

THE LOCAL AND SYSTEMIC ROLES OF SCHOOL TRUSTEES

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'Lay Governance of New Zealand's schools:
an educational, democratic, or
managerialist experiment?'**

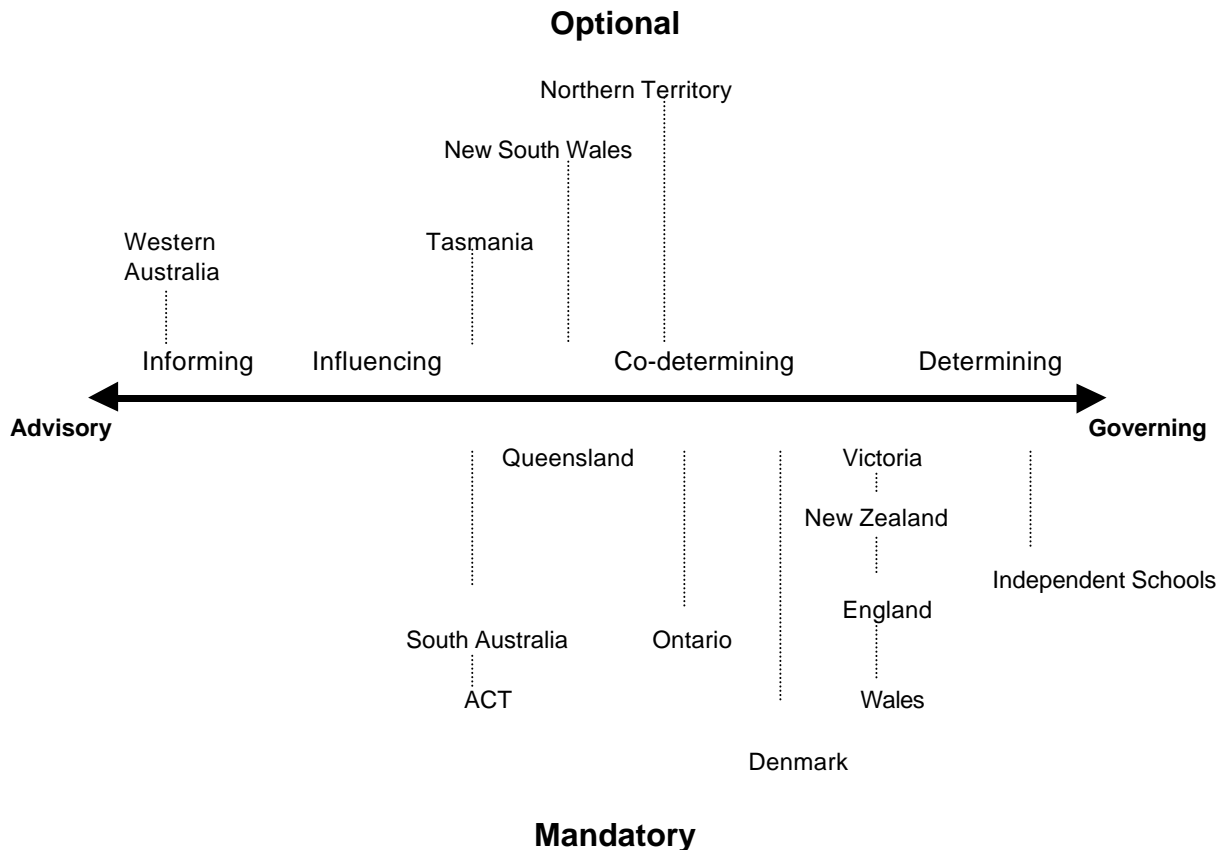
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Introduction

Thirteen years have passed since responsibility for school policy, finances, and staffing decisions passed to the first boards of trustees. We now take the existence of boards of trustees largely for granted. Yet the inclusion of parents in a formal governance role in schools is still rare internationally, even in educational systems which have moved to have greater local decisionmaking at the school level. Here is how New Zealand compares with Australian and one Canadian state, in the useful mapping given in Rentoul and Rosanowski 2000, p.36, which situates systems along a continuum from an advisory role to a governing role (from informing, to influencing, co-determining, and finally determining).



