How Do We know How Well We Are Doing & Where We Are Going? School Review in New Zealand

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School Self-Management in New Zealand

New Zealand is one of the pioneers of school self-management. Each of our 2610 public schools has had its own board of trustees, mostly parents, since 1989. Each school has been responsible for managing its own budget, and hiring and firing teachers. Staffing numbers and the government funding that go to each school are largely determined by the number of students the school has, with some additional per student funding related to the socio-economic profile of the school's community.

Decentralisation in New Zealand was based on the premise that decisions about local provision are best made locally, and that doing so would encourage more parental and community involvement, greater teacher responsibility, and improved educational opportunities for students (Minister of Education 1988, p. iv). At the beginning of our decentralisation, we shifted most resources to each individual school. Schools' relationships with government was no longer through local bureaucracies, or through locally-based inspectors who provided both reassurance of the quality of education, and support for those schools and educators who needed advice, ideas, and connections with other professionals. Each school now took on the responsibility of ensuring that it was providing a good quality education that was consistent with national curriculum and administrative guidelines. The proof of this was left largely to a new national inspectorate, the Education Review Office (ERO), which reviewed schools once every three years, or more often if the review indicated areas of deep concern. Two-thirds of the schools were generally seen as 'performing' – that is, falling within a three-yearly cycle of review. The schools took the ERO reviews seriously, and regarded them as something that could affect their reputation, and as a result, the number of students they could attract, and the school's financial viability.

To start with, the reviews focused on governance and management: on whether schools had policies and documentation. This did ensure that schools became familiar with their new responsibilities, since with greater powers of decisionmaking also came more administration. However, it also had the effect that educators associated review with compliance, and with an outside authority: something they often resented. The ERO review was seen as a test to be passed, and then was often put to one side till the next time. There was often a disjuncture between the aspects that the ERO reviews covered, or how they were covered, and schools' own goals and issues.

During the 1990s, it became apparent that simply having school-based management did not improve the quality of education throughout all schools, or close some of the achievement gaps which were evident between students. If schools were struggling, it was more difficult for them to get support, since that was no longer the role of what had become a policy-focused Ministry of Education, with little local presence, and it was not the role of ERO. In 1997, the Ministry did start to provide

some support to clusters of schools that ERO identified as having long-term difficulties, and to some individual schools that had run into serious difficulty, including financial difficulty. This support has now grown to cover 15 percent of New Zealand schools, mostly in low socio-economic and rural areas. There is an increasing emphasis in this support on growing local capacity, often through clusters of schools working together, particularly through professional development focused on teaching and the use of assessment data to improve student learning.

More recently, there have been some significant alterations to the New Zealand model of self-managing schools in order to improve the quality of education, and to better address the achievement gaps.

First, there have been two key changes in the role of the Ministry of Education. In the 1990s, its provision of professional development was largely restricted to single sessions arising out of the need to implement new policy, the New Zealand Curriculum Framework and the curriculum statements in specific areas which arose from this new framework. In recent years, it has developed some exciting professional development approaches and resources focused on literacy and numeracy, and in a number of other curriculum areas. Much of the professional development provided is moving away from single sessions, to ongoing work over a period of months where advisors work with teachers within a school, using cycles of gathering evidence about student achievement, trying out new strategies, and developing cultures where teachers talk to each other, problem-solve, and work together, rather than in isolation. A recent report shows that this approach leads to more sustained gains in teacher knowledge and capability, with gains for student learning (Timperley with Rivers 2003). The Ministry of Education has also increased its number of local offices, and is giving them more of a role in working with schools (Ministry of Education 2002a).

Second, there have been changes in ERO's role. ERO reviews now include some areas that the school itself nominates, as well as areas of government priority. The reviewers' expertise is used to make specific suggestions for improvement, as well as a global judgement on whether the school is 'performing' or not. We have just completed the 2003 survey in NZCER's series of national surveys monitoring the ongoing impact of decentralisation. Most principals whose school had had one of these reviews thought the overall impact of the review had been helpful in their school. ERO reviews provided the impetus for positive changes in around half the schools' programmes.

