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Education Today

**Roger Kerr
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NEW ZEALAND BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE**

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There can be no doubt that this is an exciting time for education in New Zealand. Since the Picot report was released in 1988, education has been in the spotlight. Never has there been so much debate about education, nor public interest been so high.

The education reforms are by no means unique to New Zealand. Even their opponents concede that in general outline they are similar to those occurring in a number of countries, including Australia, Britain and Canada. As with other areas of change, we are moving into the international mainstream.

It is a particularly exciting time for teachers. For we are discarding the ideas of researchers like James Coleman who asserted in the 1960s that, much as they would like to think they are important, teachers actually count for very little in a child's education. It was the social system of peers and the socio-economic background of the student that, according to Coleman, determined the academic achievements of a child.

But Coleman, by his own admission, was wrong. One of the strongest arguments for the importance of schools subsequently came from Coleman himself. In a later study conducted in the 1980s, he concluded that American private schools did a better job of educating the typical student than public schools, in spite of the pupils' socio-economic mix, and that their superior performance arose from important differences in school operation. Few in the educational community wanted to know about this finding. But it says something that commonsense told us all along, namely that schools and teachers matter a great deal to education.

We are also in the process of questioning the long-accepted notions of the Plowden report whose 'child centred' learning approach is now under attack in Britain. For 25 years Plowden's recommendations dominated the educational scene in that country and strongly influenced educationalists in New Zealand during the Beeby era. But as Kenneth Clarke, the Secretary of Education in the last conservative government, recently acknowledged in an article entitled 'Education's insane bandwagon finally goes into the ditch', "We must recognise... that, in the name of Plowden, grave damage has been done to parts of our educational service".

A government inquiry set up by Clarke found that there was:

"... 'a persistent belief that students should never be told things, only asked questions' and 'a belief that teachers must never point out when a pupil is wrong'."

The general consensus in Britain, however, even including the former members of the Plowden committee, is loud and clear: Plowden's ideals are far too difficult to apply, much too abused, and perhaps just plain wrong about children and learning. Contrary to Plowden, children do not learn efficiently by themselves. Again, schools and teachers matter.

Beyond the classroom, broad changes are occurring. Education is now going through a similar process of reform to other parts of the economy. The removal of monopolies in the supply of many goods and services is being matched by the elimination of school zones. The removal of monopolies in the labour market is

being matched by moves to voluntary teacher registration. Cut-backs in government expenditure reflect tough economic times, thus the debate over teacher and school performance follows hard on the heels of the increased accountability and performance demanded in the private sector.

The Employment Contracts Act is an important aspect of this change, and it too affects education. A report recently released by the Education Forum, *Better Teachers for Better Learning*, highlighted the anachronisms. What other industry offers its employees a unified national salary structure, pay rates based on service and qualifications, national bargaining, more leave than most professionals, self-regulated working hours, protection from dismissal and national redeployment schemes? These are the employment conditions of yesteryear. They are unsuitable for the competitive climate New Zealand now faces.

The report recommended obvious things like the removal of automatic pay rises, performance-related pay, site bargaining, individual contracts and more effective sanctions for non-performing teachers. As one commentator observed:

"It is the sort of report you glance at, agree with, wish would be implemented quickly, and move on. It is the sort of report which sends teacher union representatives into an apoplectic rage. The next day the newspapers were full of sound and fury, with the usual significance."

Just like every other industry in this country, schools must become more innovative and accountable in their employment conditions if we hope to improve in the 1990s.

And the goal must be improvement, regardless of how well we are doing. Clearly there are some strong points in New Zealand education, such as reading performance. And it was a thrill to read about the success of Liana Ashenden of Kristin School in the International Baccalaureate last year. But there are also some weak points where we can ill-afford them such as maths, and it is extraordinary that anyone can be complacent about the qualification record of Maori school leavers.

But whatever our relative performance, and we know too little about it, the accent must be on improvement. No chief executive would get away with a claim to shareholders that the output and quality of the firm is no worse than it was 20 years ago. No competitor country that I am aware of is satisfied with its education performance. We are chasing a moving target. And performance improvement always requires things like innovation, skill upgrading, new technology and organisational change.

That is why I believe the government is heading very much in the right direction in education. Moves toward greater school autonomy, parental choice, revamped employment arrangements and stricter assessment procedures are significant steps in the improvement of New Zealand's public education.

But there is much work ahead.

