

Moves afoot to deal with dyslexia

For:

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Alyssa Statham moulds letters out of clay

Moves are already underway to change the way dyslexia is dealt with in New Zealand following two announcements made by the Ministry of Education in the space of a week.

After fighting for the cause for 30 years, the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand is delighted with the news that the ministry was prepared to acknowledge dyslexia is a learning disorder.

Having dyslexia means the brain thinks differently. Sufferers sometimes have to read a word over and over and it still does not make sense. Those affected think in pictures, making words jumble up on the page. For this reason, reading and writing can be challenging and children can be classified as slow-learners.

The foundation and the ministry have since met to discuss changes to classroom and teacher training, and this has resulted in a specific timeframe for the changes to be made.

"From a milestone announcement of recognising dyslexia to a specific time-line for achieving some real outcomes in just a week - we are happy about this," says Guy Pope-Mayell, managing trustee of the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand.

The next step for the foundation will be a meeting in May, where members and dyslexia stakeholders will discuss their ideas on the best way forward.

Prior to the announcements, there was no official recognition of the condition, or support or funding through the education system, and trainee teachers spent less than half a day learning about dyslexia at teachers college.

The changes will mean there is a much greater chance of picking up dyslexia early in a child's education. Children who have previously been misunderstood as lazy and not concentrating at school will have skilled teachers who can identify warning signs and apply special needs tuition.

"Because dyslexia is a hidden disability, the need for help arises only once the damage has been done," says Pope-Mayell.

"The damage is usually evident at around seven or eight years-old when a child's self esteem and behaviour is affected," he says.

Once the foundation has consulted with its stakeholders, it will work with the ministry from June to November on strategy, definition, scope and potential initiatives, with a specific focus on teacher training. The two groups hope to make an announcement in December.

Parents of children with dyslexia are also applauding the positive outcomes.

"Every single thing about these decisions has to be positive," says Kym Statham, mum to seven-year-old Alyssa who suffers from the condition.

"Teachers will be more aware of the condition and not think we're neurotic parents," she says.

Pope-Mayell says with this announcement there is finally accountability in place. He says he is looking forward to reporting their specific progress in December.

However, both Statham and Pope-Mayell agree that the effects of the change will not be seen for some time.

"This means a great deal at one level," says Pope-Mayell.

"The simple fact that parents can go into school and discuss dyslexia with staff is very empowering. But on another level, it doesn't mean much until changes have been implemented into teacher training institutions and class rooms.

"From our meeting with the minister I do have confidence that he is well intentioned. If, however, the Ministers objective [of recognising dyslexia] was to make the issue go away he has got it very wrong," he says.

Statham is still a bit dubious. She believes children in the classroom will need additional and personalised one-on-one tuition to help them learn the basic fundamentals of reading and writing.

The foundation believes New Zealand is in a position to leapfrog other countries. This is because they say they have a clean slate to work from as there are currently no emotional, resource or training investments involved in dyslexia. They say together with the ministry they can use worldwide experience and research as a platform to work from.