

School choice: Making a Difference

One early morning an elderly man walking on a beach came across a mass of starfish, stretching as far as the eye could see, stranded on the beach by the tide. Nearby a small child was running back and forth from the beach, picking up starfish and throwing them into the water.

When the old man approached, the boy called out “Quick, come and help me! The sun’s coming up and the tide’s going out. If we don’t get them back in the water, they’ll die!”

“Son”, the old man said, “there are miles of beach and hundreds of starfish. You can’t make a difference.” The boy bent down, picked up another starfish and placed it gently back in the water. Then, smiling at the man, he said, “Made a difference to that one!”

As the oft-quoted story makes clear, even one life saved or transformed is worth the effort, and this was no doubt in the minds of the Inter-Party Working Group on School Choice in formulating its recently released report *Step Change: Success the Only Option*.

The working group, chaired by ACT’s Heather Roy and consisting of National MPs Hekia Parata, Chester Borrows and Jonathan Young, Maori MP Te Ururoa Flavell and ACT’s Sir Roger Douglas, had its genesis in the National-ACT Confidence & Supply Agreement, and was tasked with reviewing policy options for funding and regulation of schools to increase parental choice and school autonomy.

While the report made little more splash than a single starfish, it contains some important findings and deserves close consideration. *Step Change* limits its focus to those most in need and those not being served by the current education system, ie the 20% ‘tail’ of students who are failing and the top 5% who are gifted. It is notable, however, in that it indicates firm

inter-party support for the fundamental concept of choice as a means of improving education outcomes.

Step Change outlines a programme underpinned by the following concepts: choice to enable the 25% of most needy students (as identified by the report) to choose a school that meets their needs; flexibility for schools to match their students' needs; quality in teaching, content and performance outcomes; and accountability that sees schools measured by their students' success and performance.

In short, the proposal is that funding will follow these children to the school of their and their parents' choice – government, integrated or independent – and schools can open, expand or innovate in response to their needs and, importantly, be accountable for their success.

The proposal is hardly radical. Sweden has had a comprehensive education voucher system in place since 1990. First introduced by a conservative government, its popularity and success has surprised even its architects and has ensured that subsequent social democratic governments dare not reverse it.

The system is founded on the proposition that the state has a responsibility to ensure all children get a good education but that it does not need to run all the schools. Schools are simply funded according to the number of students they enrol.

Chile, Ireland, the Netherlands and Denmark have all adopted similar approaches. Australia also has a large private sector and the British Conservative Party plans to move in Sweden's direction if it wins this year's election.

New Zealand already has, in effect, a voucher system for pre-school education and much of the tertiary sector. In addition, Alternative Education programmes already in place to cater for those who are excluded from school or are clearly failing, operate on precisely the basis proposed by the working group: around \$11,000 per student per year is

paid to an approved consortium, with little constraint on how and where the 'education' takes place.

Choice in education providers is also a logical continuum from implementing national standards: if parents find that their children are failing, what are they supposed to do about it? 'Voice' – making representations to schools – is a far less powerful sanction.

Step Change asks education minister Anne Tolley to appoint a taskforce to determine how to implement its proposals in time for the 2011 school year.

A system of choice for all children, not just those at either end of the spectrum, would be preferable and much more in tune with the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, the working group's proposal, based as it is on inter-party consensus, should be welcomed as a golden opportunity to do something constructive about New Zealand's shameful record of failing its socio-economically disadvantaged children. Minister Tolley should waste no time in implementing the proposal. If it makes a difference to even a small percentage of children at the bottom of the heap, it will be well worth while.

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