if they don't have the sign experience.

While trained interpreters in every classroom would be ideal, the reality is they're not going to work for what a teacher aide is paid. The Ministry needs to look at where the gaps are and find out how those areas can be resourced, whether it's getting better qualified staff, upskilling the existing staff or looking for new people to train as interpreters.

The family isn't holding much hope under the new Disability Bill when they have already resigned to the fact that going head to head with the Education Ministry is a long and frustrating process.

Although they accept it's probably too late for change for their child, they're pushing on in hope for the children coming through behind their daughter. Just maybe the Ministry will reassess and try to improve life for someone else's children.

While the newborn screening system that's gradually rolling out nationally is seen as a positive move, the children identified with hearing problems will also need access to resources if the screening is to make a real difference.

Even if we identify these children, there's certainly not enough money in the coffers to pay for their education needs.

Schools are already turning deaf children away and one can only assume it has something to do with the cost. Schools are under-resourced and to take on a deaf child, they would first need to provide skilled people to effectively support their needs. They can fund education for multiple children for the cost of one deaf child.

In many cases parents are sitting alongside their child in classrooms interpreting for them. The success of a deaf child hugely depends on the support level of their parents and that can depend on the parent's socio-economic situation and language skills.

Each child's situation can greatly vary and so their individual needs have to be met – not the budgeted needs.

Parents are just living in hope that their child will get some form of education. If parents have to work, that child simply goes to school to eat their lunch, literally.

ENDS

Comments by Judi Devine, President of the New Zealand Federation for Deaf Children.

For more information please contact

Judi Devine
P: 03 211 2287 - DDI
M: 027 339 5348
E: 03 215 7953