

24 Te Waha Nui, 31 August 2007

Feature

The price of learning

Special needs children fight for their right to a mainstream education.

KYLIE ROSAN
tells their story.

Thirteen-year-old West Aucklander Myles Singleton has an array of medical conditions which use up most letters of the alphabet. He is paralysed down one side and has cerebral palsy. Myles has other conditions too which mean he is academically behind the rest of his class.

"He can't even open his lunch," says his dad, David Singleton.

"Kids don't really give him time because he's got slow speech."

In spite of Myles' conditions, Singleton says "he's just below the cusp" to receive the funding he needs to provide him with a full-time teacher aide. The special education situation was so bad at his last school Singleton paid to have the teacher aide in the class to help him.

Myles receives five hours' learning support a week. The rest of the support he needs to stay in school comes from another child's special needs hours.

He was initially funded through ORRS (Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes), a form of Ministry of Education funding for students with ongoing "very high" needs, but it was withdrawn when he turned nine because he no longer met the criteria.

"The kids that show any significant improvement, they withdraw the funding," says Singleton, who has been fighting the system for years.

Yet Myles' case is not an isolated one. Across town, 12-year-old east Aucklander Laura Harkins has down syndrome, poor eyesight and hearing loss.

She attends a mainstream school but is only entitled to three hours' learning support from a teacher aide per week, funded by ORRS. Despite this, Laura is more fortunate than many special needs children. Her school tops up her funding so she has someone to help her throughout the day.

Laura's mum Jenny Harkins, the Auckland representative for the New Zealand Down Syndrome Association, says Laura is one of the luckier ones.

"It's been pretty good, but it isn't the norm. It's quite a battle for parents."

Harkins had to battle the school after Laura's hours were cut down this year to two hours per day.

She argued Laura needed

those extra hours. The school agreed and funded a teacher aide for her entire school day, under the condition she share her funded hours with another special needs child in the class.

Harkins says: "It's hard to know why these children don't get funding when they have other [conditions]. They might be slight but there should be funding for those other children as well."

"They should be in school. Where else can they go?"

Singleton and Harkins are not alone. They believe the current special education situation has reached a crisis point.

Colleen Brown, Manukau City councillor and chair of the Family and Parents Resource Centre, says the state of special education must be addressed urgently.

She says she hears from many parents who are experiencing problems.

"Children here have the right to go to their local school," says Brown.

She says many schools may not tell parents outright they cannot go there,

but subtly remind them of the special school down the road.

Singleton says: "I know in the UK and Australia it's a lot better."

He knows people with special needs children who have moved overseas for that reason.

"I've been pretty angry at times. It's been a long road for me. I'm appalled by the special needs funding in the country."

"It needs to be readdressed and looked at," says Singleton.

Although Ministry of Education spokesperson Iain Butler says "the per-student ORRS funding has increased each year to take into account inflationary pressures", in May this year the National Party released ministry papers which show that officials planned to cut funding.

According to a statement by National they planned to save \$23.5 million on ORRS between 2006 and 2010, a cut which Katherine Rich, education spokesperson, referred to as "salt to the wound of every parent struggling to get their child verified into the programme".

"There is not enough money for learning. We're not sending our children to school to get rid of them for a day," says Harkins.



LAURA HARKINS



SCHOOL DAYS: Laura gets learning support from a teacher aide.

Even if students get funding for a paraprofessional, such as a teacher aide, this does not guarantee success. They may get someone not qualified to deal with their specific condition.

Under the current system, teacher aides are not entitled to any professional development, says New Zealand Education Institute president Irene Cooper.

"If you want them to do a particular job, they have to have the training," she says.

One Auckland teacher aide, who declined to be named, says she is disturbed by the lack of importance placed on special needs.

"I don't know what I'd do if I had a special needs child, I really don't," she says.

She works in a state school and her hours are split between seven classes with different special needs children in them.

She has recently completed a tertiary course to learn more about some of the conditions she deals with.

Not only did she fund her own studies, but she also went unpaid while attending the classes.

Terry Hewetson, principal of Glen Eden Intermediate School, says schools have been quite concerned about special education for a long time now.

He says one of the biggest problems is the allocation of funding based on the school's decile rating. Schools are graded from one to 10 (10 being the highest).

According to the Ministry of Education, a special education grant is given to every school for professional development, staffing and resources.

However, because this is based on schools' decile ratings, many schools in high income areas may have more special needs children than in low income areas, but the low income area may receive more special education funding.

This is a problem for Hewetson, who is the principal at a decile 8 school which funds a number of teacher aides.

Harkins agrees this is a problem. She has come up against this in the past, both in her role at the New Zealand Down Syndrome Association and as a mother.

"Special education grants should be for schools that are doing a really good job of educating children in the mainstream," says Harkins.

Until such time, the parents of Myles and Laura say they will have to fight the state school system to receive the adequate education their children are entitled to.

PHOTO: JESSICA HARKINS