

**New Zealand School Trustees Association
National Conference**

Thinking About Education

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THINKING ABOUT EDUCATION

Thank you for the opportunity of speaking to you this morning. As governors of state schools, trustees exercise considerable responsibility for the good education of tomorrow's citizens and it is a privilege to address your annual conference.

The state schools sector is a massive and fast growing enterprise and is undergoing extensive changes in governance, funding, curriculum and qualifications. The size of the sector and the extent of the reforms would suggest to the casual observer that equally massive and extensive research and analyses underlie present and proposed educational policies.

The casual observer might also be forgiven for thinking that the education sector especially would be driven by the highest quality of thought - after all, the process of education has a lot to do with thinking, about passing on knowledge and culture, and about developing useful skills.

Certainly there is much debate about education policy and, given its importance, it would be extraordinary if that were not the case. Yet there are two aspects of the current debate that concern me. First, much of the debate is about key features of the reforms and is taking place long after decisions have been made - during the implementation stages by which time basic issues should have been resolved. Secondly, there is often little evidence of detailed analysis underlying the reforms.

In the light of these concerns I want to address two issues about the quality of education policy thinking, to highlight some dangers of poor quality thought, and then to suggest some ways of addressing the problems that arise.

Who is doing the thinking about education policy?

Clearly a great many people and agencies are, and have been, involved in education policy development and it is impossible from the 'outside' to assess the relative importance of the various contributors. But one aspect is clear, and this has been the heavy reliance on advisory bodies of various kinds. Of course, it might well be observed, and with some justification, that the number of advisory groups just reflects the size of the sector and the extent of the reforms. And I would also agree that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with calling together an advisory group. But this dependence on taskforces of various kinds to resolve difficult policy issues raises several problems and concerns.

First, the effective use of advisory groups requires good management and coordination of the various bodies by the central agencies. This presupposes that there are personnel in the agencies who are themselves sufficiently expert to ask the probing questions, to challenge, and to refer back for further work when work is incomplete or unsatisfactory. Is this the case? I have no personal knowledge of the situation, but I note that the State Services Commissioner recently stated that the ministry had "lost its way" and that its "skill mix" needs examination (*The Evening Post*, 4 July 1996).

Secondly, there is the issue of accountability. To whom are all these taskforces accountable if they are not in a clearly established contractual relationship which sets out mutual expectations? I suspect that the answer is often far from clear. The system relies unduly on there being a sufficient sense of professionalism, analytical ability and education policy understanding within the committee to produce a 'quality' result. I suspect that this is not always the case.

Thirdly, there may be difficulties where advisory bodies are serviced by officials. If members are considering technical issues with which they are not familiar, they will have to defer to officials for advice while being unable to assess whether confidence in them is well placed. And if, as I suspect is often the case, the members of the advisory body are very busy people running schools or universities or having other full-time occupations, it is unrealistic to expect them to do otherwise than rely heavily on officials.

Fourthly, if, as seems common practice, members of advisory groups are appointed because they represent specific interest groups, we are likely to get advice which reflects the minimum position on which all groups can agree. In other words, recommendations will be a compromise between conflicting interests and not the result of high quality, objective analysis undertaken from a national perspective.

If the appointment of advisory groups simply reflects weakness within the ministry then at best it is a short-term 'solution'; it does nothing to improve the long-term analytical capacity of the ministry or indeed its short-term capacity to evaluate and follow up an advisory group's findings.

The preferred approach should surely be to hold an improved ministry accountable for high quality advice which is, after all, what it was set up to deliver. Where outside assistance is required, the ministry should in the normal course of events establish a consultancy contract in the usual way - find the best consultant available, whether within New Zealand or overseas, establish terms of reference, monitor the product, and arrange appropriate peer review before the report is finalised.

Consultation and the quality of education thinking

It will, of course, be argued that the use of advisory bodies tends to involve a range of people and interest groups and is part of the wide consultation that is needed if sound education policies are to be developed, and if the resulting policies are to be well understood by all concerned before implementation. There is substance to this argument.

I suggest there are three things to be said, however. First, the task to be undertaken needs to be identified and the need for consultation established at the outset. While there are no completely hard-and-fast rules, it seems to me that basic policy analysis is not usually an appropriate matter for an advisory committee. Such work should generally be developed by the ministry with the assistance of consultants as required. On the other hand, working through the implications of a proposed policy change, assessing implementation requirements and developing a constituency for change might very well be matters for wide consultation with those within the relevant sector.

Secondly, consultation is no substitute for hard thinking. David Hood of the NZQA said recently that the qualifications framework, in implementing assessment against standards, fulfils the recommendation of the Hawke report of 1988 which, he claimed, had drawn together the thinking from several reports and some 3700 submissions (*The Press*, 12 June 1996). But the Hawke report didn't mention unit standards nor did it include any discussion of the assessment issues associated with that approach. Where is the analysis that led to the unit standards approach, and what alternatives were considered? Did all those 3700 individuals and organisations have any idea of the system that their submissions are now being quoted in support of?