But what does it mean to have the role of formal governance? What part do trustees play in their schools? How does that role fit within the overall educational system? What should we expect of this role? In this paper, I want to explore these questions through broad comparisons with three other educational systems which have used school-site management for about the same length of time as New Zealand: Chicago, England, and Edmonton, Alberta. Chicago and England have school-located boards with formal governance authority and involving parents; Edmonton does not. Such comparisons allow us some insight into whether there are some intrinsic aspects of this role which are likely to occur in any education system which uses school-site management, and into the kinds of relations between schools and the central agency which are possible or desirable.

In all four systems, school-site management was introduced to improve educational provision, for a mixture of reasons. In the main these stem from principles of subsidiarity: that decisions for local provision are best made locally (Levacic 1998). Subsidiarity can fit a number of different perspectives on educational (or other public service) delivery. Levacic

mentions local democratic participation in education, greater school effectiveness and improved efficiency in decision making and resource usage. She notes that

...the theoretical basis of local management regarding hypothesised causal links between changing structures and improvements in school performance owes more to economic and organisational theories than it does to the principles of school effectiveness derived from educational research. (p.332).

A common trajectory in systems based on school self-management

There are some fascinating similarities in the trajectory of systemic change among the four systems. Taking a broad overview, and concentrating on school governance rather than on other issues related to systems based on school-site management, such as school choice, the creation of markets, and uneven distribution of resources, there seem to me to be four stages:

1. Governance and management take the initial spotlight, with a flurry of activity as trustees/governors and educators take on new responsibilities, relationships and workloads.
2. After a few years there is growing unease that simply shifting administrative responsibility to schools, and adding boards to schools does not seem to raise student achievement. The complexity of the governing role becomes more apparent: it does not fit neatly or exclusively into support (local partnership), direction (local ownership), or monitoring (government agent). The clear division between governance and management so confidently stated at the start of the reforms does not exist. There seem to be more paperwork and 'bureaucratic' requirements, not less. The central agency develops or refines mandatory curriculum frameworks. At the same time, decisions made by one school impact on others. Issues are raised about continuing or growing inequities of educational opportunity and resourcing, about exclusions of students with special needs or those who are troublesome, more than they are worth (literally, in per student funding). The central agency has difficulty intervening, or setting things up so that these issues are less likely to occur. It has difficulty planning, or reallocating the money it has available.
3. Now there is a growing emphasis on school accountability: new terms are set. Decentralisation cannot occur without some form of centralisation, albeit taking a new form. Some systems begin, subtly, to make more support available to schools. Others take a 'name and blame/shame' approach, putting schools on probation or in 'special measures', and promising closure or rebirth under new governance and staff if progress is not made. Here there are real cultural and political differences between the four systems, with New Zealand boards having more scope to set their own goals than in the other systems. In New Zealand, the punitive approach is less in evidence, and is not systematic.

But here, as elsewhere, questions are raised about the capacity of educators and governors to meet the accountability requirements, and growing questions about the reality and effectiveness of school autonomy. Few schools innovate, and those that do

have little way to contribute to other schools' understanding: there are no processes to develop new systemic approaches.

4. Finally—at least for now—there is recognition that school-site management and governance does need real support: not just for administration, but for teaching and learning. There is a substantial emphasis on the centre taking a leading role in designing and funding professional development and teaching resources. Reconnecting schools and centre becomes important, often through a closer local presence of the central authority with the aim of working with individual schools, as well as planning capacity and ensuring some common infrastructure is available to schools in the area. The focus is student achievement—not governance and management, though boards are asked to play a key role in planning and monitoring. Accountability provisions remain, with some systems making more public and comparative use of the information about school performance than others. Though the focus on student learning and achievement makes sense to most, the realignment also raises more questions about the role of the school board—is it primarily a manifestation of local interests and control, which is largely centred around its school—an inward focus—or is it a (very poorly paid) agent of government? And vice versa: can we make noticeable gains in learning and achievement if the school remains unconnected, and the role of the centre is still separate from the role of the board and its staff? Is there some happy medium that can be found?

