

# Introduction

The principal of an award-winning Canadian school raised his eyebrows and said in some bemusement, “You do *what?*”

“Yes,” I said, “our schools are self-managing, like your school, and every school has its own board of trustees elected by parents, and they employ the principal.”

“You have no district?”

“No, nothing like that. Each school gets its funding directly from the Ministry of Education, and a separate government agency reviews them every 3 years, more often if there are issues.”

The principal shook his head. “We were going down that route some 20 years back, but it was too costly in terms of competition between schools. No-one was thinking of the system as a whole. We were wasting a lot of effort, spreading ourselves too thin. Our district board canvassed parents and they didn’t want the responsibility. They wanted to know how their kids’ school was going, and to have some input, but not to employ people.”

“We have national collective agreements, there are handbooks, a national school trustees’ association funded by the government to provide advice, schools employ consultants ...”

He shook his head again. “So where is the career path for school leaders? How do you make sure you have enough good leaders and support them, and how do you get people working together?”

My turn to shake my head. “It varies.”

“I bet,” he said, and then we moved on to talk about the ways in which the Edmonton public school district operates, so that its self-managing schools make their own decisions but are also part of communities of sharing and joint responsibility. It wasn’t a system in which everything worked without criticism, but it had achieved gains for its students, and it had the capacity to keep developing and meeting new challenges.

At the end of that intensive week in 2007 talking to Edmonton’s school principals and district office staff I was both wistful and excited. Excited when I thought of what was possible, of where we could take our own self-managed schools. Wistful when I thought of our own situation in New Zealand, where “it varies” was a diplomatic way of saying it was too often the luck of the draw.

The school-level freedom promised in 1988 in *Tomorrow's Schools*<sup>1</sup>—the radical shake-up of our education system that cut many connections between schools and the government agency responsible for education—did augment an already existing latitude in terms of curriculum and programme at the school level. But all too often this freedom means reinventing the wheel. Promising new approaches may be confined to the school that developed them because there are no regular channels for knowledge to travel, to be tried in different contexts and supported systematically. It can mean that educators don't know what they don't know, so in all good faith they continue or embark on teaching practices that are not effective.

It has also not been hard for a school to get into difficulties, either without anyone else knowing until things were bad or, what is worse, knowing but being impotent to help a school that did not seek or want help. We have made school self-management into a barrier, not the channel of responsiveness envisaged in 1988. It has taken almost two generations of students before we have seen shifts in student achievement. Only recently has it been possible to start to see some real progress in Māori student engagement and achievement levels, although meeting “the particular needs of Māori education” had been a key aim of the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms (Minister of Education, 1988, p. iv).

I come from perhaps the last New Zealand generation where the inbuilt inequity of School Certificate (with marks scaled so that half the candidates had to fail) was not widely challenged because there were jobs and interesting work with good pay that did not require a secondary-level qualification. Now the education system must ensure that school engages all students, and that all the country's students—not just those like me, with book-clad homes and unquestioned assumptions that education would continue past secondary schooling—leave school with lifelong-learning dispositions and well-exercised minds that can keep learning in a world that keeps changing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tomorrow's Schools* did away with the 10 education boards that had employed primary school staff, and where Department of Education staff advising and inspecting primary schools were based. Secondary schools already managed their own budgets; *Tomorrow's Schools* extended that responsibility to primary schools. The policy also gave parents a greater role in school governance, through each school's parents electing their own board of trustees, the body legally responsible for the financial and educational wellbeing of the school. It also emphasised parental choice of school, as a lever for school performance. At the same time, the Department of Education was split into the Ministry of Education, what became the Education Review Office, the Qualifications Authority, and several smaller government agencies. The policy was designed to improve the flexibility and responsiveness of schools to their students, and thus to improve educational opportunities. Chapter 4 describes the *Tomorrow's Schools* policy change in more detail.

This is not just a matter of fairness, which was a major concern when *Tomorrow's Schools* began. It is also a matter of national viability and wellbeing. As economists and businesspeople increasingly began to realise in the early years of the 21st century, we need much higher knowledge and skill levels across all social groups, along with the ability to work together in new ways to ensure the use of existing knowledge and the creation of new knowledge.

What we need from our public education system now, and for the even more challenging times ahead, is therefore even more demanding than it was in 1988, when the Government put its faith in schools acting for themselves. In New Zealand, self-managed schools were not positioned within webs of well-informed support and challenge, an environment of knowledge-building in which to solve shared problems and advance teaching practice, well-constructed frameworks of thinking and processing, a shared purpose and responsibility, a good infrastructure. Many of those involved in the reforms did not appreciate at the time how important these interconnections are to building and sustaining good-quality public education.

When we look at what has been achieved over the past two decades, it is in the relatively few initiatives and policies that support these kinds of interconnections that we find some progress. The value of vital connections of this kind—ones that support sustainable development in individual institutions and a sense of common purpose and responsibility—is also increasingly clear in international research. This research shows the benefits of positioning individual schools within more collective systems. Now there is a substantial body of robust analysis that we can use to rethink our self-managing schools approach, as we need to do if we are to create the dynamic learning system we need in New Zealand.