The whole area of choice and competition in education, for example, is an issue that this country is only just starting to face. If the collapse of the Soviet bloc tells us anything, it is that central control of national enterprises is a failure. Inefficient, inflexible, and dangerously unresponsive to local needs, centrally controlled institutions have left an inheritance of poverty and tragedy for the Soviet people.

Why is it that many educationalists hanker after this same monolithic approach to education? Why are those who seek to free education from the paternalistic hand of the state opposed on all sides by teacher unions, bureaucrats and academics?

We didn't need the collapse of the collectivist systems to teach us this lesson. In his celebrated essay *On Liberty*, social reformer and philosopher John Stuart Mill had this to say more than 100 years ago concerning the growing phenomenon of state education:

"A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government... it establishes a despotism of the mind."

Interestingly, Karl Marx was also of the view that "The idea of 'elementary education by the state' is completely objectionable." While he opposed state provision, however, he supported state regulation of curriculum and teacher qualifications:

"Specifying the means available to elementary schools, the qualification of teaching staff, the subjects to be taught, etc. by a general law, as is done in the United States, and having state inspectors to supervise the observance of these regulations is something quite different from appointing the state as educator of the people."

Despite Mill and Marx, over the last century the state has intruded more into family life in education than in any other area. The state has determined for parents where their children should go to school, who should teach them, and what they should be taught. The 'One-Best-System' approach which we have had to state education in New Zealand consists of an educational agenda that was applied to a whole country by the central government. It was the result of the lobbying of various political forces and hence was the watered down mixture of particular interests. Significantly, it was applied top down, from the minister to the teachers, via a complicated administrative system.

The One-Best-System was big. It was cumbersome and bureaucratic. Its directives were formal and broadly applicable to the whole nation, but sufficiently broad so as to be applicable to no one. It was unresponsive to local needs, changed according to the political fashion, and was very expensive.

The recent reforms are starting to change all that. The rightful duty and privilege of making decisions about the education of their own children is being restored to parents. Principals as chief executives and their teaching teams are being given more latitude to respond to their needs.

What particularly seems to infuriate defenders of the One-Best-System approach to education is that many of the challenges to it around the world are coming from the political left. One of the most prominent figures in American education today is Polly Williams, a former aide to Jesse Jackson and a Democrat representative for Wisconsin. Williams herself is no stranger to poverty. She came from a poor black family in Mississippi and was at one stage a welfare beneficiary. She has what would appear to be all the right credentials to earn liberal sympathies. Yet on the question of choice and competition in education Williams had to fight a monumental battle against educationalists, teacher unions and her own party to gain acceptance

for a limited voucher programme to enable children from low income black families to attend private schools.

Williams makes her case in the following terms:

"Choice empowers parents. It allows them to choose the best schools for their children. It doesn't say, as the educrats do, that poor people are too dumb (they use the word "uninformed") to make choices. Poor people are the same as rich people. They may not have much money but they have the same desires and the same needs. And poor people make decisions all the time. They decide where they are going to live, what grocery store to buy from, where to shop for clothes - they decide everything, but all of a sudden, the educrats claim that they don't have enough sense to make a decision about the education of their children."

Reporting her experience with the campaign, Williams went on to say:

"But the teacher unions, the NAACP, the bureaucracy and the educational establishment didn't agree. In the name of protecting the poor, they all opposed choice. We didn't try to beat them - they were too powerful. Instead, we went directly to parents, and we organised the community from the grassroots level, from the bottom up. And they kept coming to our meetings by the hundreds - even the Joe Six-Packs, and the Archie Bunkers. Republicans, Democrats, Jews, Catholics, Protestants and Muslims publicly spoke up in favour of the plan even when it had nothing to do with their agendas."

In the first year of the scheme under which up to 1000 students in Milwaukee could claim \$2,500 worth of tuition vouchers (a fraction of the per student cost of public schools), every private school in the inner city had a waiting list. According to Williams, children who were previously two to three grades behind in public schools are now working at their grade levels. And in a comment that is interesting in relation to recent discussion in New Zealand about truancy, Williams says that:

"Once always absent, [children] are even refusing to stay at home sick! A typical response is, "Please don't make me stay home, my teacher is expecting me"."

Also infuriating to some in the education debate is the ground-breaking study, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, by John Chubb and Terry Moe of the left-leaning Brookings Institution. They identify school organisation as one of the most important elements affecting student achievement:

"The key to better schools is more effective school organisation; the key to more effective school organisation is greater school autonomy; and the key to greater school autonomy is school competition and parental choice."