Four Systems

The broad overviews which follow are not based on a thorough literature review of each system, but on material that was readily retrievable in New Zealand. This means that the material available varies for each system, and that some key aspects, such as trends in funding patterns and availability of external support services are not able to be covered here as I would wish.

Chicago

Local school councils in Chicago were introduced in 1988 to turn around a system serving which was perceived as overly bureaucratic and poorly managed, troubled by teacher strikes, and producing only poor student achievement results, and high drop out rates. They were supported by coalitions of parents, community groups, business leaders, and education groups. They have similar powers to New Zealand school boards of trustees, including principal appointment (for a four year performance contract), and budget. Each of the 550 school councils consists of six parent and two community representatives, elected by parents and community residents, two teachers, elected by the school staff, the principal, and a student elected by students in the high schools. A recent summary of research on the local school councils (Designs for Change 2002) includes both survey results and analysis of the relationship of school councils to student achievement. The report on the surveys of school council members carried out by the Consortium on Chicago school research in 1997 concluded that

The vast majority of local school councils are viable governance organisations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties and are active in building school and community partnerships. The initial worries that councils would infringe on professional autonomy have proved unfounded... By devolving significant resources and authority to local school communities and by expanding opportunities for local participation to

parents, community members, and staff, this reform has enlarged the capabilities of communities to solve local problems. (ibid, p. 5).

There was a high level of consistency between the responses of members of the same school council, whether parent, principal, or teacher, in relation to rating their council's effectiveness in relation to key responsibilities. From this material, the researchers concluded that 50–60% of the councils were 'highly effective', 25–33% functioned well but needed support, and 10–15% had 'serious problems', including inactivity, sustained conflict, or unethical behaviour. These differences in effectiveness were not related to the educational or occupational levels of the council members, but to weak leadership (from the principal or chair), less training than other boards, or weak knowledge and skills in areas such as running effective meetings and new educational practices.

The study noted that the councils were often able to support their schools through helping to create collaborations with local agencies and institutions, pressing for improved academic programmes, improving buildings and grounds, and increasing parental involvement—including their own volunteering in the school, an average of 17 hours a month on top of their 11 hours on board duties. Gewertz (2002) cites Fung's conclusions from a three year study of local school councils that they were

“providing a crucial avenue, especially in low income neighbourhoods, for the citizen engagement that he believes is necessary for school improvement”.

Designs for Change analysed student reading achievement data between 1990 and 1997 for a group of schools that were low-achieving in 1990, in relation to teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of their local school council. They found three patterns of reading achievement scores: 'no trend' (the proportion of students scoring at or above the national norm was much the same in 1997 as in 1990), 'substantially up', and 'tending up'. The local school council was given a higher rating for its contribution by teachers in schools that were 'substantially up', along with 13 other aspects of school leadership, parent-community relationships, school-environment, staff development and collaboration, and instructional programme. So the local school council appears as part of an overall picture of open, enquiring, and supportive school relationships and approaches which taken together, have a positive impact. It would probably be difficult to statistically separate out the particular contribution which the local school council alone has made.

Local school boards have not been left alone to do their own thing. The Central Board of the Chicago school district has targets for student achievement which school boards must address in devising their school improvement plans. In 1995, there was a shift back from decentralisation with the provision for the Chicago mayor to play a decisive role in the Chicago school system. In 1996, the Central Board set standards for principal appointments and appraisal, and set in train its own principal evaluation. Efforts by the central board's CEO to shift principal appointments back to the central board in 1999 were strongly opposed by local school council members and other groups, and were not successful. A public opinion poll in June 1999 showed that the public was pretty evenly divided over whether school councils of the central board should hire principals, but most thought school councils should renew principals' contracts only if they had a satisfactory evaluation (the poll did not specify who should carry out this evaluation), and met set standards. A further poll in December 1999 showed that between 42–50% of those polled thought that the Chicago Public School

Administration was most responsible for the direction of the system. Local school councils were seen as most responsible by 16–18%, and teachers by 15–29%¹.

Parent and community representatives on the local school boards have a higher level of education on average than those they represent, and there continues to be some under-representation of non-white groups, judged on their proportion of student numbers. The first elections saw the greatest number of candidates for board membership, with some schools struggling in the last elections to fill all their parent and community positions.

