

White Paper | May 2023

Unlocking the Enormous Potential of Neurodiverse Learners



**Neurodiversity
in Education
Coalition**



Voices of our Young Neurodiversity Champions

Our Young Neurodiversity Champions are 15 young New Zealanders standing up so that all future neurodiverse ākonga receive the support they need to thrive in our education system.

You will hear their voices throughout this White Paper as a testimony to the challenges and inequity our neurodiverse young people face everyday in our schools, tertiary organisations and communities.



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The Neurodiversity in Education Coalition is proud to be backing these young leaders to drive the change they want to see. Learn more at www.ync.org.nz

The Facts on Young People & Neurodiversity*

An estimated
320,000
neurodiverse children
and young people in NZ.



10% are dyslexic.
5% have ADHD.
5% are gifted.
2% have autism.
Many have multiple
neurodiversities.

Supported

Well-supported neurodiverse young
people build superpowers like:



"Creative, out-of-the-box thinking"



"Highly empathetic"

"Great problem-solver"

"The ability to learn new skills and adapt
to new environments very fast"

"It allows me to notice small
details in the world, see patterns,
and find unique perspectives"

"Strong moral compass"

"Hyper focus and high productivity"

"A lot of energy!"



"Entrepreneurial"

"Spatially and visually highly aware"

Unsupported

Unsupported neurodiverse young
people are at significant individual risk.



1 in 4 women with ADHD has
attempted suicide.

1 in 3

autistic people are unemployed.

50%

At least 50% of prison inmates
have dyslexia and 25% ADHD.

**The economic cost of
unsupported neurodiversity is huge**

A\$20 billion

Annual economic cost of
ADHD in Australia.

US\$12 billion

Annual economic cost of
dyslexia in California.

* See references throughout document.

Neurodiverse ākonga have a right to access an education that supports them to thrive

An estimated one in five New Zealanders are neurodiverse. The social and economic cost of leaving this group to fail is enormous. Three key initiatives, implemented immediately, could start to change this shoddy status quo.

Our New Zealand education system was not designed to meet the needs of neurodiverse students and, despite bursts of effort spearheaded by various Ministers, still only provides for the learning needs of a tiny proportion.

Over the past few decades, Governments have made various attempts to provide more support for neurodiverse students, most recently with the Learning Support Action Plan 2019 - 2025. Under the mantle of Learning Support and then Inclusive Education, the Ministry of Education has made strategic commitments, drafted policies, created action plans, funded programmes, developed resources, created new internal teams and frontline positions.

The net result has been minimal.



We see the poor outcomes at an individual and whānau level - far too many are parenting or supporting a distressed child unable to fit into the system. We also witness the struggle at a societal level where undiagnosed and unsupported neurodiversity clearly plays a significant role in disengagement from school, truancy, alarming literacy and numeracy standards, intractable mental health outcomes, youth offending and unemployment.

This Election 2023, our four organisations - Autism NZ, the Dyslexia Foundation of NZ, ADHD NZ and the NZ Centre for Gifted Education - have come together as the Neurodiversity in Education Coalition, along with the Young Neurodiversity Champions, to demand change.

Our next Government must build on the start made with the Learning Support Action Plan but go far further and commit to a whole-of-system, fully-resourced, long-term change process, across every level of the education system. This also means the education and health systems must work together to allow early diagnosis and support. This will take time.

We look forward to working with our next Government on this critical mahi.



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**The social and
economic cost of
leaving neurodiverse
students to fail
is enormous**

However, there are three key initiatives that should be implemented immediately:

- 1. Build Neurodiversity Awareness and Understanding,**
- 2. Require School Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plans, and**
- 3. Scale Up Programmes that Work**

All these are underpinned by funding a new **Neurodiversity in Education NZ** national body.

Index

The Situation

The Opportunity

1. Build Awareness and Understanding
2. Require School Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plans
3. Scale Up Programmes That Work

Implementation

Closing



The Situation

What Do Neurodiverse Students Need?

The education system is failing neurodiverse students in multiple ways, from lack of commitment, limited identification and no access to diagnosis, through to lack of coordinated support, failure to differentiate learning and absence of in-school support. This failure underpins many of the chronic challenges in New Zealand's education system, including low attendance, and underachievement in basic skills like writing, literacy and numeracy. It plays a major part in poor mental health, suicide, youth offending and unemployment. And it costs dearly – as an example, unsupported ADHD is estimated to cost the Australian A\$20 billion annually.