This leads to my third point about consultation which is that the quality of the output of the consultation process depends very much on the quality of the input. If we are going to expect high quality feedback from schools and teacher and trustee organisations on policy issues, the ministry needs to put out really well researched and presented discussion documents.

Some dangers in the current educational policy development process

I would like now to stress some particular dangers inherent in our current policy development processes. First, without a careful process and an informed education sector, we are very open to policy capture by a few local experts. We are a small country; the number of experts in any one area is always going to be small; and the policy debate will tend to be limited in the options traversed. We need to guard against 'capture' by one viewpoint by ensuring we have well developed discussion documents which identify and analyse the issues and options.

Secondly, without a well-developed policy process we are going to be taken in by overseas enthusiasms which may or may not be well founded.

Thirdly, unless we do something to improve our educational policy expertise we will have no real capacity to address difficulties when they arise. We see this in the qualifications framework - real problems are simply ignored by the Authority's staff or dismissed as implementation issues. We must learn to ask the fundamental questions if sound policies are to be developed. Adopting the typical Kiwi approach of trying to fix everything with the educational equivalent of number 8 fencing wire is simply to compound problems and to delay their resolution. We have a strange combination in New Zealand education of 'think big' enthusiasm for comprehensive solutions to perceived educational problems and almost total reluctance to work from first principles. It's a dangerous mixture.

A fourth and related point is that unless we are clear at the outset why we have made certain decisions we will not be able to pinpoint the reasons for any difficulties that arise. We may be unable to distinguish the problems of design from those of implementation - and unless we get the former right the latter problems will be unending. We will also be less able to identify accountability for error or misjudgment - a factor which may, of course, have attractions for those who promoted the proposals.

Improving the quality of educational thinking

I would like to end with a few thoughts about where we should go from here to improve the quality of our thinking about education. First, we need to strengthen the ministry of education. The State Service Commissioner has pointed to the need for the ministry to become "much more professional". It needs to pursue excellence in its own area just as it encourages the pursuit of excellence in schools.

The ministry must rethink the basis for its consultation with the education sector. Consultation must not be allowed to take the place of hard thinking, and the procedure should normally involve the development of a quality discussion paper identifying and analysing the relevant issues and options and drawing on relevant local and overseas experience. Such papers should normally be peer reviewed, must work from first principles and not accept as a necessary starting point what we have always done, what teachers are assumed to want, or the latest enthusiasm from overseas. I wish the new Secretary for Education, Mr Howard Fancy, well as he takes on his new responsibilities later this month.

Secondly, independent groups in education, including the School Trustees Association, must raise the quality of their own contributions to education policy debates. The best bulwark against ill-considered educational reforms should be a highly professional teacher workforce which is well informed and advised about current issues and which engages in quality debate. This requires that teacher organisations must be well serviced by research-based organisations that keep teachers up to date on issues and provide good discussion material on them.

I suggest we urgently need in New Zealand a professional teachers' organisation that would be detached from industrial matters and which could raise the status of teaching as a profession. Such an organisation could make an important contribution to debates about education from the perspective of the learning of students and not, as is perhaps inevitable with unions, from that of the welfare of teachers.

My third and final point is, perhaps, the most important. This is that the determining of policy on the basis that schooling is a major state enterprise to be coordinated from the centre will always be inefficient and lead to policy contention. If we ask ourselves which of the areas of everyday life for New Zealand citizens are the most fraught with conflict and viewed with dissatisfaction by the community, we think immediately of such areas as health, education, accident compensation and superannuation. The common factor is, of course, that they are all state dominated. If we ask the same question of the schools sector we are likely to come up with: the national award system for determining teachers pay; the national system for determining school staffing profiles; the national curriculum; and the national qualifications framework. Again the common feature is control from the centre.

We may resolve some current problems, but deeper concerns to do with our dependence on centralised decision making are going to remain.

First, no centralised system can adequately take account of wide variations in local circumstances and needs. Centralised solutions are inevitably subject to rules because taxpayers' money is involved, and these rules are, to a greater or lesser extent, arbitrary. So there will always be those who, often with good reason, consider that current rules do not take their particular situation into account and are therefore unfair and a cause for complaint.

Secondly, in our schooling system the problems inherent in centralised decision making are compounded by massive protection against competition from the private sector. I know that private schools receive a subsidy, and that this is to increase. But the state system still faces little effective competition, and I have no reason to believe that, in terms of efficiency of delivery and responsiveness to consumer concerns, a heavily protected state schooling system is any different to previous state monopolies like telecommunications, the domestic airline and railways.

Thirdly, there are always going to be genuine, deeply held differences of opinion among parents, teachers and the rest of the community about the purposes of schooling and how it should be delivered. But centralised solutions inevitably incorporate a particular view of the world with which some, at least, are going to disagree. One of the main reasons why it is so hard to get politicians to change a policy is because it incorporates their particular view and they don't want to change it. And the best way for politicians or officials to enforce on everyone a particular view about how an aspect of the education system should operate is to incorporate it in legislation which is extraordinarily hard to change.