Third, there is a new approach to school planning and reporting. Underlying this new approach is the recognition of the need to have a shared focus throughout the education system on improving learning. In 1999 schools were required to self-review against a strategic plan. From 2003,

> *" all school boards will be required to have a charter that specifically includes:*
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> - *A school board's long-term goals for student achievement.*
> - *An annually updatable section which sets out the school's immediate targets for improving student outcomes and establishes a framework for reporting progress.*
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> *Each year schools will be required to lodge a copy of their charter with the Ministry of Education.*
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> *The Government expects all schools will establish an on-going process of continuous improvement with student achievement as its focus. Schools will gather comprehensive information about student performance, identify areas*

for improvement, devise and implement programmes to lift student achievement and monitor, evaluate, and report on progress each year." (Ministry of Education 2002b).

What this framework is intended to do is to ensure that schools make their budget allocation decisions, and their decisions about how they will use their staffing, on the basis of student achievement data. It asks schools to revisit these decisions every year, and to be prepared to shift priorities if the achievement data indicates greater need in some areas than others. It also asks schools to analyse their student achievement data by sub-groups of students. For example, the indigenous Maori students, who comprise 20 percent of the student population, tend to score lower on average than others, and the new framework is designed to ensure that schools do not overlook any disparity of performance between Maori and non-Maori, and do their best to close these gaps.

Questions around the new planning and reporting framework

There has been some resistance to this new framework. There are two main reasons.

1. New Zealand schools have been self-managing now for more than a decade, and so they are more sensitive than they might have been before about being legally required to share this school-generated information. Up till now, they have been required to provide only annual reports and annual audited accounts. They are not used to working with local Ministry of Education staff, and are suspicious that the Ministry of Education might take a more directive role in individual school operations, or use the information to make decisions about school mergers or closures. The Ministry of Education's stated intention is to use the information to be better informed about individual schools, and to be alert to early signs that a school might need advice and support.

Another source that the Ministry of Education intends to use to gauge whether a school may be striking difficulties is a set of quantitative indicators of school performance, including teacher turnover, student retention rates, ERO review findings, and some aspects of financial health. Each school has access to how it appears on these indicators, with some benchmarking in terms of comparable schools (e.g. in terms of size of student roll and socio-economic status of the community served by a school), and in terms of schools overall. We do not know how many schools use this information to gauge their own performance.

2. The second reason for questioning this framework lies with the tensions that educators in many countries are experiencing, around assessment and its role in improving learning, and assessment and its use to make judgements about school or teacher quality. For example:

- Research has shown that students gain more in their learning from immediate feedback on their performance than from sitting tests (Black & Wiliam 1998), yet many countries now are putting their faith in more testing.
- Research in those countries which have moved to more testing, such as England, also show that the curriculum tends to become narrower, that less time is available for learning, and more time is given to test preparation, and that young students learn that learning is about being tested and failing, not about enjoyment, mastery, and making an effort. We know from the research on life-long learning and motivation that unless students do internalise a sense that they can learn, they will

give up. So an over-emphasis on assessment, particularly if it has high-stakes for schools and teachers, is counter-productive if we actually want to improve student learning and performance levels.

- The English experience is instructive. They have recently set aside national targets for student performance, since the evidence was unclear that these were actually working to improve performance, or narrow the gaps between students, particularly those from disadvantaged homes and others.
- Using student performance results as a form of school accountability or for making decisions about funding or for public blaming, is not soundly based. Research shows that schools vary from year to year. A high performing school one year might not show the same level of performance the next year, simply because of variation in student cohorts, and one-off events at the time of the tests, such as a flu epidemic, teacher turnover, or even unexpected noise or events on the day of the test (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). This variability is even more pronounced in small schools. It is very difficult to separate out effective schools from others simply on the basis of one year's student performance, so league tables have only a very limited use. Research also shows that teachers have more impact on student performance than do schools (Rowe 1999). Value-added analysis, where you measure student achievement as students start in a particular school, and then at the end of their schooling, also turns out to be more complex and less secure as a basis for comparing schools than was thought (Goldstein, Huiq, Rath & Hill 2000). What do you do, for example, with students who shift schools, and do not have all their education at the same school?