The study has been described as "discredited" by one academic from Massey University. This is codswallop. Like many significant pieces of research, it has been criticised. The most telling criticism I have read is that despite their findings in favour of competition, Chubb and Moe end up pulling their punches and limit their recommendations for choice to the public school system. But to imply that the

general conclusions of the study are discredited is to ignore the overwhelming thrust of the current United States education debate and the effective schools literature.

Another apparent irritant is the public opinion survey on a number of education issues commissioned by the Education Forum last year. On the voucher issue, the question posed was whether:

"...parents should be able to send their children to either state or private schools, with the Government paying fees to private schools up to the equivalent cost of sending a child to a state school".

That seems like a perfectly straightforward question to me, and arguably more intelligible than a related question posed in an earlier Department of Education survey. The Heylen Research Centre which was responsible for both surveys, and which has a professional reputation to protect, certainly thought so. Professor Ivan Snook, however, considered that "it is doubtful that most respondents would understand what was meant". Presumably they would be too dumb - or should I say uninformed?

Some 48 percent of respondents approved the proposal in the Heylen survey. In the United States, Gallup polls over a number of years have asked the question:

"In some nations the government allots a certain amount of money for each child's education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. This is called the "voucher system". Would you like to see such an idea adopted in this country?"

In 1991, 50 percent of the public approved of the idea. Among its strongest supporters were non-whites and blacks (57 percent in both groups).

Last month an NRB McNair survey commissioned by the Ministry of Education found that more than 50 percent of Maori parents and guardians think private Maori schools provide the best schooling for their children. I am waiting for someone from Massey University to tell us that the question was 'loaded' and the survey has been 'discredited'. Or perhaps this would be overstepping the boundary of what is politically correct?

This is not the place for detailed discussion of voucher-type arrangements. There are many options which need to be evaluated. Arguments for them do not rest on public opinion polls, although it is often unwise to ignore the commonsense of the public in favour of the views of so-called experts. Rather, they are supported by sound theory and by empirical evidence of the sort emerging from programmes like that of Polly Williams. The common objection that they would advantage better-off families and disadvantage the less well off has it exactly backwards, as Williams's experience suggests.

However, I am not myself sure how much importance has to be attached to the literal idea of a voucher as a piece of paper to be cashed in by parents at a school of their choice, as opposed to steps that are already being taken in New Zealand and elsewhere to move funding towards a more uniform per pupil basis and to even up the terms of competition both within the public sector and between the public and private sectors. Moreover, none of this calls into question the case for government financing of education in the compulsory stages.

On the other hand, questions can legitimately be asked, even by supporters of choice, as to whether vouchers are an ideal arrangement. I recently had the experience of talking on this topic to a group of managers from one of New Zealand's best-run companies. Instead of fielding the usual questions from critics of vouchers, I found myself being challenged by questions like: "What is the point of taxing people and then giving them the same amount of money back to send their children to school?" "Why not avoid the losses in national income caused by the additional amount of taxation?" "Isn't there something paternalistic about tying assistance to education rather than trusting parents to look after their children's interests?" "Wouldn't it be better to target vouchers or cash assistance only to those with insufficient incomes?" Those are serious questions which are worthy of debate, although anyone who dared to ask them at many educational gatherings in New Zealand would be risking a lynching.

There are still many who would not want to associate the words competition and choice with the process of education. These are often the same people who accuse the business sector of wanting to hijack New Zealand education. There is a conspiracy afoot, it seems. The accusers identify the Treasury, the State Services Commission and business as leaders of an ideological onslaught against education, health, welfare and all other 'public goods'. Joce Jesson of the Auckland College of Education would have us believe that the New Right, as they are called, want to sell education through SOEEs, State-Owned Educational Enterprises. These enterprises "are for the moment at least, state owned".

Professor Snook, however, warns us that this won't be for long. According to him the government, under the influence of co-conspirators Treasury, plans to "sell (or preferably give) our schools to big business which will run them at a profit by charging high fees".

This is only part of the bigger picture. Professor Hugh Lauder of Victoria University has diagnosed the real and insidious aim of the New Right:

"the marketisation of education should be seen as of a piece with the reduction in welfare benefits and the Employment Contracts Act, namely that the aim of this government is to create a low skilled, low morale workforce, for a low wage economy".

I have never had much time for conspiracy theories and especially not for ones that promote such silliness as these ones do. What use would a low skill, low morale, and low waged work force be for anyone? If these were the ingredients for industrial success, why is Africa not an economic powerhouse? Why is education accorded such importance in the dynamic Asian countries - whose education systems have been described as "untouched by progressive ideas"?

