

## Chapter 5

# A fragmented freedom: Schools in the 1990s

We got distracted by the new sexy stuff: finance, property, staffing. Somewhere about 1992 or 1993, maybe even 1994, over the summer holidays, we were having a family barbeque. And my brother in law with no experience in education at all said to me, 'How is this *Tomorrow's Schools* going?' And I said, 'It's great,' 'cause I loved it, I used to find the old system restrictive and I found the new one liberating. I said, 'I'm appointing staff, I'm moving budgets around, I've got property projects on the go, I'm busy as. It's the best thing that's ever happened.'

'Oh that's good,' he said. 'Are the teachers teaching any better, or, more importantly, are the kids learning any better?' I said without even thinking, 'I don't know, I haven't got a clue, I'm too busy running the place.' That answer rattled around in my head, and as I was going home I said to my wife, 'I should know, and I don't because we're doing this other stuff.' And I think we were all like that, or most of us.

What gave us a systemic sort of wake-up call were the ERO reports of Mangere, Otara and the East Coast that said, there is systemic failure here.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter focuses on how schools learnt to think of themselves as separate enterprises in the 1990s, through their new responsibilities and the absence of interconnections. It charts how principals learnt to lead self-managing schools, and why it was that finance and property so dominated their attention in the formative years of *Tomorrow's Schools*. Competition for students to ensure school viability and reputation was a reality for schools, particularly in some areas, and contributed to schools' sense of themselves as separate enterprises. Boards of trustees also had their efforts focused on their own school.

Because the policy-oriented Ministry of Education did not have the role of active school support and challenge, it struggled when difficulties that

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, July 2011, with former primary principal.

schools were experiencing became public or schools sought its help. The centrality of school self-management in policy meant that any connections with schools had to be framed as indirect or temporary. New initiatives were therefore advanced by asking schools to cluster together to compete for additional funding. ERO increasingly raised concerns about uneven school quality through the 1990s, but it did not work with the Ministry to improve the support given to schools, making a virtue instead of its independences—separation—from the education sector and the other government agencies. It was a decade showing the increasing costs at a national level of the fragmentation of the schooling system that came with *Tomorrow's Schools*.

## Principals and their new role

Primary principals, whose role had expanded most, found it easiest to enjoy their new expanded role if:

- their schools were large enough to employ administrative support
- they did not have responsibility for a class (but only a third of primary principals were non-teaching principals)
- their boards had relevant expertise and also trusted their principal
- they had no difficulty finding and keeping good-quality staff (both teaching and support)
- their schools were located in areas with steady or growing student population (Wylie, 1997a).

In such fortunate circumstances, school self-management allowed decision making that could focus on improvement rather than cutting back or making do. The hours a principal worked were likely to be long—the average work week for primary principals jumped markedly over the first year of *Tomorrow's Schools* to around 56 hours. For principals whose schools had fortunate circumstances, there was reward for this additional effort.

But school self-management was sown on uneven ground. Many principals did not enjoy such a fortunate combination of circumstances, particularly those who led schools in poor or rural areas, often the schools serving Māori students, who were especially meant to benefit from *Tomorrow's Schools*.

In 1992 Peter Ramsay, who had served on the Picot taskforce, brought together some of the research on the initial years of *Tomorrow's Schools* in an article for the Principals' Federation journal. Overall, he thought that

while the changes had often been accompanied by “shambles”, at the cost of high principal workload, most principals and trustees were optimistic about *Tomorrow’s Schools*. But he concluded with this warning:

If research has one message to tell us, it is that the quality learning in our schools depends very much on the professional qualities of the school leaders. My greatest single fear is that as principals have moved away from their professionalism to an understanding of the mysteries of Apple Mac and of the accounting data bases, that we will lose the genuine thrust of the quality of New Zealand education. (Ramsay, 1992, p. 17)

The new management role of principals did erode the momentum that had been developing in the 1980s to make school cultures more collaborative and evaluative, and it would make it harder for principals to take a leading role in changes in teaching and learning—in other words, to what happens in classrooms. As one experienced principal put it:

At the time *Tomorrow’s Schools* came in, there had been a whole lot of young principals appointed in this area. That took quality practitioners out of the classroom, but the opportunity to help us lead pedagogical change was still there. After *Tomorrow’s Schools* came in, we were reduced to systems implementation and compliance, and we lost our currency.<sup>2</sup>

Even for secondary principals, who had some prior familiarity with property, funding and staffing decision making, the new *Tomorrow’s Schools* framework required significant learning—learning they had to largely initiate themselves. Here is one principal who was well connected before the reforms and confident, looking back on the early days:

It was a miracle that people survived! We learnt by the seat of our pants. I had very little support from my board in the way of advice or guidance. The Ministry provided guidelines in 1990–91. They gave a bit of framework. But I also had ERO and Ministry people visiting me to help them develop manuals! I went to the Caldwell & Spinks courses,<sup>3</sup> and courses at the College of Education. I had pretty close relations with people in the advisory service there. The local principals’ association was very important to me. I could meet colleagues and talk through issues.

There was no support from the Ministry. The Ministry was policy, and schools became the operational arm. That was fine in theory compared with practice. It

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2 Interview, June 2011, with highly experienced principal, active in principals’ groups and support over the period, and some experience of working with the Ministry of Education.

3 Australians Brian Caldwell and Jim Spinks had written an enthusiastic book about self-managing schools that was influential in the early days of *Tomorrow’s Schools*. They were funded by the Implementation Unit of the Department of Education to provide sessions on self-management around New Zealand.

assumed a lot in terms of people's understanding and national consistency—that did not occur. It meant there was a lot of reinvention of the wheel.<sup>4</sup>

There was not a complete lack of government-funded professional development and support for principals, but it was no longer systematic. Principals often needed to take the initiative, and their boards needed to be willing to fund additional costs (most professional development was not entirely free for the school or for the principal). The single systematic support was an important one. College of education advisory contracts included the provision of rural advisers to provide rural principals (who were frequently new to the role as well as more isolated) with ongoing and free support. This was often a lifeline for rural principals, and a connection to the wider world which was vital to their and their school's development. But it, too, was voluntary. Things could unravel in a school without an adviser knowing; or, if they knew, they had no authority they could use if a principal or board put up barriers.

Most professional development for principals was through contracts for which the colleges of education and other providers would tender. Evaluations of these contracts would often show variation in quality across providers. But no-one had responsibility to use this information to improve the capability of providers. There was no continuing programme of principal support (contracts for their support were not available every year, and there was no strategy for the supply of principals). The providers felt themselves to be in competition, and over time they became more reluctant to share knowledge or to work together, though evaluations and providers' own published research allowed some cross-institutional learning.

An evaluation of one of the earliest contracts for principals' professional development gives insight into the needs of principals and the shortcomings of the new approach. David Nightingale provided an account of the programmes provided by seven providers, mostly colleges of education, to 9 percent of the country's principals, within a 1992 contract "to provide professional development programmes to support principal development and curriculum leadership in primary and secondary schools". Most principals who participated were positive about their experiences. They welcomed the opportunity to focus on curriculum rather than administration. They also relished having some external expertise to look with them at their particular

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, June 2011, with an ex-principal, union representative and contributor to national curriculum and qualifications reviews, manager of an advisory service and provider of principal professional development.

school, something they felt they had lost when the inspectorate went and the advisory service was restructured (Nightingale, 1993). The more useful programmes had a more sound theoretical basis and development than others, which led them to emphasise this customised support to each school and to leave schools with processes they could develop further.

Nightingale was perturbed at the professional isolation of principals, and their lack of the essential support and challenge needed to keep developing. Two of the programmes had created school clusters, but these would need external assistance to continue, assistance that was not part of the *Tomorrow's Schools* infrastructure. It is telling that what he recommended to counter this isolation and its cost for ongoing school development did not try to build on any sharing between principals that had occurred in these professional development programmes. He did not try to recommend ways to keep schools connected, identifying common issues and trying out promising approaches to create common understanding and resources. This is not surprising: there was no systematic way for principals to work together. There was no longer any organisation or role that had the authority to bring principals together, to work with them on local issues, or to arrange for them to see in action a successful programme or approach in an area of student need they were struggling with.