The summary of research on the nature and role played by local school boards in Chicago used in this paper suggests that relations between the boards and the Chicago school system have sometimes been strained by competing claims for authority within schools. This is possible when school boards see themselves as accountable to their particular school or community above all, and the central school administration as either imposing or thwarting. An article in the November/December 2002 *Harvard Education Letter* points to a different conceptualisation of the school board-central agency relationship emerging in Chicago:

The new [Chicago school-system administration] approach aims to balance previous efforts at improvement through decentralization and high-stakes testing with greater attention to building the skills of teachers and administrators with increased professional development offerings, an increase in school-based reading specialists, and a shift in budget priorities. [abstract for 'Beefing up professional development' by Alexander Russo, on www.edletter.org/current/abstracts.s]

This rebalancing of the school board-central agency relationship and the need for it is the focus of an April 2002 *Education Week* article (Gewertz 2002). Researchers of the Chicago reforms point out the need for more support for school board members, particularly as there is a stronger focus on improving student achievement scores.

"We're not talking of a command-and-control type of administration", said Mr. Fung. "I mean an administration that offers support, information-sharing, training, and guidance."

Chicago schools have also attracted considerable philanthropic trust funding, and some very interesting school development work using data on school cultures, teaching and learning, and student achievement is occurring, with the active support of external advisors and experts.²

England

The 1988 Education Reform Act in England shifted financial responsibility from LEAs to individual schools, and strengthened the authority of existing governing bodies. Parental representation on school governing bodies had become a legal requirement in 1980, and in 1986, the number of parent governors and co-opted governors, including some from industry

¹ The report gives two results for this question, but it is not clear whether this refers to different versions of the poll. Both the June and December 1999 polls are reported at www.catalyst-chicago.org/12-00/1200survey

² The Consortium on Chicago school research has material and references to some of this work. www.consortium-chicago.org

was increased. Local education authority (LEA) representatives were maintained on most school governing bodies from 1988, but schools which opted for grant-maintained status, which gave more autonomy excluded LEA representation and could decide the composition of their governing body, and. These schools were better funded than others, and their ability to act on their own without reference to other schools created local problems in terms of planning school places. In 1998, the Labour government introduced three new categories of schools, all of which would have some form of LEA representation on their governing bodies (Anderson, 2000). But this is not the LEA of the 1980s and earlier. The government term for the relationship between schools and their LEA is partnership. "An effective LEA will challenge schools to improve themselves, being ready to intervene where there are problems, but not to interfere with those schools that are doing well..." (quoted by Anderson, 2000: 383).

Along with decentralisation in England came a national curriculum for the first time, and national assessments at both primary and secondary levels, with results made public. In the last few years, there has been intensive effort put into improving literacy and numeracy, with central government taking a directive role, through not only setting the national assessments and national goals, but also setting the content of 'the literacy hour' in primary schools. There has been some progress in national achievement levels in literacy and numeracy, which may now be levelling off.

Levacic (1998) concludes that it is difficult to pin down how school-site management in England has contributed to educational achievement. There is evidence that schools have been able to achieve some cost-efficiencies by managing their own finances, but these have not resulted in radical changes to teaching and learning. "The changes in resource-use patterns have been marginal improvements as judged by school managers in their particular context and in relation to the available funds" (p. 343). For school-site management to affect student learning, it needs to have an impact on what actually happens in the teaching and learning processes. Levacic cites findings indicating that this is possible where schools plan developmentally, involving their staff to set measurable goals for educational improvement, allocating their resources accordingly and evaluating their own progress. This is the model which underlies the New Zealand planning and reporting framework which starts in 2003. It was easier for English secondary schools to take this approach than primary schools, partly because of their smaller size, and fewer staff to undertake administrative work. Levacic also wonders whether the external emphasis on achievement goals and OFSTED inspections had more of an impact on planning and analysis of student achievement, than schools being responsible for their budgets.

