

Parliamentary Working Group Report Back: Disabled Learners

Speaker Script

Slide 1: Title Slide

"Unlocking Potential: Education, Training, and Employment for Disabled Learners – A Report to the Ministry of Education and Whaikaha"

Script:

"Kia ora koutou katoa.

My name is Irfan Cherry Safin, and I am honored to be one of the co-chairs of our Parliamentary working group. The working group was tasked with investigating how we can strengthen education, training, and employment outcomes for disabled rangatahi. Today, I, and my learned colleagues present our findings and recommendations — grounded in evidence, community consultation with disabled learners, input from workers in the education industry, and advice from policy analysts. Before we go any further, I would like to note that any critique or suggestions are not of partisan nature, but purely grounded in the complete separation of any personal beliefs, and realising that this topic is bigger than all of us. When I speak, and when my fellow members speak, we act as vessels for our community. We are acting as agents of our community to ensure that all their voices are heard and considered. Let us begin with the scope of our investigation.

Slide 2: Inquiry Topic

Script:

Our Parliamentary Working Group has explored the following central questions:

1. What changes could be made to better prepare disabled learners for future education and career pathways?
2. How can schools better support disabled and neurodivergent learners?
3. What non-education system, i.e. social, healthcare and various policy changes could enable more equitable outcomes?
4. What can the government do to ensure that there is no longer a gap between what the policy promises to give disabled people, versus what is actually seen in practice.

Throughout our tenure as Youth MPs we have come across some findings that can only be described as “bleak”. Despite policy intent, UN Human Rights evaluation and legislative protections, disabled people — especially disabled students — are consistently failed by our system.

Slide 3: Key Findings & Insights

Script:

I will now outline the ten most critical findings from our work. Themes that have been consistently brought up in interviews.

1. Chronic Underfunding

Disabled people are chronically underfunded — across all stages of life. Despite making up 17% of New Zealand's population, disabled learners remain an afterthought in resourcing conversations. Only about 1% of disabled students receive funding from the Ongoing Resource Scheme.

2. Deep Dissatisfaction with the System

Disabled learners and whānau express deep dissatisfaction. One interviewee told member Payton that: *'Navigating the system feels like a minefield.'* It's not just mere statistics that our disabled rangatahi are failed by our system, these are direct lived experiences.

3. Fighting for Less than the Bare Minimum

Support — if it arrives at all — often comes after a long, strenuous battle. Learners and their parents fight tooth and nail for even basic accommodations. Often their efforts are futile. No one should have to exhaust themselves for basic access.

4. A One-Size-Fits-All Curriculum

Our curriculum is designed with neurotypical, able-bodied learning in mind. It rewards those for whom learning is intuitive — and punishes those who don't fit that mold. This disadvantages disabled students by design.

5. Unprepared Staff

Learners report that staff — from teachers to aides — are woefully unprepared to teach them. Many are unfamiliar with inclusive practices, neurodiversity, or disability-specific training.

6. Invisibility Equals Discrimination

Those with invisible disabilities — such as ADHD or chronic illness — are often misunderstood, ignored, or outright disbelieved. The invisibility of their needs leads to neglect.

7. Broken Transitions

There is no cohesive system to support students moving between primary, intermediate, and high school. At each transition, disabled students are forced to restart the fight for recognition and resourcing.

8. Reactive Rather than Preventative

“The system is not proactive. It waits for crisis before responding. Disabled students need sustainable, preventative frameworks — not crisis management.”

9. Social Stigma and Shame

“There is still considerable stigma attached to being disabled. Even asking for support can trigger prejudice, mockery, or social exclusion. We must normalise support and dismantle stigma.”

10. Legal Rights, Practical Isolation

“While the law states disabled students have the right to attend any public school, many mainstream schools are ill-equipped. Disabled learners are marginalised, isolated, or shuffled into segregated spaces — in contradiction to their legal rights.”

Slide 4: Voices from the Community (Optional Visual or Quote Slide)

Script:

“These aren’t abstract issues. They’re deeply personal. One disabled learner said:

‘Private school was the only option available where I wasn’t endlessly bullied and was actually allowed to learn. But it cost more than a university degree.’

Others report being kept home part-time, denied access to key subjects, or placed in rooms away from their peers — simply for being disabled.”

Slide 5: Recommendations

Script:

“From these findings, we propose the following recommendations:”

- **1. Increase Direct Funding** to learning support, assistive technology, and disability accommodations — with targeted equity funding for tāngata whaikaha Māori.
- **2. Implement Mandatory Disability and Neurodiversity Training** for all teachers, aides, and school leaders.
- **3. Design a Truly Inclusive Curriculum** — co-produced with disabled youth, teachers, and experts.
- **4. Establish Seamless Transitions** through dedicated case managers and consistent support across schooling stages.
- **5. Shift Toward Prevention** — not damage control. Support should be early, sustained, and holistic.
- **6. Centralise Student Voice** — every school must have formal consultation with disabled learners.