

***Speech by Ian Armstrong given at the Inclusive Education Action Group launch, Parliament, 22 August 2007.***

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

My son Duncan was born in 1989. He has Down Syndrome. In the same year the Education Act was amended, giving disabled students the right to attend their local state school.

Duncan started primary school in the mid-1990s – around the time that Special Education 2000 was launched promising to build a “world-class inclusive education system” in New Zealand.

And in 2001 he attended the launch of the NZ Disability Strategy, which includes an objective to “improve education so that all (students) will have equal opportunities to learn and develop in their local, regular, educational centres”

But the promise of such legislation and policy has not been fulfilled by the performance of our education system.

Too many of our kids are still denied access to education in pre-schools, schools and tertiary institutions. Meanwhile enrolments of disabled students in special schools and Correspondence School have been increasing.

Too many of our kids are taxied daily past their local school to attend schools far away from their communities.

Too many of our parents are distressed and exhausted dealing with an unresponsive and sometimes hostile education system.

Too many of our schools have no disabled students while others have disproportionately high numbers.

Too many schools and teachers with negative attitudes to diversity are ring-fencing our kids for professional convenience, while constructing this neglect and segregation as ‘special’ treatment in a ‘safe’ environment.

Too many teachers have inadequate training and support to include our kids and meet their social and educational needs.

As Liz Gordon, a former member of the House, said at a recent seminar organised by QPEC “... many children with disabilities are only marginally part of the schooling system, have been ejected from it or gain no benefit from it. Such negative experiences will colour the rest of their lives and their citizenship of our nation”.

The Inclusive Education Action Group has been set up to raise awareness about these problems and to do something about it.

The Inclusive Education Action Group is a group of people – academics, education practitioners, disabled people and parents - committed to ensuring that disabled students can participate fully in their local, regular educational setting alongside others of their own age.

We believe the sky won’t fall in if disabled and non-disabled students learn together.

We support the Ministry of Education Statement of Intent which pledges to incorporate the NZ Disability Strategy throughout the education system, and which recognises that significant

changes across the system will need to occur so that people with impairments can say they live in a society that highly values their lives and continually enhances their full participation.

Our work is based on respect for human rights, and sound research and evidence.

Inclusive education is based on the principle that all people are equal and should be respected and valued.

Inclusive education involves supporting all students to participate in the valued cultures, curricula and communities of their local educational setting by actively reducing barriers to participation and learning.

Inclusive education meets the needs of all children – it will not occur alongside special education and must replace the current dual system of mainstream and special education.

Inclusive education works, as demonstrated by local and international evidence which shows that inclusive education produces students who are better educated and better able to participate and contribute as members of their communities.

If our schools are not inclusive we have little hope of building an inclusive society.

Thank you