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Does a Bad Start in Life Make for Failure at School?

At an Easter hat parade at Bellfield Primary School in Melbourne, a child's mother got into a punch-up with another mother and head-butted her unconscious in front of 250 children. Did anyone bat an eyelid? No, says the then principal, John Fleming. The children had seen plenty of this kind of violence before, and the Easter hat parade continued as usual.

On another occasion he found two mothers on lunch duty in the school canteen involved in a knife fight.

Incidents such as these, which in other schools might be cause for calling in counsellors for the children, were commonplace among parents and in the schoolyard when Fleming was appointed principal at Bellfield in 1996. Violence, welfare dependence, drugs, alcohol and gambling were chronic problems in the school's community, one of the toughest and most seriously disadvantaged urban areas in Australia.

In 2005, 87% of Bellfield's parents were unemployed and at least half could not read, 61% of students came from single-parent families, 25% were non-English speaking – mostly refugees from Somalia with no English language background at all – and 10% of the students were Indigenous. Fleming could not have been surprised to learn, in taking on the job, that around 85% of the students were failing dismally in state literacy and numeracy tests.

However, over the next few years, during which the levels of economic disadvantage increased, an extraordinary transformation occurred: by 2005, Bellfield students were at the top of state-wide benchmarks. In 1998, for example, 34.6% of Bellfield students were reading at the state benchmark level. By 2003, Bellfield's score had increased to 100%, compared with 23.6% for 'like schools' (from similarly disadvantaged cohorts) and 35.9% state-wide.

How was this achieved? Fleming emphasises that it was not about more resources or better facilities, a common call from those seeking to address educational underachievement. Instead, he puts it down to changes in three key areas.

The first was the way teachers delivered the curriculum – a return to research-based, explicit, step-by-step instruction. This replaced immersion-based ‘student-centred’ learning, where students are ‘guided’ to discover things for themselves.

In instituting this approach, Fleming mostly recruited graduates who, in his view, came “without preconceived ideas about what students could achieve”. He also developed a training programme where new teachers were explicitly taught how to teach, something not taught in Australian teachers’ colleges.

The second factor behind Bellfield’s turnaround was a change in the school culture to reflect traditional values. The school leaders brought back the national anthem, raised the flag each day and taught the students respect for each other, themselves, their community and the nation. Discipline was an important part of the culture, and a simple, three-point code of conduct was introduced and applied consistently.

The third factor was performance-based accountability for both teachers and students. Teachers were accountable for student learning and set rigorous expectations of their students, who were regularly tested. Thus data became the basis of teacher performance management.

From a New Zealand point of view, the detailed work behind these changes, documented in *Towards a Moving School* co-authored by John Fleming, contains much valuable information for teachers actively involved in seeking to lift educational achievement for socio-economically disadvantaged New Zealand children.

Strong, inspiring leadership and a blueprint like Bellfield’s would play a critical role in the success of any school, and such schools can be found in

many systems, including our own. One such standout is Auckland's Southern Cross Campus set up by John Graham, respected former head of Auckland Grammar School, which brought together three schools and incorporated the Maori language immersion college Te Kura Maori O Nga Tapuwae. As well as setting high expectations for student behaviour, an explicit objective was to raise student achievement. Their recent results have seen dramatic improvements like those recorded at Bellfield.

A wider question, then, is what school system is most conducive to enabling such schools to emerge and flourish? Research indicates that key requirements of a successful, community-responsive system are competition between public and private schools and parental choice, and a high degree of local autonomy so that schools are able to innovate in areas such as teaching practices, teacher pay and school organisation, and are able to expand or contract according to demand.

Australia, with its strong independent sector, has scope for such schools. New Zealand's one-size-fits-all system, with a very small independent sector, is much more constrained. With our long 'tail' of underachievers, including around half of all Maori students leaving school with no formal qualifications, it is timely that a working group of National, ACT and Maori Party representatives is looking at ways of introducing greater choice and autonomy into education in New Zealand.

As results like Bellfield's demonstrate, it is clear that a bad start in life need not inevitably lead to failure at school.

Roger Kerr (rkerr@nzbr.org.nz) is the executive director of the New Zealand Business Roundtable.