



Media Release

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To ratify the Bill means meeting children's needs

The Government needs to allocate increased funding for Sign Language interpreters if the recently passed Disability Bill is to make any significant difference to deaf children's education, according to the National Foundation for the Deaf (NFD).

The comments from the NFD about the new Bill were made this week as the foundation launched its annual awareness campaign programme – Deaf Awareness Week.

Judi Devine, president of one of the NFD's key member organisations, the New Zealand Federation for Deaf Children, says parents of deaf children are hopeful for change but they're not holding their breath for any real fixes to a desperate situation.

Judi says that if the Government is truly going to ratify the Convention, it needs to meet the need of the child, not the dollar need.

The Bill's passing is a move by the Government to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Minister for Disability Issues, Ruth Dyson, has been quoted saying this will ensure all New Zealanders lead highly valued and productive lives and disabled people's rights will be valued on an equal basis with others.

"Profoundly deaf students in the mainstream are learning less than a quarter than a normal child at school. And it's simply because deaf children can't interpret the language, says Judi.

"At the moment we have deaf students in a world of silence learning from teachers and students with no sign skills. Deaf children need support from 9am to 3.30pm and they need interpreters," says Judi.

A Dunedin family currently has a case before the Human Rights Commission against the Ministry of Education, highlighting the lack of access their daughter Isis, and many others, have to education. The case was put forward in July 2007 and is due for mediation later this year.

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.

"We're just asking that our deaf children have the same access to the curriculum at the same level as their hearing peers. They're missing out on something which they're promised along with all other New Zealand kids," says Isis' mother Julie Allen.

This means access to a proficient user of sign language for the whole 25 hours of school a week and the same chance to participate in the class and lessons.

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

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

"The Ministry should be looking to see where the gaps are and trying to find out how they can resource those areas, whether its getting better qualified staff, upskilling the existing staff or looking for new people to train as interpreters, " says Julie.

"But if they don't do something soon the children who are coming through will be left behind too. We accept now that it's too late for change for our child but we'll push on in hope the Ministry will reassess and try to improve life for someone else's children."

Julie says that there are many New Zealand families in similar situations who simply have to have low aspirations for their children because the system is failing them miserably.

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Release on behalf of the National Foundation for the Deaf by Donovan Boyd Communications

For more information or images, please contact

Liane Donovan
Donovan Boyd Communications
P: 09 379 2121
M: 0275 450 226
E: liane@donovanboyd.co.nz