A recent OFSTED report focuses on school governance and its role in the quality of teaching and leadership and management (OFSTED 2002). It concludes that what it classifies as good governance is associated with higher student achievement (as judged by OFSTED), and vice versa, but also that "there is a significant number of schools that are exceptions to these general trends, and good governance is no guarantee that a school will be successful" (p.5). It also notes the significance of socio-economic factors in school effectiveness, which are not taken into account in its analysis of the relationship between governance and student achievement. The vacancy rate for governors in inner cities, where there is a higher level of social disadvantage was over 30%, compared with a national vacancy rate of 5–10%.

For primary schools, student achievement was unsatisfactory in 37% of the schools with unsatisfactory/poor governance, compared with 11% of the schools with satisfactory

governance, 3% of the schools with good governance, and 0% of the schools with excellent/very good governance. The pattern was similar for secondary schools (pp. 11–12). When OFSTED governance judgements are set alongside student results in national examinations, there are similar trends, but a stronger demarcation between schools with excellent/very good governance and those with good governance (pp.13–14).

Of the schools inspected in 2000–01, only 8% of primary and 10% of secondary schools had unsatisfactory governance, in terms of fulfilling the governing body’s responsibilities. But this proportion increases in relation to school socioeconomic disadvantage, using the indicator of the proportion of students receiving free school meals, to 17% in primary schools and 24% in secondary schools where more than half the students receive free school lunches. Of the schools where 8% or fewer students receive free school lunches, 30% of the primary governing bodies were judged as excellent/very good, compared with 14% of those serving schools where more than half the students received free school lunches. There was no correlation between judgements of governance quality and the proportion of ethnic minority students in the school.

English school governors and New Zealand school trustees have similar dislikes, but their top three likes are different: NZ trustees seem to feel more of a sense of achievement and involvement. This could be linked with different approaches by principals to the relationship with their board—the English research suggests that headteachers may take a more dominant or gatekeeping role than their New Zealand counterparts—or to the more prescriptive framework within which English schools operate with regard to curriculum and assessment.

English governors

Like most

Involvement with the school and pupils
 Gaining knowledge & understanding of school
 Getting overview of how the school was managed

Like least

Long meetings
 Time commitment
 Paperwork

NZ trustees³

main sources satisfaction

Seeing progress/improvements
 Doing things for children
 Positive relationships at school

main sources dissatisfaction

paperwork
 workload
 meetings

Other studies of the work of English governors’ work are less sanguine than OFSTED about the centrality of their role in the life of a school (and even OFSTED suggests that that influence is indirect in relation to student achievement). Creese (1999) concludes on the basis of his own analysis of schools’ OFSTED reports, which vary greatly in the detail with which they describe the work of governing bodies, that

Perhaps only between five and ten percent of governing bodies are making a very significant contribution to the life and work of their schools. About five percent of governing bodies might be said to give cause for concern and one percent are so ineffective as to seriously prejudice the standard and quality of education received by the children in their schools. (p. 249).

³ Wylie 1999, p. 124.

Creese suggests that there is a balance needed to be struck between the English government's managerialist and increasingly active governance model, involving more monitoring and evaluation of teaching staff and student achievement, and the more usual supportive, albeit questioning, role which is easier for governors, and which has a useful role in school focus and culture. The first emphasis suggests a specialised role, and a very large one for volunteers, with other commitments in their lives.

New Zealand

The decentralisation of education administration to school boards has been well covered elsewhere (e.g. Fiske and Ladd 2000, Wylie 1995), and is now a familiar story for New Zealand educational researchers. By now, boards of trustees are taken for granted. I want to concentrate here on what we know of their role, and the contributions they make.⁴

The 1999 NZCER national survey showed that trustees thought the main element in their role was to represent parents in the school (41%), provide directions for the school (37%), or provide partnership with school staff (28%). Only 2% thought that their responsibility as employer of principal and school staff was key (Wylie 1999, p. 93-94). Their sense of responsibility was firmly located in their individual school (ibid, p. 178). They did not appear to feel that there were areas of school operations which they should be more involved in, or that had been withheld from them by school staff. The disappointment they expressed was with government; they felt excluded from policy development in the areas that affected their schools. Overall, trustees identify with their school, and parents; they do not see themselves as government agents.

