

Education Reform Kiwi-style

June 15, 1999

By Maurice P. McTigue

Given to the Texas Public Policy Foundation

Americans are grappling with major policy questions about education, from improving student performance to funding, charter schools to classroom size. More than a decade ago, New Zealand, a country only slightly smaller than Texas, faced similar, if not worse, problems. We "Kiwis" made bold, across-the-board reforms, with positive results.

New Zealand's government had created a massive, unresponsive educational system where parents had little or no influence. The system was failing to meet acceptable achievement levels. There was outright bureaucratic capture, and little or no performance accountability. The system consumed 70 cents of every education dollar, with only 30 cents spent in the classroom.

Education was administered by a very bureaucratic structure. The Ministry of Education, the central body which answered to the federal government, made all of the rules and controlled expenditures with prescriptive regulations. It determined the curriculum, how it would be taught, and how performance would be measured. In every region, the ministry established Boards of Education to whom it delegated limited power.

Since reforms were implemented, some 67 cents of each education dollar is spent in the classroom, which is more than double the previous amount. Parents play the dominant role in the educational choices for their children. Learning has improved, and classroom size is down.

Education still continues to be fully funded by the central government from general income and consumption tax revenues. Every child is still entitled by law to a tax-supported education until completing secondary school. However, little else remains the same.

- * All Boards of Education have been entirely eliminated.
- * Boards of Trustees have been established for every school. These are elected by the parents of the children at that school. They're unpaid positions. The Trustees deliver accountability directly into the hands of the parents.
- * The Board of Trustees makes all spending decisions, and has full responsibility for what happens at their school.
- * The Board of Trustees writes the Charter for their school, and is bound by and accountable for achieving its goals. The Charter can only be changed after a

consultative process with the parents.

* The role of the Ministry has been changed to that of the body that passes to the Board of Trustees a block of money determined by a formula based on the number of students at the school. It is also responsible for auditing school performance against its Charter requirements. Reflecting its new role, the Ministry was reduced to about half its former size.

As, next to parenting, education is the most important influence on a child's future, a significant debate was initiated on parental rights regarding education. The outcome was parents have an absolute right to choose the school at which their children will be educated. The consequence: good schools with good teachers get more students, less capable schools with less capable teachers get less students, e.g., less money and less teachers are employed at that school.

Private schools may get state funding equivalent to public schools. To do so they must make an application to the Minister of Education to integrate. This process requires them to prove their buildings, grounds and facilities meet the code standards. About 15 to 20 percent of all schools are private, and to date about 90 percent of these schools have integrated.

Once integrated they have the right to maintain their special character (normally religious education and ethics), though they must teach the core curriculum and be open and actively teaching the students for the prescribed number of days each school year. For this they get identical funding to public schools including capital. They may compete to educate any children. This is a process started in 1970's. It is now non-controversial. As large quantities of money had been freed up by the elimination of bureaucracy, a decision was made that all of this money would remain a part of education spending. This decision allowed:

- * Major investment in classroom technology.
- * Significant investment in teaching aides.
- * Bringing all maintenance projects up to date.
- * Reducing all classroom numbers to 20 pupils per teacher.

Texas and New Zealand are half a world away, but our citizens share a common interest: a good education for our youth. New Zealand's policies have shown that parental control, choice, and accountability are key to providing a quality education.