This book tells the story of our self-managing schools so far and the lessons we can learn from this, on the whole, less-than-successful turn. It looks at the frameworks, conditions and connections schools and teachers need if they are to meet our continually growing expectations of education. Chapter 1 looks at the purpose that our self-managing schools should achieve, what we expect of education and what lies behind good teaching. To understand the changes of the past 20 or 30 years we need to go back to how our schools were supported and challenged before *Tomorrow's Schools*, and the strengths and tensions of the previous system. Chapter 2 describes the latitude and productive connections with education officials that schools actually enjoyed before school self-management, something all too often ignored because of the diagnosis of 'over centralisation' that was central to the reforms. It also

shows how this latitude may have made schools confident about taking on school self-management, but that school leadership and cultures were not as strong as they would need to be to really make the most of school self-management.

Chapter 3 depicts a system that OECD examiners in 1983 found had substantial strengths as well as tensions that needed political will to address. These OECD examiners noted that New Zealand spending on its schools was lower per student than other comparable systems—a pattern that has persisted and remains the case today. This chapter describes the progress being made before *Tomorrow's Schools* to address the tensions our schools faced, and some of the gaps in knowledge that would make it difficult to do so—gaps that were ignored when it came to expecting so much of school self-management.

In Chapter 4 I explore why it was that school self-management seemed the answer to the tensions that educators and officials had been grappling with since the 1970s, and why it took the radical form it did, largely because education administration was tackled in the same generic way as other parts of the public sector that were being reformed. We were—and still are—the only country that has built its national school system on schools operating on their own.

The costs of this separation of schools from government, of 'operations' from 'policy', coupled with the haste of the changes when they occurred and the loss of knowledge and momentum in some key areas of education, are evident in fragmentation and deepening mistrust and defensiveness through the 1990s. Chapter 5 also describes how the new school administrative roles consumed attention and energy that were needed elsewhere, and how the Ministry found it could not in fact step back from working with schools, particularly those struggling with the new responsibilities. The 1990s also saw a new national curriculum framework, with the rapid rollout of new curriculum for different areas and efforts to move to a new national qualification framework. But student engagement and achievement remained static overall. Chapter 6 explores why this was: what the new system lacked in the way of knowledge-building and connections that could change teaching and learning.

By the end of the first decade of the new system, seeds had been sown for the Ministry of Education, working with educators, to develop new frameworks that would better support changes in teaching and learning—changes that would allow schools to better meet student needs. This was the knowledge, with support and better connections, that allowed many schools to develop

in ways that self-management alone could not achieve. At the same time, however, school self-management in schools without any interconnections remained the prime vehicle for change. Chapter 7 looks at the increasingly evident challenges to ensuring every school could have sound leadership and governance, and the continuing difficulty of funding growing expectations. It also traces what was done to change the ways schools worked to make the most of their resources.

Chapter 8 describes shifts in the professional culture of many primary schools, and the role of Ministry-shaped or Ministry-funded professional development and joint work between schools, researchers and professional developers, which brought and created new knowledge that schools were keen to use. It also looks at the new challenges encountered by schools that are working hard to change their practices, particularly schools in low-income areas. Chapter 9 describes how secondary schools continue to face some of the same tensions in engaging adolescents in learning that were identified well before *Tomorrow's Schools*, and the gains they have been able to make through the introduction in 2002 of a fairer qualification structure, the NCEA.<sup>2</sup>

Considerable progress has been made over recent years. The question now is whether we have 'plucked all the low-hanging fruit' with the way schools currently operate. Chapter 9 includes an analysis of patterns of New Zealand achievement on the international PISA<sup>3</sup> assessments. On the one hand, ours is a relatively efficient system: we continue to spend less per student than other countries also rated as high performers. On the other hand, the PISA comparisons show the issues we face related to social inequality, inequality which grew over the 1990s and 2000s, making the work of New Zealand schools and teachers more demanding.

In Chapter 10 I conclude with the lessons I have learnt from writing this book, especially through comparing the good intentions and bold statements of what would be achieved with what actually resulted. Putting that analysis together with the knowledge base we now have, here and internationally, I am convinced of the pressing need to rethink our self-managing schools, to locate them in more constructive connections with government. That means rethinking the nature of how government works with schools and educators at the local and national levels, and ensuring that policy is inclusive and better based on robust evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> National Certificates of Educational Achievement.

<sup>3</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment.

The *Tomorrow's Schools* system is simply not strong enough to bear the weight of our expectations for schools and learning. If we continue as we are, we will not be able to make the progress we need to make. We are unnecessarily handicapping ourselves. The conclusion zeroes in on the fundamental flaws of our system and offers a new setting for self-managed schools.

In writing this book I drew on my own experience as a researcher who has tracked and written and thought about the impact of *Tomorrow's Schools* since it began. I came into educational research in 1987 with a background in wider social policy and a keen interest in how policy has a bearing on the reality that organisations and individuals make. For me, policy is not just something that happens in buildings in Wellington, something abstract and separate from everyday life.