The New Zealand planning and reporting framework does avoid the excessive faith in the value and reliability of student assessment which is evident in the recent U.S. approach (e.g. the '*No child left behind'* legislation). It leaves the decisions to schools on what evidence they will offer of student performance, and what targets they will set. This makes it much more likely that the assessments used will be ones which schools find useful, rather than additional tests which may not be related to their curriculum emphasis, and their students' learning.

We are also fortunate that this is not a 'high-stakes' framework, with mechanical cut-off points for categories of schools, so that schools are always put in the position of competing to avoid a low ranking. Schools will not be held up as 'failing'. It will be interesting to see what targets schools do set for themselves, and whether both they, and the Ministry of Education, will take into account the natural annual volatility of performance in school populations.

Primary principals' views of the new framework & target setting

Our initial data from the 2003 NZCER national survey show that primary school principals were taking a matter-of-fact approach to the new framework.[1] They saw its main purpose as being to help set goals for student achievement (44 percent), and to help identify what they could do better (11 percent). Eighteen percent thought it would provide national data for policy development. A third each thought it would mean their board would get more information on student achievement, and spend more time discussing student achievement. Half the principals said they were already using student achievement data for planning and spending decisions. Only 12 percent

[1] The surveys were undertaken in May-July. I have used only the primary school data here because the secondary data were not available when this paper was written. Results from the surveys will be available late 2003-early 2004 from the NZCER website (www.nzcer.org.nz)

expected their board to change its spending priorities as a result of the new framework.

But what kind of student achievement data are primary schools using to set their targets? Only a quarter had student achievement data for all areas of the curriculum: they are much more likely to have them for literacy (72 percent), and numeracy (62 percent). Literacy and numeracy were also the key priority areas for primary schools in setting targets: 92 percent of the principals were making literacy their priority area, and 83 percent, numeracy. Of the other curriculum areas in the New Zealand curriculum, which all schools are required to provide, 6 percent were giving priority to science, 10 percent to the Arts, 7 percent to sports/physical education, and 3 percent to social studies. The New Zealand curriculum also identifies a set of essential skills. Nineteen percent of the principals were giving priority to setting targets in social skills, and 18 percent to students taking responsibility for their own learning. Twelve percent mentioned problem-solving, and 5 percent, creativity.

So in terms of target-setting, the emphasis is very much on literacy and numeracy. This is not surprising since these have been the key focus of the government-provided professional development of the last few years, and there are government-funded assessment tools which fit with the curriculum and teaching programmes, and which provide some national benchmarks. This year saw the launch of AsTTle, which allows teachers to compile literacy and numeracy tests for years 5, 6, and 7, from a bank of items on a CD-ROM.[2] AsTTle provides benchmarks in terms of national averages for student characteristics such as year level, ethnicity, and gender, and for schools in the same location, or with similar characteristics.

Other government-funded assessment tools which schools can use are the ARBs, which provide resources in English, mathematics, and science, for years 5 to 9, which teachers can download from the internet.[3] These provide national benchmarks in terms of curriculum levels. The ARBs also provide writing scoring guides, which are being used in schools to develop more consistent approaches to marking, and in some, to provide students with a deeper understanding of editing and polishing their own work (Boyd, forthcoming). National exemplars of student work for different curriculum levels are also being developed, again funded by government,[4] and these are being used in schools for similar purposes: not just for benchmarking against national averages, but to provide diagnostic information about students' learning needs, to use in teaching, to develop shared cultures of teaching and assessment – and to report to school boards. These uses show that the new tools are much richer than traditional tests, and that they can contribute to teaching and learning as well as measuring aspects of student knowledge.

