

The Northern Advocate



Camrin Murray learns with the Lexia computer program. Picture/Chris Rudsdale

Donation gives help to dyslexic learners

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by André Hueber

Northland students struggling with the learning disability dyslexia have been given a \$150,000 leg-up by the Freemasons.

The funding is being heralded as a significant first step in tackling the problem - but teachers say the Government needs to do more.

The grant will pay for multi-sensory computer software called Lexia, which uses the child's eyes, ears and touch to get messages into the brain.

Whangarei Boys' High School literacy teacher Vicki Wakefield said the software helped students to decode the "secret messages" everyone else could understand.

"Having dyslexia is like driving a car in the dark when it's slippery and the kids are shouting in the back.

"Your brain is working twice as hard," she said.

Peter Packard of the Freemasons Northern District said he first saw the software in action at Kaiwaka School in February and thought it was "obviously hugely beneficial".

"Of all students entering primary school, 20 per cent have trouble reading and writing. In lower socio-economic areas that rises to 30 per cent.

"That's up to 5000 Northland children without support. Of course, this is something the Government should be paying for," he said.

Jenny Litchfield, a resource teacher of learning and behaviour who supports teachers at Whangarei Boys' High School and Pompallier College, was grateful for the donation - but "fed up" with the Ministry of Education's attitude to dyslexia.

"The ministry only recognised dyslexia a year ago. If they recognise it they should back it up with funding.

"There's a real sense of frustration at the lack of resources in schools. We're identifying learning needs in students but we're not being provided with staff, equipment or training."

Without help, students suffering from dyslexia could end up living on the street - or in jail.

Whangarei Boys' High School special needs co-ordinator Jock Whitley agreed some students were currently missing out.

"It would surprise the public to know how many people suffer from dyslexia and how many have fallen through the cracks because of it."

He said the Freemasons' donation was the first meaningful contribution towards the problem.

Now that students were being tested for dyslexia, it had become clear that central government funding was needed.

Students had made real progress since they had started on a trial using Lexia and another program called Toe by Toe.

"We can make real advances and get positive outcomes. No help leads to restricted learning, frustration and truancy."

Mrs Litchfield said all students learned in different ways and described a 14-year-old who could customise a Mazda but had the reading age of a 7-year-old.

"He learns using pictures and art. We can build a pathway for him - he can be a mechanic - and we can build on his strengths."

Freemasons Roskill Foundation chairman David Mace said that, unless people could read, write and understand, their futures were in jeopardy. "If we don't understand people's basic needs we're all going to suffer."

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