

Improving learning opportunities

Why schools can't do it on their own

CATHY WYLIE

In this article Cathy Wylie, a chief researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, provides an account of New Zealand's education system from the introduction of self-managing schools under *Tomorrow's Schools* through to the present day. Dr Wylie draws on her recent book *Vital Connections* to critically examine the assumptions and structures that have underpinned self-managing schools. Her book describes the many ways in which schools are disconnected from the Ministry of Education and from one another. She suggests that much stronger connections and relationships are needed, locally and centrally, to address the fundamental challenges that schools face today, especially with regard to improving the educational futures of "priority learner groups".

When David Lange introduced *Tomorrow's Schools* in 1988, he said it was "one of the most important proposals for education reform ever announced by any New Zealand government". He also said that *Tomorrow's Schools* "will lead to improved learning opportunities for the children of this country. The reformed administration will be sufficiently flexible and responsive to meet the particular needs of Māori education" (Minister of Education, 1988).

This reformed administration made schools not only self-managing, but also positioned them as stand-alone units. Principals and teachers were primarily accountable to their own board of trustees. Connections with the new Ministry of Education were focused on accessing funding or providing information, rather than gaining and sharing knowledge useful for developing teaching and learning. Instead of ongoing relationships with locally based Ministry staff who could use their knowledge of a school and its context to provide both support and challenge, external feedback on a school's teaching

and its organisation came only once every 3 years, in ERO reviews. In the 1990s, these reviews were focused on compliance with regulations, and though principals were keen to have external advice, such advice was seen as counter to ERO's function as an independent evaluator.

Schools did not only lose connections with the government agencies that had been focused on teaching and learning. Schools lost connections with one another. Because the reforms emphasised parental choice of schools, on the basis of the assumption that competition for students would sharpen school practice, schools were often reluctant to share their knowledge and teaching resources. School clusters did not emerge without additional Ministry funding, and often they have lasted only as long as that funding. In the NZCER national surveys that began in 1989, the first year of self-managing schools, teachers most desired and least experienced form of professional development was to work with teachers in other schools. Though there

has been an important and welcome focus on whole-school professional development in the past 10 years or so, this kind of interaction is still something that teachers do not experience as often as they wish.

The information we have indicates that the radical reform announced by David Lange has struggled to really improve educational opportunities. For example, over the first decade of *Tomorrow's Schools* there was no improvement in Māori and Pasifika retention rates in secondary school, or in qualification success rates. It took a change to the qualification framework to make a substantial difference: something beyond the power of individual schools and teachers, no matter how dedicated they were. Two key factors that limited schools' ability to improve outcomes for what are now termed "priority learner groups" were the competition between schools and the limited scope to learn from successful practices. Competition between schools, and the ability of schools to act in their own self-interest in the 1990s, meant that often schools seeking to serve their own students or grow their roll did so at the expense of other schools and other students. It was also difficult for schools to share their practice and to learn from one another about effective ways to support the learning of these groups of learners. The failure to make a significant difference to educational outcomes has led the current Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, to talk of "addressing system failure of learners who are Māori, Pasifika, have special education needs, and/or are from low socio-economic backgrounds" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 2).

But the basic building blocks of *Tomorrow's Schools* produced a "system" that is in many ways thin and fragmented, highly dependent on the capability and networks of individuals and individual schools. Knowledge, experience and links are unevenly and unreliably distributed. This system lacks the kind of knowledge-sharing and connection-building that fuel deep and wide development. The question I want to

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How schools became disconnected from central and local support

When I recently retraced the origins and shaping of our current system, I was particularly struck by how little consideration there was of the infrastructure needed either to support school self-management, or to ensure that useful knowledge could be shared and built across the system. The previous system comprised primary schools nested in 10 education boards, and secondary schools already exercising quite a lot of self-management. It had interwoven ongoing support—and challenge—for teachers and schools within the inspectorate and advisory services. For most people in schools, the issues with this interweaving were not about the fact that it existed, but that demand outstripped the money available, and sometimes the quality of support and challenge they sought was not available. The inspectorate was linked into the Department of Education's head office, and it was able to resource some innovative joint work that saw teachers sharing responsibility with the inspectorate and advisers to develop resources, professional development and curriculum. Again, funding limited what could be done.

But for the architects of the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms, this interweaving was suspect, because it did not separate advice from evaluation and judgement. Separation of functions was the core of the reforms, in line with the generic separation of policy and operations in other parts of the public service. Schools were stood alone, so they could be held individually accountable for their work. The result was that schools were left largely on their own to make sense of their new responsibilities. The kind of connections that are needed in an educational system to support common learning, shared understandings and goals, and capacity development were seen to compromise the realisation of school self-management. Indeed, the Lough report of 1990 warned the Ministry to stay its distance from schools, even if schools were seeking its advice. The Ministry's "hands off" approach might have been welcome to some principals and boards, but it was frustrating for many others. It meant that the Ministry became associated in schools' minds with compliance activities rather than educational knowledge or learning. It also meant that

schools could get into difficulty either because they kept things to themselves, or because they refused help where it was offered. The Ministry was not positioned to have the knowledge or relationships it would need to help a school getting into difficulty. The ability of the Ministry to develop policy and to design and implement initiatives was likewise hampered by its lack of operational knowledge.

This siloed approach also resulted in splitting up the Department of Education into many agencies, with the Ministry of Education responsible for overall policy. Things that should be developed together went to different agencies. For example, curriculum development stayed with the Ministry, but qualification development went to NZQA. The new government agencies were also lean, and had lost some of the knowledge they needed, particularly for the major curriculum work of the 1990s.

