



SPANZ

SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION OF NEW ZEALAND INC.

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President
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President's Comment 28 - Behaviour Disorders - Raising the Debate

Dear Colleague

One of the basic tenets of Human Rights is that every individual child, no matter their religion, race or ability, has the right to attend their local school. With respect to gross behaviour disorders, I believe that there is a debate that has not been held around that basic tenet. The basic assumption that every teenager is fit to be educated in a mainstream secondary school should be debated. It is something that the nation needs to talk about.

Disabilities that manifest themselves in behavioural ways impact on the lives and education of other children and on the stress and workload of teachers. At the same time boards are required to ensure a "safe" playground.

The debate that needs to be held is not around behaviour misdemeanours, minor challenges of authority or indiscretions (i.e. normal growing-up) for there is an expectation that teachers will manage their classrooms and manage such behaviours. The debate that needs to be held is around gross, violent behavioural disorders.

Schools are not mental health facilities and whilst the children exhibiting these gross behavioural disorders are more often than not victims, the question that has to be asked is whether a school operating six hours a day for 38 weeks of a calendar year is the right environment for managing and modifying such behaviours. The trap is to say that we can meet their needs, or think that we can, yet the wear and tear on teachers and particularly deans and tutors is not sustainable. It is not about stretching existing staff and existing programmes, it is a paradigm shift.

Group Special Education and other government agencies are responsible for the mental health services. The fact they are not necessarily fulfilling this role, or doing it properly, doesn't mean schools should take it over by default.

Through Human Rights more and more young people exhibiting gross behaviour disorders are finding their way into our classrooms and playgrounds and most don't have a teacher aide supporting them, or qualify for one, because their behaviour disorders are undiagnosed or, alternatively, because they are diagnosed but are under-resourced ("the cheque is in the mail"!).

OECD in identifying possible scenarios for future schools included school melt-down and social-welfare organisations as possible models. If schools don't draw the line about what behaviours are acceptable and manageable they will become little more than social-welfare agencies and those who can afford it will find other ways of schooling their children, such as home-schooling and internet clusters.

I say again, that I don't believe this issue is about increasing resourcing: rather it needs a whole paradigm shift in thinking. In raising the topic for debate I have, through my comments, prejudiced the debate somewhat. Nevertheless, I would be interested in member-feedback on this topic.

Graham Young
President
Secondary Principals' Association of New Zealand