The Ministry of Education sets out four key roles for a board of trustees, which do include some managerialist aspects.

- *set the school's overall direction, within the national guidelines*
- *represent parental and taxpayer interests in the school*
- *appoint the principal*
- *monitor and assess the performance of the school and its principal.*

(Ministry of Education 2002a, p. 56).

ERO's guide for boards on its framework describes three review strands: school specific priorities, government priorities, and compliance issues (ERO 2002, p. 5). It is also quite blunt about the fact that both ERO and schools operate within a public policy environment, and that the fundamental priority is student achievement. In the section on effective governance and its role in student achievement (p.22), it indicates review questions which flesh out the Ministry of Education's four key roles:

- *What is the quality of the governance and management relationship and how well are the respective roles of board members and principal understood and acted on?*
- *How transparent are the school's governance processes to its community?*
- *How effectively does the school gain input from its community?*

⁴ It is time for another national survey. NZCER is undertaking a set of these in 2003 in a national sample of primary and secondary schools, and early childhood education centres, with separate but linked questionnaires for trustees, principals, teachers, and parents.

- *How effective are school strategic planning and self-review processes in bringing about improvements likely to impact on student achievement?*
- *How effectively does the school monitor and evaluate its performance and take action to secure improvements?*
- *How well does the board meet its obligations for being a good employer?*
- *How well does the board support school management to create a positive environment where teachers can maximise their impact on student achievement?*

The underlying assumptions here are that a board can best support student achievement by both supporting and monitoring the work of school staff – that support cannot be given well if it is not derived from a process of being informed about the work of educators and its effects. The trustees' understanding of what is, and what could be, in the school is also drawn from their community. However, the ways in which that community has an input to that understanding and the decisionmaking that results are not so specified as is the board-staff relationship.

In 2001, ERO found in its 621 reviews (not conducted within the framework above) that boards were more likely to comply with legislation (85%), than performance management (74%), or self-review (69%). 'Particular strengths were reported in schools' relationships with parents and communities, and between the board, principal and staff' (Ministry of Education 2002, p. 57). ERO has not yet undertaken the kind of analysis which OFSTED made of the relationship between (its criteria of) effective governance and student achievement. Such analysis may be more possible in future, although there may be limits on what it can establish, which I will return to.

In NZCER's recent report on the first phase of its study of sustainable school improvement, we found that these relationships were useful to schools (Mitchell, Cameron & Wylie, 2002). They were more to the fore in the schools which had to confront crises of falling rolls and staff morale after poor and publically reported ERO reviews. Board members, particularly chairs, were important links to the community in changing community perceptions of the school, as well as contributing behind the scenes to the knowledge and effort of school staff in analysing their situation, determining a path forward, and making changes. They could provide invaluable and probably immeasurable companionship for senior school staff, particularly principals: where board and staff had together identified a common path. They helped school staff feel that they mattered, that they and their effort were valued.

In schools that had a culture of continual development, the board's role could be more indirect, and less easily specified. It provided the forum for overviews of the school's work and its future, it provided the place where people had to come together and make decisions, and it ensured that professionals were aware of parents' views – and others – in their approaches. The relationships were often warm and open – not uncritical – but the criticism takes on a more positive meaning when it occurs within a shared endeavour. Boards in these schools, as in most others, also provide an important source of voluntary labour and advice and fundraising.

The issues that the New Zealand School Trustees' Association (NZSTA) has included in the *Briefing to the Incoming Minister* have remained almost identical for 1996, 1999, and 2002:

adequate funding, evidence of government commitment to school self-governance—‘through boards of trustees’ was added in 2002 - tangible commitment that it values trustees and supports trusteeship—‘by funding support services for trustees’ was added in 2002-ensuring the integrity of rural education; and the need for a review of the improvements in education delivery as a result of the *Tomorrow’s Schools* reforms. In 2002 was added ‘the provision of a permissive legislative environment that allows boards to exercise change as to the most appropriate options for their school’.

In his NZSTA president’s report on 2001, Chris France urges boards to spend some of their operational funding on their own development, so that they can continue to play a key role in schools, in the more focused framework ushered in by the Education Standards Act. The framework as such is not seen as a threat to the role of boards, so much as the possibility that it will exclude laypeople because they will not have the knowledge needed to develop the new plans and achievement targets, and align those with their budget decisions.