This artificial separation between the Ministry of Education and schools also made it difficult for the kind of joint work that had occurred at the national level in the previous system around curriculum and teacher development. It meant that the Ministry had no clear role or ongoing built-in relationships with schools or the advisory services at the district or regional level where it could play a knowledge-building and supportive role. The interconnections of the previous era that often enabled practice to travel across schools no longer had authoritative anchorage. The Picot taskforce—whose report led to *Tomorrow's Schools*—did see that schools should not be isolated. But it thought that such interconnections would be made by schools voluntarily clustering together to share practice, resources and professional development. But unless we position and support schools differently, so that they can act within a less competitive or self-regarding framework, we are unlikely to see schools working more collaboratively.

Two other potentially important checks and balances to the centrality of the self-managed school, and the accompanying disconnection with any government agency, were recommended by the Picot taskforce. They made it into the *Tomorrow's Schools* reform, but in forms that were soon watered down since they did not fit with the purist model of self-management. Community education forums were intended to discuss local provision of education as a whole, along with any issues arising, and provide a way for “flaxroots” thinking and analysis to reach the government. But—in keeping with the purist model—participation in these forums was to be voluntary. That meant there was no way at the local level to systematically analyse provision in the light of student and community needs, or plan ahead; no way to see synergies and opportunities to make the education dollar

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(increasingly falling behind rising expectations of both community and government) stretch further, or to share and build knowledge of how to better meet student needs. A handful of these community education forums were called in the very early years of *Tomorrow's Schools*, where one school's expansion plans were clearly occurring at the cost of neighbouring schools, but none resulted in a more rational approach to provision.

The initial incarnation of the Education Review Office would have seen multidisciplinary teams, including a current principal and community representative, visit each school every 2 years. Reviews would have been on the basis of the school's own charter, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and making recommendations, with a follow-up visit a term later to see what progress was being made. Schools still with serious issues at that stage would be revisited 6 months later; with boards dismissed if no progress was evident. This approach respected school self-management—putting the individual charter at the heart of a review—but it also offered advice and connections, and the opportunity for cross-fertilisation. The Lough review put an end to this approach. The 1990s Education Review Office evaluation approach that followed did not try to provide a hybrid model of review and advice.

It is telling, however, that the emphasis ERO did take on evaluation per se, in terms of legal requirements, was criticised by schools. It gradually gave way to reviews that include school-decided as well as national priorities. These reviews provide recommendations and—for those schools not meeting the criteria for 3-yearly reviews—some additional ongoing advice. As a result, schools are more positive about their ERO reviews. Nonetheless, the NZCER national surveys indicate that many principals would prefer ongoing formative discussions with a credible peer about their school's annual plan and progress. This shows a preference for ongoing connection, for a relationship with someone who knows the school well, and who can provide that most useful combination for ongoing development: informed challenge and support.

Recent strategies to reconnect schools with the Ministry and with one another

Recently, the Ministry of Education has begun to try to reconnect itself with schools at the local level, in three different ways. First, each school now has a senior adviser, whose role is in fact to discuss with the principal the school's progress on its annual targets and longer-term goals. The NZCER mid-2012 national survey of secondary schools showed that principals' experience of this was very varied (Wylie, 2013).

Secondly, the local Ministry of Education office now also allocates Ministry-funded professional learning, prioritising on the basis of school-identified need, as part of schools' annual planning process. Initial school experience of this process was more negative than positive, with issues of timing and mismatches of need and what was offered, as well as schools experiencing a loss of previous support if they did not fit the Ministry's priorities.

Thirdly, schools whose annual reports show low achievement levels or whose rolls include substantial proportions of the Government's priority groups are offered student achievement practitioners: initial experience is also variable. In the competitive environment, schools may also be reluctant to accept support that is based on "low achievement", and comes as a distinct named role, rather than occurring within existing relationships. Initial experience here too is very variable.

Another variable has been the differences of the quality and relevance of support provided. Unless Ministry staff can offer useful knowledge and fresh insight, the new links will feel like compliance. They will invite defensiveness rather than build the trust and openness that is sorely needed in our system.

The need to fundamentally reconnect schools locally and centrally

The new Ministry-school links are still one-to-one. They do not position schools within ongoing learning networks, where schools with common challenges could share their experiences and successes, so that individual schools do not have to reinvent the wheel. They do not provide regular forums where local principals and the Ministry could review their area's progress, learning and

issues together, sharing planning and responsibility for the area as a whole. The local Ministry offices still do not have the responsibility and authority they need to take an area-wide perspective that could do two things. First, this wider view could make more of self-managed schools than each school can on its own. Secondly, a broader Ministry focus could address the issues that are beyond the capacity of individual schools to solve, such as ensuring that all schools serving low-income and rural communities can attract and retain the teachers they need, or redrawing enrolment zones so that there is less social segregation in our schools. More even school socioeconomic mixes are associated with gains for students from low-income homes (Willms, 2010). This is a powerful lever to address the needs of priority learner groups. Our fragmented system makes it harder than it should be for teachers of students from those groups.

New Zealand is not the only country with self-managed schools. But we are the only country whose whole system is based on self-managed schools left to stand alone, without nesting them within a district, without connecting them in ways that allow them to both gain from and contribute to other schools, to wider and deeper learning. I think we have hobbled the growth of our system as a whole as a result. If we are really going to improve the learning opportunities for *all* our students, then we need to reposition self-managing schools and reconnect them.

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