In a 1989 paper discussing the trends in education reform that he disapproved of, Professor Snook wrote:

"I am not naive enough to believe that ideas conquer the world, winning people by their logic and cogency. I am rather more drawn to the Marxist notion that 'the ruling ideas of every age are the ideas of its ruling classes'."

Unfortunately for Professor Snook, this notion was crumbling with the Berlin wall at almost the exact time his paper was given. As the economist Keynes once wrote, ideas are more powerful than is commonly understood, and over the long run the world is ruled by little else.

You may be interested to know that I recently wrote to Professor Snook inviting him to substantiate a number of claims in a recent paper. My letter included this paragraph:

"You refer to 'New Right' educational thinking. Could you please indicate who or what is the 'New Right'. For the record, I personally have no such affiliation, nor does the New Zealand Business Roundtable, nor does the Education Forum or I would not be a member of it, nor am I aware of anyone who claims to be a member of the 'New Right'. In the interests of rigorous debate I would invite you to specify precisely whom you are referring to when you use this term in public and exclude the aforementioned."

The term is offensive because it is used to imply that those to whom the label is applied are concerned to defend privilege, including in this context the interests of so-called 'elite' schools. I hope I have already said enough to demonstrate that this is claptrap. None of us need waste time fretting about the interests of well-off people. They will do tolerably well under any system. They have both the financial resources and, more importantly, the cultural capital needed to ensure their needs are met. They can cope with a political and bureaucratic market for education - Professor Lauder's preferred form of marketisation. Less well-endowed people cannot. As the Polly Williams story demonstrates, they are better served by the competitive market.

I have to report that Professor Snook declined to reply to my letter. He has also declined an invitation from the chairman of the Education Forum to join its members for an exchange of views. This is a pity. The Forum's interest is in improving education. It has benefited from contacts with people with widely differing perspectives on education. We recently had an excellent discussion with Philip Capper of the PPTA, whose views I find are always worth listening to. I am sure there would be mutual benefit in a discussion with Professor Snook and I hope he will reconsider his decision.

Business and education are coming closer together in New Zealand through vehicles such as the Education Forum, as they are around the world.

The motivation for such interest is not insidious. Educated people are a business's most valuable resource. Productivity and success rely on human capabilities: decision-making, analysis, communication, motivation, dedication, know-how. These are the qualities of valuable staff. Indeed the productivity and prosperity of a whole nation are under threat if its population tends towards illiteracy and innumeracy. It is not for nothing that the damning report of the 1980s on American education was called *A Nation at Risk*.

The accusation has often been made that all business wants are trained automatons, a docile workforce, people who can turn the engine of production in the economy. Business today is not concerned about narrow vocational preparation, if indeed it ever was. I think it was Cardinal Newman, writing 150 years ago on the uses of the

university, who observed that the only true vocational education is a liberal education. This has never been more true than today.

The fact is that the business community needs and wants youngsters and adults who are broadly and deeply educated, people who can think, who can communicate, who can compute, who can solve problems, who can ask questions, who can do the kind of things that we associate with good core curriculum and a good liberal education. As one writer has put it:

"The needs of the modern economy are perhaps for the first time in history consistent with the intellectual and academic needs and demands of a liberal education."

Business should not be telling educators how to do their jobs: that is your field of expertise. Nor should companies become a financial life-support system for schools. That is like doing your child's homework; it may do more harm than good, especially if the basic problem is with the system.

Business's best contribution will be to insist that the debate gets the fundamentals right. This is the point made by educators who have welcomed the involvement of business in education.

One such, Ted Kolderie, has criticised business involvement as too often not being challenging or decisive - business has come in "wanting to be liked". He argues that business has to decide whether it is serious or not:

"If the central issues are going to be raised and addressed, somebody is bound to be upset and some conflict is inevitable. No pain, no gain."

John Chubb has expressed a similar view:

"[E]ducation politics... tend to be dominated by what you might call the education establishment - the administrators, the teachers' unions and so forth... Until there are other players in the politics, educational systems are not going to change... [B]usiness is the only group with sufficient leverage and interest in the quality of our education to actually bring about that change."

Chubb adds that the basic lesson business has to teach our educational systems is that they will run better if the consumers, parents and students, are sovereign in the system and schools are accountable to them.

Business can also help to bring some perspective and commonsense to the education reform debate as it has experienced many of the changes which the education sector is now going through. To those of us in the business sector, some of the claims that were made at various points in the debate were hard to take seriously. For example:

- School boards of trustees were alleged to be incapable of coping with the demands placed upon them, despite the fact that private school boards have coped with larger responsibilities for many years. It has turned out that by and large they have coped well.