How many students are neurodiverse?

One in five young people are neurodiverse, with brains that are wired from birth to perceive the world, process and analyse information, and communicate in ways that are different from neurotypical children.

What does neurodiversity mean?

The term "neurodiversity" includes a number of brain-based differences including ADHD, ASD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and processing disorders, as well as giftedness. Many neurodiverse people have multiple diagnoses. Across neurodiversities, a range of strengths and weaknesses can be seen in areas like working memory, processing speed, spatial awareness, emotional intensity, sensory sensitivity, and impulsivity and empathy, to name a few. Whilst some are profoundly affected by their neurodiversity, many are at the lower ends of the spectrum. Very often, neurodiversity is an invisible disability, with many young people - particularly girls and students from minority communities - masking their symptoms in order to fit in.

**1 in 5 young people
are neurodiverse. Very
few are diagnosed and
supported at school.**

What is effective for neurodiverse ākonga?

Effective education for neurodiverse students requires that these children be identified early, so that their needs can be met from the outset. They need teachers that recognise and understand their brain-based differences, their strengths and their challenges, and the likely impact of those on their learning, and who can differentiate learning and provide a range of supports for them. Neurodiverse students need social and emotional support, to understand why and how they are different from their peers, and to learn how to respond and work effectively with neurotypical people. Neurodiverse students need learning spaces to be designed and fitted out with their sensory needs in mind.

How are we doing?

Our current education system in New Zealand continues to fail to meet the needs of neurodiverse young people, despite the promise of the recent Learning Support Action Plan 2019 - 2025 which invested \$225 million across six priority areas. Whilst there are no publicly available reports from the Ministry of Education on actions undertaken under the plan and their outcomes, the lack of impact for most neurodiverse students and their whānau is clear from the experience of our four organisations who work daily with students, whānau, teachers and schools around NZ, as well as the Young Neurodiversity Champions.

Even worse than poor academic outcomes for neurodiverse learners is the harm caused when they do not feel accepted and understood at school. Neurodiverse young people experience anxiety, depression, self-harm and most tragically of all suicide, at a much higher rate than their neurotypical peers.



What We See

Lack of commitment

Few schools see supporting their neurodiverse students as a significant priority. For most public schools, the needs of neurodiverse students - particularly when they are not causing significant trouble - are far down a long to do list. Where children are causing trouble, many schools find it easier to go down a path of exclusion rather than invest in addressing the systemic issues. Where children are not causing trouble, schools often see parent requests for better support as pushy and demanding.

In this situation, private schools - existing and new - have picked up the slack for those that can afford it. Some newer private schools specialise in supporting neurodiverse students, whilst others offer whole Learning Support departments, with specialist coordinators for areas like gifted education and dyslexia support, smaller classes and significant use of teacher aides.

Limited identification

Whilst there are no statistics on the number of young people identified as neurodiverse in New Zealand, it is clear that most pass through the education system unidentified and without support, particularly students with low to moderate needs, girls, Māori and Pasifika students, students from other ethnic minorities, and from poorer families. This is largely because few teachers, parents, health professionals and young people themselves understand what neurodiversity is and how it can present.

No access to diagnosis

For those that are identified (by their families, a teacher, or a health professional), many go undiagnosed because families cannot afford to pay for an assessment with specialists in private practice, and few diagnoses are publicly funded. Without a diagnosis, many education and health sector supports are unavailable, including medication for students with

ADHD and access to special assessment conditions, and many schools do not take the child's learning needs sufficiently seriously.

Lack of coordinated support

Forty percent of schools have access to a Learning Support Coordinator, leaving 60% of schools still waiting, with no indication as to when they will be supplied. Whilst some schools can afford to set funds aside for a Special Education Needs Coordinator, many do not have those resources.

Failure to differentiate learning

At school, few teachers understand the range of brain-based strengths and weaknesses that neurodiverse learners can have, and how to differentiate learning for those students. They were not taught this in their initial teacher education, they have little time for professional learning, and resources online can be overwhelming, especially where they fail to provide practical, easy to implement strategies. Faced with crowded classrooms and teacher aide time available only for the highest need students, many teachers know they are not meeting the learning needs of neurodiverse students, but feel unable to do more.

Absence of in-school support

Few schools provide supports like quiet spaces, support groups and assessment modifications. Many students are isolated, excluded, and stigmatised, by peers, teachers and often their own families who do not understand them. Indeed, many whānau are worried about seeking a diagnosis because they do not want to label their child - unwittingly this fear of stigma is denying their child the support that would enable them to flourish.

