



Finding learning issues early could prevent crime

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Frontline special education workers and parents say the system for identifying children's learning difficulties is broken.

A Palmerston North education psychologist is advocating in-school screening to pick up learning problems at a young age – claiming knock-on benefits for crime and welfare rates. But she says the buck should pass to the state as many families cannot afford the diagnosis.

On Saturday the *Manawatu Standard* revealed applications for

Special Assessment Conditions (SAC) funding soared in 2012. The New Zealand Dyslexia Foundation estimates that learning difficulty alone affects as many as one in 10 New Zealanders.

According to New Zealand Qualifications Authority figures, pupils at about 60 per cent of lower decile schools nationwide had no applications for help, while some private schools had up to a quarter of their pupils sitting NCEA assessments getting SAC funds for learning disabilities.

The requirement for an educational psychologists' report, estimated to cost

between \$220 to \$500, was a likely barrier that would explain inequity in the numbers, SpelADD assessor Rachel Bradley said.

The trained teacher and educational psychologist has been lobbying the NZQA to address barriers

to access to help for families of children with often "invisible" learning disabilities, such as ADHD, dyslexia and apraxia.

Ms Bradley praised the Ministry of Education's decision to review the system, which will look at SAC funding criteria, the quality of the support, how schools are managing, and what impact technology has for pupils.

Ms Bradley also wants the NZQA to drop IQ-testing requirements and implement a nationwide screening programme in primary schools so impaired learners are identified early.

"If we save the money spent later in the mop-up, we could save untold suffering later in life."

The use of IQ assessment in current learning difficulty screening standards meant some children who might be deemed of above-average intelligence were ruled out for help.

Children who were unable to get the help they needed learning to read or write often became troublemakers later in life and were disproportionately represented in the mental health and crime statistics, Ms Bradley said.

"Children pick up their difference, and they become the class clown, or the bully, or they become invisible. They learn to hide it," she said.

Massey University literacy education expert Professor Tom Nicholson said help could be difficult for parents to access.

"I think, financially, the system is a huge barrier – which can cost hundreds and hundreds of dollars – although I don't think it's that hard to assess. I think schools could be doing that themselves. They just need training on how to assess it."

A Palmerston North mother of a 14-year-old diagnosed with dyslexia says she is struggling to access support for her son. "I don't think the teachers even really quite understand it.

"People hear 'dyslexia' and they think that's just that thing that makes you muddle your words up.

"The other kids just think you are dumb."



Tom Nicholson