



PARENTS OF VISION IMPAIRED (NZ) INC

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Providing a community to support parents of children with vision impairments

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Tēnā koutou,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the parliamentary *Inquiry into School Attendance*. Our submission is focussed on the experiences of parents and whānau of a blind, deafblind, low vision or vision impaired student. PVI would like to speak to this submission. My contact details are below.

Ngā mihi,

Rebekah Graham

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About Parents of Vision Impaired

Parents of Vision Impaired (PVI) is a registered charity which supports parents who have blind, deafblind, low vision, or vision-impaired children. There is no cost to enrol and we provide a supportive community of parents who are overcoming challenges every day. Our current membership is at just over 1300 active members, with close to 800 email subscribers.

PVI offers parents advice, information, and opportunities to meet other parents. We publish a quarterly newsletter (eVision) and have a members-only Facebook page for families and whānau to share information and to network. We run an annual conference and AGM which allows parents and whānau to get together face to face for a longer time to talk, listen and learn in a social setting.

PVI takes an active part in the disability sector through making sure that the voice of visually impaired children and their parents is heard in consultations with government, schools, local councils, and other organisations.

Blind, deafblind, and low vision students

Blind Low Vision NZ has over 14,000 persons registered with their service. Of these, approx. 800 are under the age of 16. BLENNZ enrolments fluctuate from year to year but generally there are between 1300-1500 students registered with their service.

Parent/whānau overview of school attendance

For those blind, deafblind, and low vision students who receive support and services from BLENNZ, particularly in the form of RTV hours, teacher training, and TA hours, full time attendance at mainstream school is predominantly experienced as a matter of course. While difficulties and challenges do occur, these are typically resolved and addressed in a manner that supports the students learning and their full-time attendance at school.

For students who have additional disabilities (such as intellectual disability, neurodiversity, cerebral palsy), full-time attendance is more challenging. Likewise, for students who have a vision impairment but whose vision is not at the threshold required for BLENNZ support, and for those who do not receive other forms of additional support, full-time attendance is difficult.

What supports school attendance

For blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired students, having **access to specialist support** for teachers, educators and school staff, and where specialists are able to **upskill school staff** with regards to accessibility and reasonable accommodations, this works to create an inclusive and supportive school environment, which in turn supports student attendance.

Understanding by school leadership, staff, and educators of the need for blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired students to access health-related services is useful. Appointments are routinely made by DHB's during work hours with little regard for school attendance. The centralising of ophthalmology specialities in urban centres can mean that health-related appointments can require a full day (or more) of absence from school. Health-related appointments can be tiring for students which again, contributes to increased absence. Where schools are understanding and supportive this assists with returning to school feeling confident and able to manage.

Understanding of visual and neural fatigue, particularly how fatigue presents in blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired students, is a significant contributor. Being able to implement strategies that reduce fatigue for the low vision learner contributes towards school attendance. PVI parents explain:

- Our student started full time college this year (mainstream) but will come home when too overwhelmed/overloading and strategies not working (which isn't very often). This is a change from the last school. They have a pass to get out of class if it is all too much and can go to learning support or the library to complete work. Then home last option if we are available.
- After struggling with major tiredness we were able to adjust [child's] curriculum and get picked up early before lunch (was only 1 period after lunch anyway) but this meant loss of socialisation time which is a major detriment...at the time [child] was not coping and too grumpy to socialise anyway.
- Funnily enough, [name] never gets actually sick but needs mental health days about 4-6 days a term due to being overwhelmed, fatigued, stressed or anxious or any combination of those. This strategy really works for us, we recognise it. Give a day off, refreshes, then gets back into it.
- Our two [students] are full-time mainstream but only because the school has proper withdrawal, specialist learning spaces, and a large teacher aide team. Because [name] is ACC funded they get 30 TA hours but are still very fatigued after school.

Barriers to school attendance

Attitudes

There is a clear need for educators and school staff to be **overtly** welcoming and supportive of disabilities such as vision loss. Disabled persons and their whānau are keenly aware of body language and the subtleties of spoken language that are employed to exclude disabled people and promote stigma. This form of terminological inexactitude, where people use polite language to exclude (e.g. suggesting another school/job as a 'better fit'; saying it would be 'too hard' to introduce accessible signage/entranceways; complaining at having to enlarge handouts via photocopier) very clearly communicates a lack of welcome. This type of indirect (yet clearly communicated!!) rejection is harder to challenge than more overt forms of discrimination. Nonetheless, it leaves students and their parents/whānau feeling unwanted, excluded, marginalised – and reluctant to ask for the reasonable accommodations to which they are entitled to.

Contributing to these challenges are the sometimes negative attitudes of other parents, who may not understand or value inclusion, who may have concerns and worries of their own with regards to including disabled young people in the school and who may view disabled young people as a negative influence in the classroom. There is a need to address wider societal attitudes towards disability and to ensure that schools are inclusive and welcoming.

Wider environment

The wider disabling environment that school students are subjected to impacts on school attendance:

- School classrooms that are too noisy, too bright, and too overwhelming
- Playgrounds and outdoor areas that are too noisy, too bright, or are physically difficult to access
- Educators do not always provide work material in the students preferred alternate formats.
- Assistive technology can weeks/months to order and/or fix
- Mobility toilets in schools and workplaces are still being used as storage cupboards and/or locked to prevent access.
- Transport options that arrive late or leave early. For example, one parent noted that their child attended full-time but that they had to “finish 40mins earlier on a Friday so the bus driver can get to their other route on time”.

These types of disabling environments communicate a lack of welcome for disabled students. It is our opinion that addressing such things would be highly effective in increasing school attendance.

Comments from parents on this include the following:

- We find [name] runs out of steam by Thursday and we have noticed he doesn't want to go [to school].
- We had full-time with issues at some schools and not with others. We were at Correspondence School because of massive issues during the first year of high school...in my experience, a lower decile school is actually better [at including disabled students].
- Our child attended full-time but as they progressed through the school system it became harder and harder. At high school they were far too keen on shortening school days, not wanting [name] on some days, sending them home for minor reasons, and it was often a fight to maintain their right to be at school full time. The school gave the impression that as [name] was disabled, it didn't really matter if she attended or not.

Where multiple disabilities are present, currently available supports are inadequate and insufficient. As one parent notes, "It's when your child has multiple disabilities that things can get really complex, and the [education system] may fail to work as planned."

More thought needs to be given as to how to address the above noted concerns in order to ensure that disabled students receive a high-quality educational experience and feel welcomed and valued in the school classroom and playground. A recently published piece in *The Spinoff* by an ex-teacher argued for exclusion of disabled children from the classroom and it is exactly this sort of attitude that contributes to students and their parents/whānau feeling unwelcome and thus less likely to want/insist upon school attendance.