

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, TONGA

Special Education Policy

Policy Issue and Policy Outcome

- 8.1 The desired policy outcome is that Tonga has an education system that ensures equal access to education and training for those children and adults with special learning needs. Those people with special learning needs include the physically handicapped (those who require wheelchairs, for instance), the visually impaired (the blind or near-sighted), those with hearing impairment (the deaf), those with speech defects, and those with intellectual disabilities. The category of those with special needs also includes the emotionally disturbed.
- 8.2 The rationale for Government intervention is based on the principle that access to education should be provided to enable all people with disabilities to develop to their full potential. Students with physical and intellectual disabilities face impediments that make access to learning difficult, and as a matter of equity should be assisted to take their place in the formal education sector and develop fully as individuals.
- 8.3 The first step in improving the opportunities for students with physical or intellectual difficulties is to recognise their rights to access education. The Ministry of Education acknowledges that, flowing from such recognition, there are certain obligations which it will be required to meet.
- 8.4 While education of disabled children was previously catered for in Tonga by the extended family, this policy has meant that considerable human potential has remained undeveloped, owing to lack of access to education. Focused intervention would prevent this wastage of human potential. There exists therefore a need to provide more effective support, particularly for people with special needs who are of school age.
- 8.5 The Government of Tonga, through the Ministry of Education, wishes to support the special needs of children and adults with physical and intellectual disabilities by: recognising that these children and adults need to have access to appropriate educational opportunities, and by supporting policies to provide this support within the acknowledged resource constraints.

Government Policy Response

- 8.6 The Ministry of Education proposes a combination of policy responses, including direct and indirect support for special education by the Government. While the current community initiatives to support those with special needs are to be encouraged, the Government now wishes to consider how it might provide additional targeted support.
- 8.7 A clear message that the claim of students with disabilities has been recognised would be provided if the Ministry of Education were able to appoint a special education adviser.
- 8.8 A special education adviser could devise a workplan that would include a thorough survey of the needs of students with disabilities, an outline of the assistance available through NGOs and other regional bodies, an assessment of the potential for incorporating some special education training into the course offerings at TIOE,

and provision of assistance for the development of individually targeted curricula by teachers.

8.9 The Ministry of Education would then undertake to move towards formal support of children with special needs through a number of strategies, staged over a period of years. These strategies include:

- undertaking a review of special education provision in Tonga, by inviting donors to fund specialist technical assistance to help the Government of Tonga undertake this formal review, by establishing national working parties to support the review, and by considering in this review the issue of mainstreaming children with special needs within the formal education system, and the implications, and costs and benefits (social and financial), of such a policy for Tonga's education system;
- conducting a baseline survey to ascertain the nature, number and extent of children with special needs (including those children currently attending schools, and those whose needs are too acute and who do not attend school);
- establishing a central database with detailed information about those people (adults and children) who have special learning needs, having due regard to privacy considerations;
- providing assistance for special needs children in existing schools through
 - a special needs component in all pre-service teacher training,
 - providing teachers of children with special needs with professional development opportunities and targeted in-service training to assist them to help each child with special needs, and
 - training of teacher aides who could provide individual assistance to children with special learning needs;
- reviewing the school curriculum to ensure that it caters adequately for children with special learning needs, and making available appropriate learning materials and equipment for special education;
- provision of incentives to improve the qualifications of teachers in the special education field, such as financial subsidies (possibly through the scholarship systems) for supporting access to special education programmes for teachers of special needs children offered by tertiary education providers, including the University of the South Pacific, and making provision for training of special education teachers at the Tonga Institute of Education (i.e. additional specialist training for regular trained teachers); and
- supporting classes for adults with special needs in the community.

Proposed New Investments

8.10 The following investments in new Ministry of Education Budget Sub-Programs and Activities are proposed, and will be included in the Corporate Plan.

Special Education

- 01 Appoint special education advisor(s).
- 02: Baseline survey of current provision for children and adults with special needs.
- 03: Review of special education provision in Tonga.
- 04: Provision of learning materials and specialist equipment for learners with special needs.