The Result

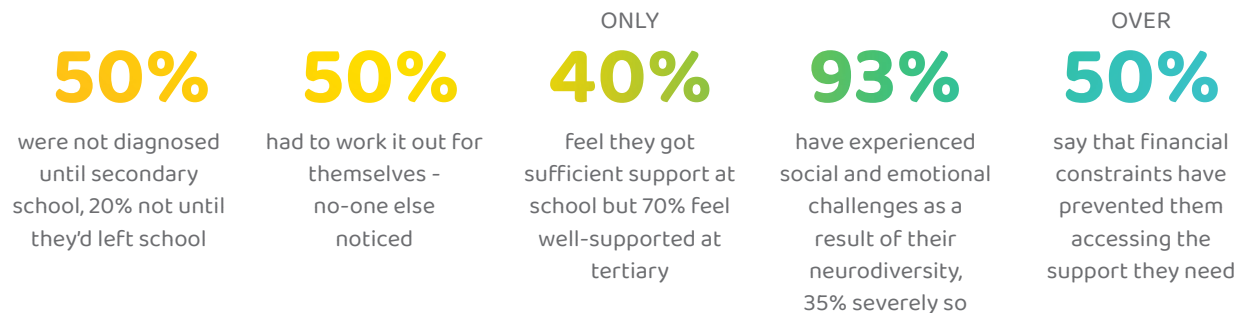
Given that one in every five children in our education system are neurodiverse, this is a massive and ongoing system failure. It underpins many of the chronic challenges in New Zealand's education system, including low attendance and disengagement, and underachievement in basic skills like writing, literacy and numeracy. It also plays a major part in other intractable social issues like poor mental health, suicide, youth offending and unemployment. The causative impact of unidentified and unsupported neurodiversity in young people on nationally poor education and social outcomes is indisputable, given both international and New Zealand research.¹

This education system failure also has significant economic implications. Numerous studies show the economic impact of unsupported neurodiversities. For example, unsupported ADHD is estimated to cost

the Australian economy A\$20 billion annually², and dyslexia and its consequences are estimated to have cost California approximately US\$12 billion in 2020 and will cost \$1 trillion over the next 60 years³.

By 8-years-old, neurodiverse students in NZ are already anxious and depressed, with lower school satisfaction and quality of life than neurotypical peers

The reality for our Young Neurodiversity Champions



¹ This includes the recent results of the Growing Up in New Zealand longitudinal study which shows that by age 8, the 15% of students able to be identified as neurodiverse already have significantly higher scores for depression, anxiety, impulsivity, school satisfaction and quality of life than neurotypical children. Fletcher, B. D., Waldie, K. E., & Peterson, E.R. 2023. Growing Up in New Zealand: A longitudinal study of New Zealand children and their families. A short report: Cross-sectional associations for neurodiverse children at eight years old in New Zealand. Auckland: Growing Up in New Zealand. Available at www.neurodiversity.org.nz/resources

² <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-social-costs-adhd-australia-270819.pdf>.

³ <https://media-publications.bcg.com/The-Economic-Impact-of-Dyslexia-on-California-Whitepaper-Final.pdf>

What Does It Feel Like To Be Neurodiverse In Our Education System?

I feel like I am an alien. Sitting in a classroom five periods a day with people who don't really understand me, or how I think.

I feel singled out as different, and not valued. I feel excluded from my school community.

I thought that it was me that was the problem. I thought that I mustn't be trying hard enough, when really I just needed different help.

I feel sad. My family have had to sacrifice a lot to get me the help I needed, right from when I was a very distressed 6 year old. We aren't well-off and paying for a diagnosis and for schooling that costs \$100 a day is not cheap.

I had been so ashamed all through school of my many 'faults'. When I got diagnosed, I realised that they were not because I wasn't trying or incompetent at basic human activities but because of a difference in my brain structure. It changed my life.

I feel lost, undervalued and discouraged. I come home from school most days wondering why I even went.

It took me a long time to realise that I wasn't 'dumb', I just learned in ways that are not conventional. In classrooms that provided various ways to learn, I flourished.