Trusteeship must stand up and play its part in achieving improved learning outcomes by improving its governance skills. Either that or stand back and let the educational professionals control your families’ educational destinies by simply rubber stamping what teachers, principals, and the Ministry propose!....

(NZSTA Annual report, 2002, p. 7).

The introduction of the Education Standards Act signals a profound change in the responsibilities and expectations of stakeholders and the potential for a huge shift in the relationships stakeholders must have with government or risk losing their ability to be effective partners in the education sector...the Education Standards Act is a wonderful opportunity for locally managed schools to be truly that, but the opportunity needs trustees on the ground to make it happen. You, the average trustee, must ensure the Ministry fulfills its role of indirect support by making sure you govern well and take the governance decisions that are yours to take, and ensure you are doing everything possible to enable your principal to manage well. Achieve that and the Ministry’s only job becomes that of supporting you! (ibid, p. 8).

There is nothing in the Ministry’s 2002 *Briefing for the Incoming Minister* to suggest that the existence or role of boards of trustees are under threat, though there is certainly more about the need for greater alignment of goals and focus on student achievement throughout the system. Positive mention is made of clusters and collaborative arrangements, and of the importance of educational institutions becoming more networked:

‘...recognising that self-management does not mean self-sufficiency; a change in approach from simple competition to selective collaboration; focusing on the learner, and in particular, on how best to provide high quality educational opportunities, rather than focussing on how to build and protect a particular institution- brokering opportunities for learners rather than seeking to meet all educational needs within the institution’s own resources.’

(Ministry of Education 2002b, p. 54).

This emphasis on networking and collaboration is not so evident in the NZSTA briefing notes or President’s report: and it points to the continuing difficulty which the Ministry of Education has with the inward-school focus of boards: a focus which it has to be said is consistent with the Ministry of Education’s summary of board’s key roles, other than perhaps the board’s responsibility to represent ‘taxpayers’ as well as parents’ interests.

Both the Ministry's 2001 report on the school sector and its briefing for the incoming Minister place a high premium on building professional capability, in order to raise student achievement.

Edmonton

I want to turn now to a school system based on school self-management, but without governing school boards with the kind of authority found in New Zealand, Chicago, or England. In a recent journalistic account, Edmonton, Alberta, is now regarded as one of the success stories of school self-management (Young 2001). There is one board of trustees for the district of 209 schools, consisting of nine trustees elected by all residents of the district. The following indicates that it is seen as part of the Albertan government.

School boards are agents of the [Alberta] legislature and as such, have certain obligations to perform and certain powers to carry out their tasks. In keeping with the theory that government is most effective when it is placed closest to the people being governed, local people elect trustees to act for the legislature in the local community. In this sense, the trustee is the bastion of democracy, government for the people, by the people. (Alberta School Boards Association, Policy handbook December 2000).

This board of trustees appoints the district school superintendent. Schools have advisory councils, but the principal carries sole responsibility for his or her school. The district school superintendent appoints principals, evaluates a third of the principals each year, and visits schools regularly. He also sets priorities, informed by the 13 principals on a superintendent's council, who meet with him and two 'central-services department heads to talk about district issues and policies and provide feedback on pending decisions" (ibid). It analyses achievement results, sets targets for improvement, and shares best practice. This council also attends all the board of trustees' meetings. The membership of this council changes yearly.

There is also a strong emphasis on bringing principals out of schools to work within the central district office on projects such as district-wide curriculum changes, and on providing mentors and ongoing support. Unlike other Canadian and US school districts, Edmonton has no trouble filling its principal vacancies. Young quotes one school principal:

Projects that bring school leaders and teachers together districtwide are important, even in a site-based system, she said. "Being given ownership does not in any way disenfranchise you from being a district player... we're bringing principals together on a collaborative mission. Then we do go back to our sites and move it along uniquely with a sense that we are not going it alone."

