The system is failing many of the 70,000 dyslexic students in our school system, writes Guy Pope-Mayell. Dyslexia week starts today.

Gift of dyslexia still a burden for many

DYSLEXIA is an alternative way of thinking that, if effectively addressed, can be a gift.

Often found in the creative professions — from artists to musicians, actors, chefs and even iconic leaders — a world without dyslexia would be a much less colourful and diverse place.

The theme for this year’s Dyslexia Awareness Week is “blessing in disguise”, which is all about recognising the creative gifts that dyslexia can bring.

But for the majority of the 70,000 dyslexic school children in our education system, recognising dyslexia as a gift won’t be the norm. This is because their learning needs are not being recognised or supported by the mainstream education system.

Dyslexia’s biggest disability is self-esteem. Every day dyslexic people of all ages see themselves as failures instead of embracing their unique talents and way of looking at the world around them.

And too many of our children share a shockingly similar story — told they are lazy, losers, academically challenged, only good for manual labour and so on. It is no surprise then, that dyslexia is not only at the root of many education difficulties, but flows through to social issues, for example youth depression and youth suicide. It is also estimated that 50 per cent of youth who find themselves in court are dyslexic or have an identifiable learning disability.

This has been recognised by Andrew Becroft, Principal Youth Court Judge, who has identified a route to offending which often starts with classroom difficulties caused by undiagnosed learning problems.

It is also no surprise that the Government’s recently announced Schools Plus programme will be hard pushed to address any of this. Schools Plus, designed to reach about 14,000 young people (25 per cent of school leavers) who exit school without even a Level 1 qualification, is fundamentally flawed. Its policy — the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff for underperforming school leavers who are already disengaged and disenfranchised, and have had years of inadequate support.

It’s a simple choice help 70,000 school children with dyslexia and make a real difference.

The bottom line is that the vast majority of those early school leavers wouldn’t be in that position if their educational needs were correctly addressed at an early stage.

The Dyslexia Foundation sees dyslexia as the sharp end of the stick in that if you get the learning environment right for dyslexic students early on, it will work for and benefit others.

It estimates the percentage of under-qualified school leavers could be reduced by up to half simply by getting the environment right.

The process of developing engaged youth starts at primary school and requires learning difficulties to be identified early and addressed through appropriate class and strategies and specific interventions implemented across the whole school.

Education is a fundamental right for children, yet the system in New Zealand pre-determines failure for a child who learns differently. Acknowledging that children learn in different ways is one of the reasons dyslexia is still a burden for many.