I feel frustrated. I am part Maori and Pacific Island and I grew up with domestic violence and alcoholism. By all statistics, I should be failing school but it's not these situations that are holding me back - it's the education system. The only way I can fix my situation is to excel at school, but at every turn I'm told to be average. The next Ernest Rutherford is potentially right now sitting in a low-income household in Porirua. Gifted learners' education shouldn't depend on where they live or the circumstances of their parents.

The Opportunity

A new Government must put achieving an optimal education system for neurodiverse students as a top education priority.

It's time to unlock the full potential of the twenty percent of students who are neurodiverse. It's time to acknowledge that the \$225 million invested in the Learning Support Action Plan 2019 – 2025 has not delivered an acceptable return on investment. We need to increase and retarget investment to what we know works – programmes with proven track records and demonstrable, measurable results. We need a new well-resourced Neurodiversity in Education New Zealand peak body that has real life experience in working with neurodiverse students, devolving power from policy makers who have meant well but failed abysmally.




Announced by the new Labour Government, the Learning Support Action Plan 2019 - 2025 was already a significant roll-back from the reforms recommended by the 2016 Education and Science Select Committee inquiry.⁴ Even so, the implementation of the plan by the Ministry of Education has been disappointing, at best. The centrepiece Government-funded Learning Support Co-ordinator role, has not been rolled out as planned. An open and constructive partnership between the Ministry of Education and sector organisations has not been built, with, for the most part, sporadic tick-box consultation only. Four years in, the Ministry of Education has never publicly reported in any way on the action taken under each of the six priorities of the Learning Support Action Plan, and the outcomes achieved. There has been no opportunity for sector groups who work daily with neurodiverse students to participate in review and reflection, and no indication of what further work is planned.

In terms of impact on the ground, we remain very far from having the type of optimal education system set out overleaf.

The incoming Government should declare a commitment to achieving an optimal education system for neurodiverse students, recognising that it will take significant, long-term work, with Government, the education sector and a properly resourced community sector, along with iwi and other Māori organisations, working hand-in-hand and alongside the health system to achieve it.

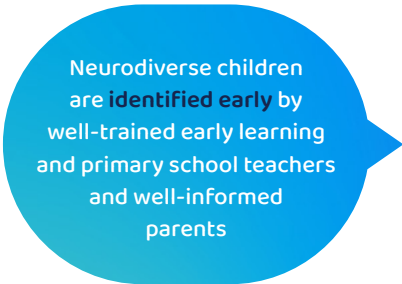
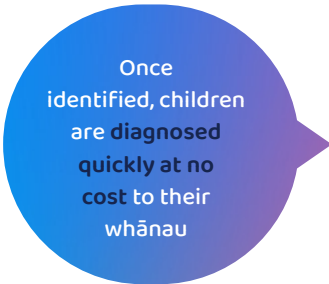
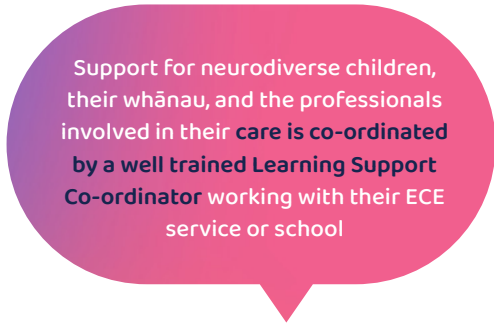
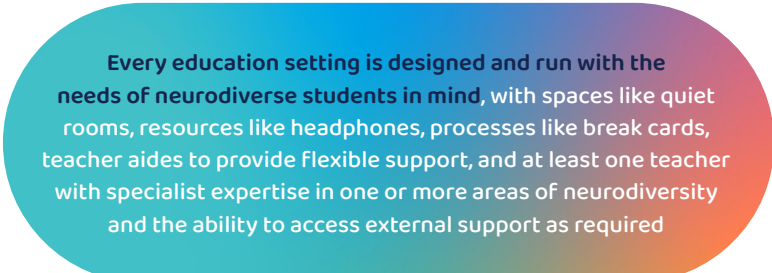

⁴ The final report of the Education & Science Select Committee's Inquiry into the identification and support for students with the significant challenges of dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools is available here <https://selectcommittees.parliament.nz/v/2/1c18522d-18be-4316-8b7d-e02f016f2331>. NZ First and Green members did not believe the majority report had sufficient teeth and made 26 additional recommendations.

There are three key initiatives that a new Government should get underway immediately that would strongly signal a new level of commitment and focus, and lay critical groundwork for system change.

