

Schools failing autistic and other neurodivergent children - report

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<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/516641/schools-failing-autistic-and-other-neurodivergent-children-report>

A report warns schools and early childhood centres are failing autistic and other neurodivergent children on an epic scale. The Education Hub study said devastating testimony from 2400 people showed the education system was broken and heading for a major crisis. It was calling for more funding and a law change to force the Education Ministry and schools to provide support for all children with disabilities and learning needs.



The Education Hub is a non-profit organisation that connects teachers with education research.

Its report said 15-20 percent of the population was neurodivergent, meaning they had conditions including autism, ADHD, dyslexia and anxiety.

The school system was supposedly inclusive, with schools required by law to enrol local children regardless of their abilities, it said.

However, inclusion was not the reality for many neurodivergent children.

"Inclusion is all but an illusion for too many of our young people, with no specific education legislation in New Zealand regarding specialist provisions or supports for children with special educational needs," it said.

"Many parents gave heart-rending accounts of the mental health impacts they witnessed in their neurodivergent children during the time they attended school, describing trauma responses, clinical depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation from as young as the age of six."

The education system focused more than \$600 million a year on children with the highest needs, which meant neurodivergent pupils who did not have challenging behaviours tended to miss out, the report said.

"In addition, at some schools, accommodations for neurodivergent students are being arbitrarily denied or discouraged."

When support was provided, it was often inadequate, the report said.

Education Hub founder Nina Hood said it was clear there were big problems.

"The system is completely broken. There's very little that is working particularly well."

"There are significant issues with funding. It's really, really hard for many neurodivergent students to get access to any publicly funded services and those young people who are getting access to public services, in most cases it's not enough support."

There were too few specialists working with neurodivergent children - and teachers needed more help, Dr Hood said.

"They are having to bear a huge burden trying to support these neurodivergent students and for many teachers they want to be doing the best by their students but it is incredibly hard."

More funding was part of the answer, she said.

But the law needed to change so that all children with disabilities had an absolute right to the support they needed.

"Neurodivergent children ... have the right to attend school but at the moment they don't actually have the right to receive the resourcing and support they need in order to actually succeed and thrive at school," Hood said.

Frustrated and exhausted

Tami Harris from [Acorn Neurodiversity, a trust helping neurodivergent children and young people in Auckland](#), said the report accurately reflected what many families were going through.

"Families feel like a burden to their school and, in fact, are often discouraged from enrolling their child at the school directly and feel like they're constantly needing to fight to get the things that their child needs."

The situation was "incredibly bad" and New Zealand's neurodivergent children were much worse off than children in other countries, she said.

"The access that our families would have if they lived across the pond in Australia or really anywhere else, they would be getting a suite of comprehensive services if they had a disability or some form of learning challenge."

Rebecca, the mother of a child with autism and ADHD, said trying to get support for her daughter was exhausting.

"I've been out of work, in work, out of work purely to spend time advocating, ensuring my daughter's needs are met, ensuring I'm at home when she's been sent home. Yes, it's been a real roller-coaster."

Many people tried their best to help, but the system was too difficult to navigate, she said.

"Individuals [are] working within a system that's convoluted, complex and just doesn't have enough to meet the basic needs of children with learning needs."

University student Annabelle said she teared-up when she read the report.

Going through school with undiagnosed ADHD and autism was tough, because even with supportive teachers, the system made neurodivergent students feel like failures, and seemed to provide help for students only after they had failed, rather than supporting them to succeed, she said.

"It's not acceptable for the students and it's not acceptable for the teachers. It's not acceptable for the leaders, it's not acceptable for anyone working in schools.

"Trying to navigate a system that's built like an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff is ridiculous."



Hostile environment

In the report, several respondents said the situation in schools was so bad they would be better off home-schooling their children.

A school's special education coordinator told the study: "If I had a learning support child I would seriously homeschool my child. At times I suggest to parents the same. The New Zealand school system currently cannot support these students."

Many respondents were especially unhappy with so-called modern learning environments, which have large, open, shared spaces for teaching.

Most said teachers' lack of knowledge about neurodivergent children was a big problem.

And schools that did a good job tended to attract more neurodivergent children, a teacher told the researchers.

"It is a concern to me that the schools/staff that have embraced better approaches to supporting neurodiverse students (and others with special needs) often are flooded with those students.

"This is unfair, does not always come with extra funding/resources, and allows those who are deliberately blind to remain that way."

Another respondent said specialists were burnt out and every Education Ministry speech therapist they knew was looking for another job.

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