However, the use of these new tools to provide targets as required by the new planning and reporting framework has the potential to narrow the focus of learning. Literacy and numeracy are key to learning. But if schools set targets only for literacy and mathematics, it means that schools and the Ministry of Education are unlikely to have a complete picture of student learning, and gains that students may be making. If these are the only school targets for student performance, and the targets are seen as 'high stakes' within a school or by the local Ministry of Education office, then less attention may be paid to other curriculum areas, and the development of skills and dispositions which foster learning in both the short and long-term.

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[2] www.tki.org.nz/r/asttle/index_e.php
[3] http://arb.nzcer.org.nz
[4] www.tki.org.nz/r/assessment/exemplars/index_e.php

A developmental approach to school accountability

However, the New Zealand approach to ensuring that individual schools focus on student achievement is a low-stakes one. It does not over-emphasise comparative judgements of schools, and thus provide incentives to schools to focus more on how they appear in accountability statistics, than on meeting individual student needs. In high-stakes systems, the pressure on schools to meet set standards or benchmarks, whether these benchmarks are realistic or not, has led to ensuring that low-performing students do not sit mandatory tests, by which school performance is judged, either through marking them absent on the day of a test, or encouraging them to leave the school.[5] These are short-term ways to apparently improve school performance on set benchmarks, but in the long-term, they do not lead to improvements in learning, or the narrowing of achievement gaps between different groups in the population.

The New Zealand framework is more developmental. It should mean that principals, teachers, and boards, are more analytical about what they do, and how they do it. It places this framework within existing processes of school self-review, rather than as something separate, which schools can think of as external to their own priorities. In these processes, student achievement data and student engagement data – such as attendance, truancy, and retention to the end of compulsory schooling – are not seen in isolation, but are connected to school policies and decisions. We have found in a recent study of ten primary schools which have made sustained improvement in their provision that well-informed self-review which looked across the board in this way was an important element in their ability to make changes, and then to keep them going, and build on them.[6]

What Kind of Information & Benchmarking Do Improving School Use?

I want to turn now to some of the key findings of that study, particularly in relation to the information the schools used, and the way they used it to find out where they were, and where they could be heading. Our findings in this area are consistent with other research studies of schools making changes, and of schools which were more effective in improving and enriching student learning.

- **Information from external reviews**. This information does not seem to trigger changes in direction in schools that meet the 'performing' benchmark. But it did encourage the schools in our study which had had a poor ERO review to change what they did, and how they did it. Not every school reacts positively to being judged to not meet the 'performing' benchmark, but these schools could use a poor ERO review as a way to really focus the attention and effort of their staff and board.
- **Information from declining rolls**. Sometimes declines in rolls signal changes in the population living locally, but where declining rolls seemed to be

[5] The Audit Commission in England and Wales has concluded that exam targets and school league tables are encouraging schools to exclude or discourage students with special needs, and has recommended that 'when judging a school, inspectors should give the same weight to the integration of challenging pupils as they do to academic results' (Slater 2002, p. 11).
Other examples are given in a recent New York Times article (31 July 2003), "To cut failure rate, schools shed students", by Tamar Lewin & Jennifer Medina.

[6] Mitchell, Cameron & Wylie, 2002. Two papers from this study are available through NZCER's website, www.nzcer.org.nz (Cameron & Mitchell (2002), and Wylie & Mitchell (2003).

indicating that other schools had a better reputation, then this could serve to spur schools to look critically at what they were doing.

