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Address to the SPELD NZ National Conference

Saturday, 20 June 2009, 5:02 pm

Speech: New Zealand Government

Going For Gold

Hon Heather Roy, Associate Minister Of Education

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Hon Heather Roy opening address to the SPELD New Zealand National Conference; Quality Hotel Plymouth International, New Plymouth; Saturday, June 20 2009.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you Michael for your warm welcome.

I am delighted to be here today to join SPELD New Zealand in welcoming you all to this conference. I would like to acknowledge your hosts, SPELD Taranaki, and thank the conference team and the Executive and Board for inviting me to speak to you this morning.

It is also a pleasure to welcome your impressive line-up of keynote speakers, who have all travelled to be here: Dr Linda Silverman, Jan Polkinghome and Professor Tom Nicholson. In my experience conferences always stimulate ones enthusiasm and I suspect you will all go home at the end of the weekend with a renewed sense of purpose.

The theme for your conference, 'Going for Gold - Celebrating Creativity', is about celebrating and supporting students with different abilities and learning styles.

For well over 30 years, your organisation - largely voluntary - has been providing valuable support for students with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities.

In that time, SPELD has taken its members from being a disparate group of committed individual teachers - who were often regarded as 'alternative' or 'on the fringe' - to being a credible, well-organised, forward-looking organisation. The insight and work of Jenny Tebbutt, Rodney Barber and others over the past three years - and the appointment of Toni Griffiths - have been paramount.

SPELD has, to date, not received Government funding. I know that at times this has been discussed and you will probably in the future consider lobbying government for funding. This is never an easy decision because accepting Government funding also means accepting that Government will want a say in how that money is utilised. In my experience, Government assistance nearly always comes with a catch - Government interference in daily operations.

Funding is always hard to come by but, in the current economic climate fundraising is more challenging than ever, SPELD continues to do a great job. I recognise the frustration you feel at not being able to

help more of those needing educational assistance.

Choice in education is something that both the ACT and National Parties believe is important for parents. This Government wants students to have choices in education, and for parents and students to be better informed about how they are achieving within that system.

As Associate Minister of Education and, perhaps more importantly, as a parent I know there is no 'one size fits all' education that suits our children - and especially for those students who have special needs or learning disabilities.

It is for this reason that ACT's Confidence & Supply Agreement with the National Party includes the establishment of an inter-Party working group to explore and consider options for increasing choice in all types of education.

In Parliament last September all political Parties ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Article 24 of that convention is about education, and states that the rights of persons with disabilities to an education must be realised without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.

We know that good teaching benefits all students, and we know that every classroom has a diverse range of learners. This government is committed to providing the best educational opportunities for all students.

In my view, this means providing students and families with choice; with the freedom to choose the education that best suits their child - whether that be through State schools or Independent schools; through special schools, satellites or units; through inclusive learning environments; or through other options, such as organisations like yours.

As you all know well, either from your experience as parents or educators - or both - a small percentage of students will experience persistent difficulty in their learning. Research indicates that just over seven percent of all school students in New Zealand have specific learning disabilities - around 50,000 students throughout the country at any given time.

Of those students, SPELD currently works with 2,174 - each of whom has unique needs that are not being met with a single approach.

The Government is well aware of this, and of the urgency with which the learning needs of these students must be met.

The term 'learning disabilities' can mean different things to different people and groups - leading to common misconceptions about their nature and resulting needs. For instance: while dyslexia is a learning disability that isn't always diagnosed, many children who may be struggling with reading are labelled 'dyslexic' despite the fact that they may have other issues.

Towards this end, the Ministry of Education has developed a working definition of dyslexia. This definition has been formulated on the basis of a literature review, and with input from the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand and Professor Bill Tunmer from Massey University.

The working definition states that dyslexia encompasses a spectrum of specific learning difficulties - including problems with reading, writing, spelling, numeracy or musical notation.

It is clear - in fact just common sense - that the early identification of such difficulties is critical. Identification must then be followed by individualised teaching and specialist support to enable students to participate in the full range of learning opportunities across the curriculum. It is for this reason that the Education Ministry focuses on supporting classroom teachers to identify and develop appropriate programmes for all students. Schools, teachers and educators are encouraged to design support based on each student's specific needs. Resources are allocated on the basis of specific behaviours and difficulties, rather than automatically on the basis of a diagnosis.

For students who need extra support, including those identified as dyslexic, there are specialist teachers available to work with them and their teachers. This provision includes: Resource Teachers: Literacy; Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour; Reading Recovery programmes; and Learning Support Teachers.

In addition, schools are directly funded with a Special Education Grant and Targeted Funding for Educational Achievement. Schools make their own decisions about how they use this funding to meet the identified needs of their learners.