- One early reason given for opposition to bulk funding of teacher salaries was the administrative burden. This was impossible to sustain as schools are very simple organisations and modern payroll systems make such a claim groundless.
- Then we heard that bulk funding would be a Trojan horse for cutting teachers' pay, as if there was any connection between the two. Pay cuts are possible under the existing system and may indeed occur, with or without changes to funding arrangements.
- Next we were expected to take seriously the threat that teachers would 'black' schools that opted for bulk funding. They have had more sense; only unionists with a Seafarers' Union mentality would have believed otherwise.
- Lately we have heard that teachers would be incapable of negotiating their own collective or individual contracts at a school level. The same people who are said, rightly in many cases, to do a terrific job in the classroom are apparently unable to cope with something that hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders do as a matter of routine.
- The same process would, apparently, destroy staffroom cooperation and "pit teacher against teacher". Is it seriously believed that other organisations that do not operate on national awards - which now means most in the country - are not highly dependent on teamwork for their success and do not assess and reward staff for their team contributions? Is non-cooperative behaviour what we observe in private schools?
- Performance pay, it is claimed, is unworkable in teaching. If this were the case, why do we bother about promotions, which after all are simply one form of performance pay? Why not just pay all teachers the same? The notion that you as principals cannot rate and reward teacher performance strains credulity. Ask any private sector organisation whether recognition of performance matters.

I do not believe these claims and I doubt that many of you do. You are well aware - far more so than I am - of some deep-seated problems in teaching. Some of the reaction to the recent Education Forum report on teacher employment arrangements was critical, but one issue that was widely acknowledged was the problem of non-performers. This was confirmed to me in a recent letter from a primary school principal who wrote:

"The main problem facing primary schools today is the poor performance of up to one third of the primary school workforce... The other problem is 'capture' of the schools by a unionised workforce which is virtually unaccountable for its day to day performance."

He expressed the belief that:

"...it is very important that future teacher employment arrangements be organised under the aegis of the Employments Contract Act, i.e. individual employment contracts based on the known performance of the individual teacher should supersede the current Collective Employment Contract."

I have been impressed by the number of school principals I have met who have responded to the challenges of the new environment with enthusiasm. I have little doubt that most would have no difficulty in handling responsibilities such as setting employment conditions for teachers, as your colleagues in private schools have for many years.

The developments that face you as professional leaders are probably the most critical to the progress of New Zealand education in the 1990s. I say this because if the current policy trends in education continue, and I hope they do, then the local school will become a great deal more autonomous and self-governing. It will be more akin to a small business enterprise than ever before. The first crucial area of importance, then, will be that of leadership. You will be guiding your schools into the new regions of competition, choice, accountability and independence. They are the same regions in which well-managed businesses in New Zealand are now beginning to thrive. Welcome to the fold!

As any good chief executive knows, a key aspect of leadership is team building. To quote Chubb and Moe once again:

"...effective leadership in a market setting should be heavily oriented toward teaching. Team building requires that principals know their teachers well, know what happens in the classrooms, understand what good teaching is about... Success does not call for a power struggle. Nor does it call for a supreme administrator. It calls for effective leadership - which in turn calls for a firm anchoring in the profession, culture and everyday experience of teaching."

The new structures allow more scope for leadership, team building and shared decision making. Together with the establishment of clear goals, high expectations of pupils' achievement, frequent evaluation of pupils' progress, and parental involvement, these characteristics seem to be the hallmark of effective schools.

I said at the outset that this is an exciting time for education. Never has the economy needed good education more. Many of the shibboleths about education have been destroyed. Commonsense is displacing educational theories of the progressive era. We are now much clearer that schools matter and teachers matter. Things like teacher pupil ratios and levels of spending matter less. The old excuses - that education performance is largely outside the control of schools - won't wash.

The climate is right for restoring the status of teachers. Twenty years ago teacher unions were essentially professional societies like their counterparts in law and accountancy. Somehow since then they have evolved in the direction of the Seafarers' Union. Teachers deserve better. Their organisations ought to operate more like professional support services providing technical assistance, teaching resources, professional development courses and, by all means, legal advice. Voluntary unionism may help that process along.

You are running an enterprise which has the most noble of goals: the chastening of ignorance. Set your sights high. International standards of excellence and the lifting of all our young people to their full potential is what today's educational enterprise must be all about.