Linked to this interest in policy and its effects is an appreciation derived from my doctoral study in social anthropology of just how important concepts of freedom and equality are in New Zealand society, to the point where different interpretations lead to sometimes fierce clashes (Wylie, 1980). Both of these concepts played a role in the development of self-managing schools, and the expectations of them, with the same words promising different things to different people.

My own expectations of *Tomorrow's Schools* were cautiously open. With other colleagues at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), I had reviewed the existing educational research on educational opportunities and outcomes for a range of different social groups. Our conclusion was that there were concerning inequities in the system (Benton, 1988; Wylie, 1988a). I was asked to provide an overview of education policy and public views on education for the Royal Commission on Social Policy—a crash course for someone new to education in the issues identified by various inquiries and reports, and the existing research on effective teaching, the role of assessment and qualifications, and the importance of what would later be called 'student engagement'.

This work for the Royal Commission also brought me within the orbit of the Picot taskforce and a discussion with its chief executive on its intentions to make schools self-managing. I knew from the existing overseas examples of self-managing schools that it was important to design funding and staffing systems that did not disadvantage schools serving students in low-income and rural areas; that treating schools equally in the sense of treating all alike would no more remedy disadvantage than treating all students as if they were identical. It seemed important, too, that goals of improving educational opportunities for

groups who were not as well served as others, such as Māori and those from low-income homes, were shared across the system and were used to hold schools accountable (Wylie, 1988a). But, like others at the time, I took for granted that there would be a supportive infrastructure for schools' work.

As the detail of *Tomorrow's Schools* became clear, I saw how important it was to have ongoing evaluation of what this radical change was producing. Fortunately, my institution, the NZCER, had the independence to pursue in 1989 what became a regular series of national surveys of primary schools, and from 2003 secondary schools, gaining the perspectives of principals, teachers, trustees and parents. These surveys have served as the backbone for a range of connected studies I have undertaken over the years, including principal and governance roles, how schools manage their finances, how they review and plan their work, how schools change their teaching practices and the way teachers work together, and how schools improve student engagement and achievement.

I have also thought about the way our system works by taking part in evaluations of particular programmes, initiatives and policies, and in inquiries into whether bulk funding (where schools receive funding for staffing within their operational grant, instead of having staffing paid for centrally) improved Māori learning opportunities, the role of school competition in our system and in other countries, and a review of the Special Education 2000 policy for the Government. All through this work I have sought evidence that would test whether what was intended in policy actually occurred: that the assumptions behind the policy, about how it would work to achieve its purpose, were well grounded. I continue to be optimistic that we will learn from such work and that well-researched evidence and analysis can feed better policy, though this optimism has been sorely tested at times over the past two decades or so.

This book draws, then, on more than 20 years of seeking to know how our schools were working and why, and how well positioned they were for what we needed them to provide all our students. It also draws on official publications, a wide range of reports and studies, and personal accounts. During 2011, when I was fortunate to be able to focus on this book full time as the J D Stout Fellow at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, the material I considered was substantial. I read and thought about far more than I could directly use in this book. Within the braided river of *Tomorrow's Schools* there are two important developments in particular that are beyond the focus of this book, but whose stories need to be written by those with in-depth understanding.

First, kura kaupapa Māori have become an established part of the educational landscape: it is once more possible for Māori to use their own language in educational settings that nurture Māori identity, and with evidence of considerable success in secondary qualifications. Yet the demands of school self-management and the absence of a strong infrastructure mean that these gains have been hard won and are not present in every kura.

Second, students with special needs are now better integrated into classrooms, though their needs throw into often uncomfortable relief the need for better integration of knowledge into school practice, better integration of services working with schools and parents, and the difficulties in our current system of ensuring that all self-managing schools can give these students the acceptance and learning they need.

This book also draws on interviews undertaken in 2011 with some 30 educators, officials, researchers and school advisers, people who I knew would provide me with a range of perspectives on the gains from school self-management and the possibilities for New Zealand education to make further progress. Most are known to me through contact over the years in research projects and policy discussions. They are thoughtful people who are not just mouthing a cliché when they talk about trying to make a difference to children's learning. They are people who have lived through the changes of the past 20 or so years, and who have worked hard in various roles over that time to make the most of the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms. My understanding deepened through our discussions, and their reflections provide vivid illustrations of the reforms in practice. These are by nature optimistic, energetic people—as so many educators are. But they were largely unsure whether the gains they had seen could be sustained within the current structures and frameworks, let alone spread further so that every school can provide the quality of learning we want for all our students.

Despite many people's efforts, and some changes in the frameworks and support for schools, the issues self-managing schools set out to address remain with us. Promising developments that would have addressed some of these issues were halted in 1989 as all the attention went onto making the new structures work. There has been a price to pay for taking school self-management so literally and making it the kernel of our schooling system. Failing to learn from what self-managing schools can and can't achieve, and why, is wasteful. As a country, we cannot afford to pursue ineffective policy that does not make the most of our public funds and our human potential. Continuing as we are will not successfully address the continuing gaps in

student learning. It is high time to change our education system, to make it more dynamic. I hope this book and the recommendations with which it concludes contribute to a much more productive phase in the story of New Zealand's self-managed schools.