 <p>1</p>	 <p>2</p>	 <p>3</p>
<p>Build Awareness and Understanding</p>	<p>Require School Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plans</p>	<p>Scale Up Programmes That Work</p>
<p>Fund a multi-year Neurodiversity Awareness programme targeted at parents, teachers, school leaders and boards of trustees, health professionals and young people themselves</p>	<p>Require schools and kura to provide a Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plan (NDAP) as a condition of learning support funding</p>	<p>Scale up proven programmes to ensure equitable access and grow system capability</p>

Successful implementation of these new policies would be underpinned by the funding of a new Neurodiversity in Education New Zealand peak body as part of helping develop a more effective, coordinated community sector, better able to support schools, students and parents and work alongside Government.

In an optimal education system:

 <p>Neurodiverse children are identified early by well-trained early learning and primary school teachers and well-informed parents</p>	 <p>Once identified, children are diagnosed quickly at no cost to their whānau</p>	 <p>Support for neurodiverse children, their whānau, and the professionals involved in their care is co-ordinated by a well trained Learning Support Co-ordinator working with their ECE service or school</p>
 <p>Every education setting is designed and run with the needs of neurodiverse students in mind, with spaces like quiet rooms, resources like headphones, processes like break cards, teacher aides to provide Flexible support, and at least one teacher with specialist expertise in one or more areas of neurodiversity and the ability to access external support as required</p>	 <p>High-quality programmes to support specific learning needs are available free to all neurodiverse children, within their education setting or outside</p>	

1. Build Awareness and Understanding

Fund a multi-year Neurodiversity Awareness programme targeted at parents, teachers, school leaders and boards of trustees, health professionals and young people themselves.

Real change for neurodiverse students requires behaviour change on the ground, every day and in every setting. High-level policy statements like the National Educational Learning Priorities mean little if the people acting and making decisions on the ground every day - teachers, principals, boards of trustees, parents, health professionals and young people themselves - are not on board, do not understand, or feel unable to help.

Right now, many of these critical people have unhelpful mindsets and ways of thinking which create barriers to effective action for our tamariki and rangatahi.

These include:

- Outdated and inaccurate conceptualisations as to what neurodiversity is and looks like
- Thinking and beliefs that neurodiversity is a willful behavioural issue which could be fixed with more effort from the student/ their parents
- A fear that labelling or diagnosing children will stigmatise them instead of empowering everyone
- Beliefs that children who are not actively causing trouble at school do not need support

The Behaviours We Need to See

Parents / Whānau

We want all parents and whānau - whatever their ethnicity or socio-economic status - to recognise potential neurodiversity in their children, seek support from their school and/ or GP, obtain a formal diagnosis, and work with their school as well as others involved in their child's care to support their child's learning and development.

Teachers

We want all teachers to identify potential neurodiversity in their students, even when it is not currently causing low achievement or behavioural challenges at school, to work effectively with whānau around diagnosis and ongoing support, and to provide appropriate support for neurodiverse students in the classroom.

School leaders and boards of trustees

We want all school leaders and boards of trustees

to prioritise proper support for neurodiverse ākonga.

Other professionals

We want other education and health professionals involved in the screening, diagnosis and support of various neurodiversities (eg public health nurses, GPs, (educational) psychologists, paediatricians, psychiatrists) to properly identify and diagnose neurodiversity in young people, with up-to-date knowledge of diagnostic criteria and how symptoms may present across genders and ethnicities.

Young people

We want all young people to be able to recognise indicators of potential neurodiversity in themselves, to access high-quality information, to raise their concerns with whānau and teachers, and to obtain support at school and home as required.



The new Government should invest at least \$3m in an initial three-year public awareness programme, targeted at parents, teachers, school leaders and boards, health professionals and young people themselves, as a prerequisite for real change. It is time to overcome stigma against neurodiversity as this is a significant barrier to progress. The cost-benefit ratio of such a campaign is likely to be very high: the Like Minds Like Mine campaign has a ratio of almost 14:1.⁵

Such a programme would involve:

- **Initial research** to understand the changes that would make the biggest difference for neurodiverse students on the ground, what experts in neurodiversity and neurodiverse people themselves need people to understand, and what mindsets parents, teachers, school leaders and boards, health professionals and young people

currently have and how far away they are from where we need them to be, as well as the impact of culture on these mindsets and understandings

- The **development of new “big ideas” and new messages** to deepen understanding
- The **roll-out** of these messages in targeted campaigns utilising a range of appropriate channels and champions to spread the messages to local communities and different professional bodies. In the same way as the Mental Health Foundation of NZ supports the Like Minds, Like Mine campaign, the Neurodiversity Awareness programme should be developed and rolled out by the new Neurodiversity in Education NZ peak body discussed below, in partnership with the community organisations who work on the ground with schools, parents and young people and advocate for their interests.

