

IEAG Position Statement on Inclusion and School Change 2010

The Inclusive Education Group (IEAG) was set up in response to the challenges faced by many parents in New Zealand who want their sons and daughters with disabilities to go to a regular school. Our main purpose is to advocate for changes in the education system so that all schools and teachers expect and are able to teach all children in their local communities.

Many of us have observed over the years attempts to make small changes at the level of individual schools. However we are now convinced that this is not sufficient. Too many families are still not able to opt for inclusion because many regular schools are not prepared, or are not well supported to teach disabled students. Families should not have to move house or change cities in order to find an inclusive school, nor should they have to pay out of their own pocket for a teacher aide, yet this is what some do. IEAG believes that positive change requires a commitment to and the development of one inclusive education system so that all schools are for all children.

Inclusive education is a goal worth pursuing because it is central to what we want our society to look like. That is, a society that has a commitment to equity and justice for all citizens. Schools that are concerned with social justice value and support all students irrespective of their individual circumstances, they acknowledge when students are in unequal situations and they strive to compensate for this. They recognise diversity and encourage students to see that this is part of the human experience.

Inclusive schools have strong inclusive values (such as fairness, social justice, equity, and respect for diversity); they foster and celebrate learning for all children and young people; and they are sustained by a supportive policy framework that ensures that teachers and schools have the knowledge, supports and professional development they need to teach all children well.

When New Zealand schools are inclusive, it is our hope that parents will not have to make difficult decisions about where their child should go to school, as their local school will be prepared to enrol, welcome and teach the children and young people in their community.

We also recognise that countries such as Italy, some provinces in Canada and parts of Australia have become inclusive because leaders in these school systems have concluded and accepted that segregation has not worked. These school systems have taken the position that all children have the right to a quality education, to be and learn together. They have not found it necessary to exclude some students because of the nature of their disability, rather they have taken the view that schools are central to their local communities, and can be supported to teach all of the children in their local area well. We can learn from these countries' experiences.

When there is evidence that inclusive education is working elsewhere, it is unfair that so many families in New Zealand still have to battle for their child to go to their local school. We acknowledge that for some families there is a huge commitment involved in maintaining this struggle, and for some a huge cost. It is very understandable that some families will choose not to take this path because they are battle weary, or simply do not have the energy. Some parents therefore choose to simply stay up to date with thinking about inclusive education by reading the IEAG website, while others have become active members of the IEAG Governing Committee.

IEAG provides a forum in which any parents interested in inclusion can work together, as well as working alongside disabled people and interested professionals, but at a level that is right for them. We appreciate that some New Zealand parents decide to enrol their children in special schools and units. IEAG's view, however, is that the separation of some children as 'special', and the concern for parent 'choice' is not working, because disabled students are still being discriminated against in regular schools. This does not mean that we should return to separate education. It means that we must learn from the education and disability research and from the experiences of those school districts and countries that have moved to inclusion. This work shows that children and young people, and their families, are better off in an education system that is inclusive, where all children are valued and where schools have the leadership, support, and professional development they need.

IEAG recognises that regular schools in New Zealand have not been designed to cater for all children, either in terms of physical resources or in terms of teacher knowledge and practice. We believe that ending the exclusion of disabled children from our schools will require major changes in values, understandings and classroom strategies. It will mean ensuring that all teachers become competent and confident in teaching a diverse student group. Some classrooms may require more than one teacher. Some teachers may develop particular skills in 'support for teaching and diversity', just as at present we have teachers with particular expertise in tikanga and te reo Maori, music or reading, physical education or chemistry. IEAG therefore sees inclusion as a complex project that will transform schools so that they no longer reject and segregate disabled or other children.