Schools undertaking literacy professional development contracts for 2009 are trained to identify the needs of 'at risk' students, including those with dyslexia. Teachers are also supported with resources like 'Sounds and Words', an online resource for teaching phonological awareness and spelling available on the Te Kete Ipurangi - or TKI - website and literature produced by the Ministry of Education.

No matter what our education system offers, however, some children and young people just require additional assistance - it's as plain as that. That assistance often has to be accessed from programmes that exist outside those offered in the mainstream. This is where organisations like SPELD come to the fore.

I'd now like to talk briefly about Budget 2009, which was announced last month against the backdrop of global economic challenges.

With the Government needing to make every dollar count, we have focused on delivering on priorities in education that have been funded through the addition of new funds as well as the re-prioritisation of existing funds.

Despite the Government having to make some hard decisions, Budget 2009 commits to a range of new initiatives - including supporting schools to: raise literacy and numeracy achievement and support more special education students to realise their potential.

Our Government is committed to a devolved system of decision-making. It is working to ensure that over time a greater proportion of education funding is invested in the front line in our schools, and that less is tied up in bureaucracy.

Around \$36 million will be invested over four years to support the Government's Crusade for Literacy and Numeracy. This includes implementing National Standards, and additional assistance to schools where a high numbers of students are not meeting the Standards.

National Standards aim to lift achievement in reading, writing, and maths. Each standard will clearly state the expected level of achievement of each child and by when, compared with others at that age and level across New Zealand.

It is important to realise that, while they will set clear expectations, standards will not be fixed hoops that all must jump through at a certain time - we know students learn at different rates.

But the information will help students; their teachers; and parents, families and whanau to better understand what they are aiming for and what they need to do next.

The standards are based on literacy learning progressions and will provide teachers with highly effective tools for deciding if students need additional support, or different approaches and interventions.

The Ministry of Education has been carrying out a consultation process on National Standards throughout the country. All English and Maori-medium schools will use National Standards from 2010.

For standards to make a difference, we need to keep the student firmly at the centre of school decision-making. And in our wider system we need to always focus on learning.

For many years it has been common practice in New Zealand schools for teachers to use the Observation Survey after children have received one year of literacy instruction. Helping schools to use this information to meet the unique learning needs of each student is a major focus for all Ministry literacy work.

The five tasks that make up the Observation Survey include: Letter Identification, Concepts About Print, Word Recognition, Writing Vocabulary, and Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words. These remain strong indicators of a child's ability to control the component tasks of literacy learning.

The Observation Survey, in conjunction with an analysis of text reading, provides teachers with comprehensive information about the child's learning.

Work is underway as part of the National Standards development to map current assessment tools and review areas where further tools may be required.

With this work in progress, and other assessment tools already available, teachers are in a strong position to make evidence-based decisions about the particular strengths and needs of their students.

With regard to Special Education, I am confident that further improvements can be made in terms of the services provided and the policies and processes in place. The Government is committed to ensuring that there is more support for students with Special Education needs, and it has made Special Education a priority. ORRS funding was increased in the Budget by \$51 million over four years - this will fund an extra 1100 students. Schools High Health Needs also received an extra \$2.5 million to fund 250 students. That is why responsibility for Special Education is a specific delegated area of responsibility, rather than a small facet of another area within the wider Education portfolio. By delegating Special education to an Associate Minister of Education, this Government is ensuring that Special Education is a priority that will receive the attention and consideration it warrants - attention that it might otherwise only have received peripherally.

It is for this reason that the National party committed to a comprehensive review of the Special Education sector before the election. I am delighted to be leading this review because the current way of supporting students with Special Education needs was developed in the mid-1990s, and much has changed since then. We must be sure that the Government's investment in Special Education - over \$450 million - is delivering positive outcomes for children and young people. The taxpayer needs to know that money earmarked for education is being spent effectively.

The review will examine how well Special Education is working and how it can be improved. The details of the review are being developed now and will be publicly announced once they are finalised.

I would like to say how encouraging it is to see an organisation like SPELD making strong and positive

steps toward the future - taking a strategic view, sorting priorities, establishing a vision and a mission, and planning effectively with well thought-out goals and objectives in place.

I know that your Board has been working on a change proposal to carry your organisation forward so that it is well placed to tackle the challenges that inevitably lie ahead. Change is both exciting and scary and rarely easy, but it is important to constantly assess the effectiveness of one's goals, objectives and plans in order to provide a quality service. I expect you will have some robust discussions and debates around your change proposal. Although sometimes frustrating it is also healthy. I wish you wisdom in your decision-making.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you all on the extremely valuable work you do in supporting students with learning disabilities throughout New Zealand.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak with you today, and I wish you well for the rest of your conference.

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