⁵ See Vaithanathan, R, Pram, K et al. (2010). Cost benefit analysis of the New Zealand National mental health destigmatisation programme (“Like-Minds Programme”). Supplied by NZ Mental Health Foundation.



What Are Some of The Myths and Mindsets Our Champions Grapple With?

It would make a huge difference if neurodiversity had no stigma associated with it. We are different but NOT less.

Everyone just thought I was a disobedient, troubled, rebellious child.

People have a stereotype that all Asians are smart and don't need support at school. Asian neurodivergent students are expected to go so much farther without the appropriate level of support from teachers.

Just because I didn't cause a lot of trouble for other people, didn't mean I wasn't struggling. Not all ADHD kids are loud and rambunctious. Some have that energy turned inward, and because of that, they don't receive proper diagnosis or help.

I truly believe half the reason I wasn't diagnosed until my final year of high school was because I am a gifted learner. People refused to even consider that this gifted kid could also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder!

For a long time, my parents sought to 'cure' my ADHD. Which just simply is not a thing you can do.

Many migrant communities despise the use of 'labels' such as ADHD or Autistic because they don't want the person to be even more estranged than they are already in society.

My family's first response to my struggles was 'everyone struggles with that sometimes!' They dismissed my 'bad behaviour' and ADHD struggles for not having enough willpower.

I am half Samoan and half NZ European and my Samoan Dad has taken a while to fully understand what giftedness and neurodiversity means... this was not explained or considered back in the Islands, and he used to think I was dramatic and overreacting.

2. Require School Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plans

Require schools and kura to provide a Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plan (NDAP) as a condition of Learning Support and Support for Inclusion funding.

The new school strategic plan framework is well meaning but there are no mechanisms for holding schools to account and penalising non-compliance. Schools should have to provide and adhere to a comprehensive NDAP as a condition of Learning Support and Support for Inclusion funding.

Under the new Education and Training Act,⁶ every school board must prepare a three-year strategic plan which includes strategies for identifying and catering to students whose needs have not yet been well met,⁷ in consultation with their communities.⁸ This includes students with learning support needs, including gifted and talented students. Each Board must also prepare an annual implementation plan and annual report which must report on the progress of those students whose needs have not yet been well met.⁹

Whilst parents and students may certainly use the strategic planning and reporting processes to advocate for their needs, there is no mechanism for a school whose planning, implementation and/or results is inadequate to be held to account by a student or a parent. There is also no sufficient mechanism for the Ministry of Education to do so. Whilst the Secretary of Education is able to review and revise the strategic plan, they cannot take further action without reasonable grounds for concern about the operation of the school or the welfare or

educational performance of its students.¹⁰ Under this and the previous legislation, this is a high bar, and the power is not often used.

Without a clear, accessible mechanism for holding schools to account, it is very hard to see that these new requirements will lead to any change on the ground for neurodiverse students. The previous National Administrative Guidelines which placed similar learning support requirements on schools were in place since 1989 to very little effect.

Sanctions for non-compliance

For real change to occur, the example of the approach used by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) in relation to Disability Action Plans (DAPs) is instructive.¹¹ To encourage and support Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs) to take a strong and proactive approach to improving outcomes for disabled learners, the TEC introduced DAPs as an Investment Plan requirement for all TEOs receiving over \$5m in funding. Where the TEC is not satisfied

⁶ This includes the Education and Training Act 2020 (ETA) itself and the proposed new Education (School Planning and Reporting Regulations) 2023 (ESPRR) which are expected to be promulgated in mid-2023.

⁷ S 138 ETA, cl 7 ESPRR.

⁸ S139(3) ETA.

⁹ Ss 138 and 145 ETA, cls 9 and 10 ESPRR.

¹⁰ S171 ETA.

¹¹ <https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/disability-action-plans/>

with a DAP or its implementation, this can lead to sanctions that impact funding, investment plan length, and ability to gain extra funding for extra learners.