- **Information from parents and the community** Sometimes this came through the parents who were on the school board of trustees, from their own experience and what they were observing and picking up through their involvement in the school and around the community. Some came from the principal and senior staff in particular keeping an eye and ear open when they were out and about, or observing the number of parents involved in the school, and how comfortable they seemed when they came into the school.
- **Information from students and teachers** Some schools had regular surveys of their staff and students to check the health of the school climate, student sense of belonging, feeling safe, and feeling engaged in learning. Some principals and senior staff – and board members – also used observations of playground behaviour, or asked students to identify the things that mattered to them in the school and that they would like to see some changes in. One indicator used by some was the content of the conversation in the staff room – was it about student learning? Were teachers excited and sharing accounts of what they were doing with individual students?
- **Information from professional experience and professional development**. This source of information was particularly important, especially where the professional development was
  - ongoing, and developed a learning community within the school, and
  - combined analysis of teachers' own students' performance, and increasing the repertoire of teaching strategies that teachers had to address specific student needs. Teachers learnt to do more than compare their students' marks with a national average. They dug deeper into the kinds of problems a student was having, or aspects which could be strengthened.[7]
- **Information from student performance data**, particularly in relation to national or school benchmarks. This comparison was sometimes a wake-up call, where school staff were basing their assessment of student achievement levels for their class or school as a whole on what they were used to, within their local setting.

The schools never used just one single source of information to guide them. The benchmarks they used were a combination of external ones, such as comparisons they could make with national averages on assessments, and internal ones, such as comparisons between current school climate, and what it had been two-three years earlier.

Priority Setting in Improving Schools

The information about school and student performance was used to set priorities for action. These changed over time. Often, the first thing that was addressed was school climate, particularly in schools which had received a poor ERO review or had falling rolls. Principals, usually working closely with their board chairperson and other trustees, worked hard to restore confidence, pride, and trust. They focused on some visible areas – not always core academic areas, but sometimes the school buildings or grounds, or sport or cultural activities. They made sure their

[7] For a summary account of the difference made by professional development with this focus, see Timperley with Rivers (2003). A recent useful summary of the features of professional development that are most effective is ASCD (2003).

staff were taking part in rich professional development, and that they were working more together.

No school tried to tackle every single curriculum area all at once, or at every year level, unless they were involved in professional development which went across all year levels. They set school wide priorities – for example, writing and the Arts one year, mathematics and literacy the next. This was true even in the schools which had not experienced a crisis, but which had cultures of continual improvement, of gathering information and seeing whether they could do better for student learning. The experience of these primary schools was that more progress could be made by allowing teachers to focus deeply, rather than spreading their concentration too thinly. There was an expectation that by developing a strong foundation, teachers could then continue to refine their practice, by ongoing enquiry, continuing to analyse student performance, and take action to improve it. Teachers were not expected to work in isolation, but with each other.

These schools were also developing and moderating school-wide benchmarks for assessing student work. This meant that teachers were assessing students consistently, and could use the benchmarks to diagnose student needs and share strategies for how to meet those needs. Some of this diagnosis was related to individuals, and some to student groups. For example, one school found that its transient students had lower performance, and now makes sure that these students establish good relationships with their teacher and peers as quickly as possible after they first arrive at the school, so that the students are comfortable, feel they belong, and can focus on learning.

What these schools have done is to take responsibility for their students' learning, and to ensure this remains the focus and priority of the work of the school. To do so, requires that this purpose is the fundamental value for the school. If you like, it becomes the ultimate benchmark. And it is the one which is used to shape school programmes, goals, and targets, and the internal and external benchmarks which will be used by the people in the school to further their work. Imposed external benchmarks which cannot be aligned with the fundamental purpose of schools are counter-productive, giving at best a superficial appearance of people being held to account. External benchmarks of student achievement that are selected by schools, and can be aligned with their programmes and student interests, within this values framework are more likely to be used to improve teaching and student performance, and support the development of life-long learning skills and dispositions. The role of the government and its bureaucracy becomes less one of policing and judging, than of providing the conditions – the professional development, advice, and curriculum related resources – which over time ensures that this values framework is at the heart of the practice and goals of all self-managing schools.

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