So here is a system which relies on school-site management, but which has also ensured – more recently than in earlier days - that there are real tasks related to curriculum and student achievement which give school managers a responsibility and role beyond their own school. The central district office works with school managers: both are seen as part of the one system. The district superintendent and the board of trustees are clearly responsible for policy decisions, but these can be well informed because of the regular contact the superintendent has with schools, focused on their work. The board of trustees is seen as part of the Albertan government. How it influences Albertan government policy is less clear. It is

at the district level that the principle of subsidiarity comes to rest, and not, as in New Zealand, at the school level.

The challenge now

The benefit of having boards at the school level is that they do enhance the connections between schools and their parents and community. They play a more modest role than that envisaged by either those espousing a managerialist model or those who thought that the inclusion of parents in school governance would lead to new educational structures or involve more parents directly in their child's education. I am not sure that it will ever be possible to statistically separate out the contribution of boards of trustees to student achievement, since that contribution is largely to the school culture. School culture is the expression and outcome of many processes, and does not originate solely with the board of trustees. Boards have a key role in allocating resources, but it is difficult to trace direct links between resource allocation and student achievement.⁵ So being able to statistically locate and size the contribution of boards of trustees should not be the arbiter of whether boards of trustees are worthwhile.

The flip side of the local attachment of boards of trustees is that it precludes contributions to the area or the system as a whole. This is not simply a matter of attitude, or workload: there are no systemic processes in which either boards of trustees or educators can or must take wider responsibilities. Here the account of Edmonton raised some key questions for me about how our system could develop further, not by making either the individual school or the central agency the arbiter of how all things should be arranged or funded, but by taking a more systemic, organic approach.⁶

On the face of it, the Edmonton system has managed to bring schools and the central agency together, in a common endeavour, without in any way losing the sense of local purpose which is so vital. The other three systems have a tension running through them which often opposes boards and the central agency, and one school against another. The Ministry is moving from a single focus on policy to a more complex role, offering more support for schools, but mostly on an individual basis. It is providing some support for schools to collaborate, but on a largely ad hoc basis, leaving much up to individual schools and the people in them. Workloads alone preclude much of what could be done more usefully in concert.⁷

⁵ Vignoles A, Levacic R, Walker J, Machin S and Reynolds D (2000) *The Relationship Between Resource Allocation and Pupil Attainment: A Review*. Department for Education and Employment Research Brief No. 228. The Stationery Office, United Kingdom, www.dfes.gov.uk/research/re_brief/RB228.doc

⁶ The role of the district superintendent in principal appointment, appraisal, and shifting principals between schools to match their skills with the needs of a school at a particular point in its development also raises questions about whether this kind of approach would serve New Zealand better than leaving appointments to individual boards. The Edmonton approach ensures that an understanding of the educational needs of a school can be fully taken into account. Our current system, where boards are advised to use an external expert, but need not, and where the expert's role is limited to advice, may mean that schools do not always get the principals they need.

⁷ Most subject associations have declined since 1989, which means that a vital way for educators to work together to develop their understanding and teaching has dried up. Moderation of assessments has provided a new way for teachers to work together, but it is focused on assessment, and not always on the deeper issues of purpose and the connections between teaching approaches and understanding.

Will support and collaboration still based on individual schools be enough to foster continued development in teaching and learning, and understanding of the infrastructure and processes needed to sustain that? I believe we need some real tasks to bring people to work together across schools, and levels of the system, to share in common responsibilities. Instead of the current model of central translation of policy into practice, and then disseminating it from the centre, or undertaking lengthy but often vague consultations, we could start with working groups of central agency officials (local and national level), educators and trustees to develop a shared understanding (or `ownership') which can underpin the development of workable models and guidance. It is too much to expect that substantial progress in learning and teaching can arise or be embedded by schools working inwardly, without the critical debate about purpose, and the stimulus and knowledge that comes from wider connections. Boards need this understanding too: the local focus needs to be balanced with the wider horizon. We could also involve boards in decisionmaking and responsibility for the allocation of resources for their area: not in terms of representatives trying to get the most for their own school, but in terms of ensuring the wisest use of the resources for the students and communities in that area.

It seems to me that making this balance between local and systemic, and developing a more interwoven approach is the real challenge now.

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