I accept that as a society we need a schooling system that helps us to live together. Given the mobility of our population, we need a system that provides high standards throughout the country. But I do not accept that this requires heavy centralisation. I have no reason to believe, for example, that private schools and the religious and other schools that are now integrated within the state system do less to socialise children into society, or provide an inferior education compared with non-integrated state schools. What I am sure about is that we need a far greater degree of parental choice within our school system both to meet the legitimate concerns of parents for their children's education and to provide greater incentives for high performance within the state system. It is not my purpose this morning to spell out in any detail how this should be effected. However, I would note that it requires a system of funding all schools - state and private - on an equal footing.

If private schooling is to be funded on an equal basis, then state schools must be allowed to compete effectively without the impediment of heavily centralised supervision. State schools should be encouraged - not just permitted - to develop the particular levels of academic emphases that suit their communities, and to provide services beyond those that the state prescribes as minimal and which its community wants. As different types of school emerge, some real choice will become available in contrast to the very limited options available to most parents under the fortress, zoning mentality currently in vogue.

Far less state intervention into areas such as the curriculum and qualifications will allow legitimate parental and student choice. It will also avoid the considerable risks inherent in our present comprehensive, heavily specified frameworks which are very difficult to change and which, if poorly specified, will adversely affect everyone. We must build into our education systems the flexibility which will allow adjustments to be made quickly and easily as defects are identified, as new options emerge, and as needs change. We have already seen how extraordinarily difficult it is to get political and bureaucratic agreement just to review the qualifications framework even after serious studies have pointed out substantial weaknesses. Surely we do not want to get locked into such inflexible, centrally driven systems.

What I have suggested this morning is that much needs to be done to improve the quality of education policy thinking at the centre. But I have also suggested that it is dangerous and unsatisfactory to centralise that thinking to the current extent. The system needs considerable freeing-up from central controls so that schools can do much more thinking for themselves in response to legitimate parental wishes and student needs.

I would like to end with a quote from a tape recording of a conversation which took place not long ago between two senior education officials in Wellington. In the interests of anonymity, and with apologies to Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn.¹ I will simply refer to them as Sir Humphrey and Bernard. The conversation went like this:

Sir Humphrey: Well Bernard, have you seen the Education Forum report on Unit Standards?

Bernard: Yes, Sir Humphrey. Very interesting.

Sir Humphrey: *Interesting!* Is that all you have to say?

Bernard: Well. It seems to suggest that we can't do what we have been telling everybody we can do - and that is to set standards in subjects like history and English.

Sir Humphrey: Bernard! I never thought to hear such language from a loyal member of the Authority. Have you been got at by the enemy?

Bernard: The enemy?

Sir Humphrey: Yes. Not to put too fine a point on it, by people who think about assessment, and difficult things like that. Naive people who think the framework should be based on educational principles.

Bernard: But isn't the qualifications framework about assessment and that sort of thing? Quite complicated things.

Sir Humphrey: Whatever gave you that idea? The framework is about providing teachers with what many of them seem to want - allowing them to test their own students whenever they like, letting them set their own tests, getting rid of nasty examinations and status distinctions, and making everyone feel good. Easy, straightforward stuff like that.

Bernard: I thought it was something about helping students to achieve.

Sir Humphrey: *Students!* Really Bernard, I sometimes despair of you. Whoever mentioned students?

¹ Editors of the Hacker Diaries and the Appleby Papers. Their report of a conversation between Sir Humphrey Appleby and Bernard Woolley published in *The Sunday Times* of 11 December 1983 is acknowledged.

Bernard: But shouldn't the Authority see the report? It seems to be saying that their policies are all wrong and won't work.

Sir Humphrey: Bernard! First, the Authority may *think* they are making policy but you know as well as I that it is *we* who make the policy. Secondly, of course the Authority must see the report but we must make sure the authors are discredited. We can call them ultra conservatives for a start.

Bernard: And what about the minister? Shouldn't he see the report?

Sir Humphrey: He shall Bernard. But it is your job to make sure he doesn't read it. He may glance at it, and then dismiss it. You must provide a devastating critique.

Bernard: How?

Sir Humphrey: Discuss 'scaling'. Virtually no one understands it, certainly I don't, and it either throws people into total confusion or drives them into paroxysms of rage because they think scaling denied them or their children a brilliant career. You could infer that it is against the principles of the Treaty - virtually everything else is, so why not scaling?

Bernard: But the report barely mentions scaling!

Sir Humphrey: What on earth has that got to do with it? The point is that it did mention scaling. Anyway, no education minister will read the whole report. They are far too busy doing important things like opening new classrooms and drinking tea with the unions. And that is the way it should be. It lets people like us concentrate on the business of thinking about education.

Well Ladies and Gentleman, that conversation didn't actually take place. But to the extent that it might have done, it does, I suggest, make my case. Thank you for your attention.