Using the same approach, the new Education and Training Act regime should be amended to require a school's board to submit for approval a Neurodiversity and Disability Action Plan (NDAP) before they are given Support for Inclusion or Learning Support Funding as part of their Operational Grant, or are able to use a Learning Support Coordinator. All boards should be required to report satisfactorily on NDAP progress and to revise their plans annually as a condition of such funding each year. Further, students and parents should have a clear and accessible mechanism to raise performance concerns directly with a specified unit in the Ministry of Education who should be resourced to investigate, recommend action by the school, and impose funding consequences for non-compliance.

Helping schools to build quality NDAPs

Alongside this, the Ministry of Education should commission the new NIENZ peak body (see below) to develop a NDAP Code and NDAP Toolkit resource, as TEC did with Achieve NZ¹². The Code should set out detailed standards across all aspects of a school or kura's governance, management, teaching and learning support provision. The Toolkit should provide practical examples of how schools can meet the Code in their own context,¹³ as well as standard-form sample NDAPs for schools of various sizes and types and options.

The Ministry of Education's current expectation is that each school should create its own strategy for students with learning support needs after extensive consultation with its stakeholders and perusal of the very large number of resources made available by the Ministry.¹⁴ In practice, this acts as a significant barrier. Most schools do not have the time or resources to craft such a strategy. Providing them with a Code, Toolkit and template NDAPs would come as a significant relief to many, and is essential to ensuring high-quality outcomes for neurodiverse and disabled learners in every school in NZ



¹² See the Kia Orite Toolkit here - <https://www.achieve.org.nz/kia-orite-toolkit/>

¹³ The NSW Department of Education's What Works Best in Practice resource is a high-quality example of this <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/practical-guides-for-educators-/what-works-best-in-practice>

¹⁴ See, for example, the TKI sites on inclusion (www.inclusive.tki.org.nz) and on gifted learners (www.gifted.tki.org.nz). The Inclusion site contains 30 different guides on everything from allergies to autism.

3. Support and Scale Programmes

Support and scale up proven programmes to ensure equitable access and grow system capability

The hard work has already been done in creating programmes with proven track records and demonstrable results. The failure has been in not taking high-impact programmes and providing the funding and support required to scale them nationally. The result is ongoing inequity of access for neurodiverse students.

Supporting neurodiverse students to thrive does not require new research and innovation. Over the past decades, the Government, alongside community organisations and the philanthropic sector, has already invested significantly in the development and testing of high-quality programmes that support neurodiverse learners and build capabilities in their teachers, parents and other professionals to support them.

What successive Governments have failed to do is to support and scale these proven programmes up so every child, parent and teacher in New Zealand can have access to them. Many successful programmes are not funded beyond their initial pilot, and those that continue often remain small-scale, financially marginal, and available only to those who can afford them or who live in a particular area.

The result is significant inequity of access for neurodiverse students and a failure to sustainably build and grow a consistent infrastructure of programmes well understood by schools and parents, and the experienced staff needed to deliver them.

A new Government must commit to supporting existing high-quality programmes to sustain and scale. The following programmes should be on the list:

- **Learning Support Coordinators**

\$217 million was allocated in Budget 2019 to fully fund Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs) in around 40% of schools over 4 years as part of the Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025. Comprehensive evaluation has been positive, but no indication has yet been given as to whether existing funding will be continued, and additional funding given allowing all schools access. A new Government should commit to continue the programme and scale it to all schools nationally.

- **Early Steps**

This is an early intervention programme run by Autism NZ for 44 children in West Auckland under a four-year contract finishing in 2024. Evaluation is very positive, and an Impact Lab Good Measure Report is currently being developed to show the social return on investment of early intervention. A new Government should commit to continue the programme in West Auckland and work with Autism NZ to roll it out nationally.

- **MindPlus YourSchool**

MindPlus is a programme for gifted learners run by the NZ Centre for Gifted Education (NZCGE). In 2020, NZCGE was funded over 3 years to deliver and increase access to the programme. It has now developed and tested a new delivery mechanism called YourSchool which supports any school in Aotearoa to deliver MindPlus to its Y2-10 gifted learners. At the same time, the school's

own teacher is trained as a specialist MindPlus educator. Outcomes for learners are very positive and an Impact Lab Good Measure Report for the programme is also underway. NZCGE needs \$10m to scale the programme to support 10,000 students at 500 schools.

- **The Better Start Literacy Approach**

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is a structured approach to literacy instruction for Y0-2 children, developed by a team from Canterbury University specifically for the New Zealand educational and cultural context. Controlled research trials have proven its effectiveness. The Ministry of Education is funding BSLA professional learning for all New

Entrant, Y1 and now Y2 teachers, with Yr 3 being developed. A new Government should continue the BSLA roll-out, development and support. By Y2, if a child is not reaching expected levels, that child should be fast-tracked to screening/assessment.

- **ADHD NZ**

ADHD NZ was funded by a philanthropic trust to develop online training resources for primary and secondary schools to build understanding of ADHD and the strategies and accommodations that can enable students with ADHD to succeed. Funding should be provided to allow the roll out of this training to all schools in New Zealand.



Implementation

Fund a new neurodiversity in education peak body as part of helping develop a more effective community sector, better able to support schools, students and parents and partner with Government

Lived experience can provide many more valid insights to what works for the neurodiverse, than relying on the best intentions of policy makers. A new peak body would provide a vehicle for the sector to partner with Government, developing policies, initiatives and programmes with the experience and support of its member organisations. Having a "one stop shop" for information, resources and support around all neurodiversities would be game-changing for whānau, young people and teachers and schools.

The successful implementation of these three new policies will require an active partnership between the Government and the community sector. It cannot be achieved by the Ministry of Education alone. It requires an ongoing commitment to grow and resource an effective community sector, able to support schools, students and parents and work alongside Government. A strong connection to lived experience groups is essential to the successful implementation of these changes.

A key component of this is the creation of a Neurodiversity in Education NZ (NIENZ) national peak body.

A strong united voice

NIENZ would enable its member organisations to present a strong united voice in discussions with all stakeholders, and allow Government to more effectively consult with and partner with the sector. This should include, for example, with developing and rolling out the Neurodiversity Awareness programme and creating the NDAP Code and Toolkit. A similar peak body model is successfully used in education technology, where EdTechNZ provides the voice of EdTech in NZ, supporting the growth of the sector and working closely with the Ministry of Education, Education NZ and other agencies.

A one-stop shop

NIENZ would provide a one-stop shop for high quality information and resources on the full range of neurodiversities for parents, schools, young people and others in the community. This would include maintaining a website and information line, and up-to-date referral information to member organisations and other service providers. It would address the significant difficulties parents, schools and young people have finding accessible, aligned information and support, and the challenges support organisations have in reaching them.

Support for all member organisations

NIENZ could also help address current inequalities in support for different neurodiversities, where a number of organisations, including ADHD NZ, receive little to no Government or philanthropic funding and rely on volunteer labour. NIENZ could provide smaller or start-up organisations supporting different neurodiversities with back-office services and support with fundraising and Government advocacy. It could also act as an "umbrella" (or fund holder) organisation distributing resources and support for smaller groups.

Funded by Government

Baseline funding of \$2m pa would enable NIENZ to provide these core functions, without needing to seek funding from philanthropic sources and potentially taking funds away from its members.

NIENZ could also contract with Government to provide specific services with the support of its members, including, for example, developing online training modules for educators across neurodiversities.



Closing

Improving the achievement and wellbeing of neurodiverse ākonga is a critical imperative, and one that is well within our grasp.

This White Paper presents an action plan for the incoming Government - three initiatives able to be implemented straight away that will lay the groundwork for the system change required.

A new Government has the opportunity to transform the lives of the estimated 20 percent of students who are neurodiverse. This investment will lower the huge social and economic costs of managing the disenfranchised and enable New Zealand to unlock the enormous potential of our neurodiverse young people, as learners, employees, business owners, and contributors to their whanau and communities.

What would it feel like in a supportive education system?

I would feel I belonged. I wouldn't treat the classroom as the inner circle, there would be no time wasted trying to 'get in'

I wouldn't feel like a burden. I wouldn't be nervous to reach out to teachers about struggling.

I'd feel supported, not ostracised for my perceived 'difficulties' and would have been taught the skills to help me manage areas I found difficult - not taught that they were wrong and I had to fix them.

I'd feel like I had been learning at school. I'd feel that I have so much more to offer and people were valuing that. I would be so much further ahead. I wouldn't have gone years without having been taught anything. I wouldn't have been ignored

It would make a huge difference if neurodiversity had no stigma associated with it. I think we will always be seen as different and unique, because we are NOT less.

A lot more people would leave high school with their confidence intact and a more clear understanding of what they're capable of and where they would like to go.



**Neurodiversity
in Education
Coalition**

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