Rather than joint work or systematic local connections, what Nightingale thought might be feasible was that principals should have one-on-one professional supervision from other principals, tertiary institutions, the Special Education Service (now separated from the Ministry) or private consultants. In the new era such support for their principal was something that was left up to an individual board to decide, to weigh its priority in the many competing calls on their school funding. Only in 1998 were professional standards for principals introduced and schools given a tagged sum of money to employ outside expertise for principal appraisal, if they chose not to do it themselves.

Few principals pursued one-on-one professional supervision. Most principals' access to some external review of their work was limited to the annual principal performance appraisal that boards were required to undertake, based on mutually agreed objectives. This appraisal has varied considerably in its quality and usefulness. It has been heavily reliant on who did the appraisal—which was often left up to the principal, if the board did not undertake the appraisal itself, and therefore dependent on who was locally available and known to the principal. Principals were also cautious about

what they shared in the appraisal process, even with its two-fold purpose of identifying professional development needs as well as judging performance, because the results would or could go to the board.

Appraisals were kept within a school, so there was no opportunity to gain knowledge about area or national needs that could feed into a coherent programme for principal development. ERO could see them—it has the right to see anything within a school—but ERO’s interest was in whether the appraisal process was occurring and was consistent with the school policy on appraisal, and that the school policy in turn was consistent with the National Administration Guidelines (known as the NAGs). If ERO looked at principal appraisals, it was in the context of the individual school or perhaps, later on, patterns of how appraisals were done. But ERO was not focused on the substance of those appraisals in terms of either individual school or system improvement.

Principals had to be registered teachers, but that was all. Boards usually employed external advice in their appointment of principals, but sometimes went for generic human resources advice. Advice they paid for was sometimes ignored, or not given the same weight as board views about the importance of, say, sporting interests or demonstration of a roll increase at the applicant’s current school. Boards in some areas (particularly rural) often had to take who they could get, so schools with high needs would run through a series of first-time principals, many with no school management experience. Through the 1990s the complexity of the principal’s role grew clearer, but so did the difficulty of finding sufficiently capable and energetic educators to fill that role.

## The demanding twins

Property and finance loomed large for principals from the early days. They were the two areas of school life that dominated board of trustees’ work right through the 1990s. Most of the major initiatives primary schools reported in the NZCER national survey in 1993 were related to property, not teaching and learning. This is not surprising given the poor state of many schools’ physical structures at the time of *Tomorrow’s Schools*. I sometimes wonder what might have happened in these important formative years of school self-management if school property had been in better shape when boards and principals took over: if their energy could have been able to focus more on teaching and learning, on evaluating what was happening in classrooms, on developing parents’ role in learning as well as in governance.

But school trustees' knowledge and confidence were more likely to include dealing with buildings and grounds, with many getting their own hands dirty in working bees. Sprucing up a school yielded a tangible sign that the board was now making its own decisions. It could also make a school look more attractive to prospective students and their parents. With operational funds and teaching positions decided by roll numbers, this was important. Just a few students more could also improve the principal's role markedly if they tipped the number over the threshold for the principal to become non-teaching, and therefore better able to balance the demands of school management with educational leadership.

Property management at the national level appeared to be no better in the new system, which was most evident in the lack of planning that left some Auckland schools overcrowded and some students with no local school available to them. A 1997 Deloitte report included in its criticisms of the Ministry's property management "an organisational culture which did not encourage joint problem solving, shared responsibility and consultation within the Ministry" (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 1997, pp. 39–40, cited in Boyd, 1998). This report led to some reconnection of policy and operations (schools funding) within the national office, and in the property and operations work at the district level. Even so, in 2001 the Controller and Auditor-General thought that the Ministry risked another build up of deferred maintenance by schools (this had cost \$500 million in the 1990s) if it did not regularly review board plans, monitor actual maintenance, and undertake or have boards undertake physical inspections (Controller and Auditor-General, 2001, pp. 17–19). Boards were not property experts; they needed "practical and timely advice and support" (ibid., p. 13).

Freedom to allocate operational funding certainly made principals and their boards more aware of costs, and increasingly frustrated by plans they could not afford and erosion of the funds they did receive. In 1990 only 20 percent of primary principals thought their government funding was inadequate. By 1996, after operational funding for schools had declined by around 10 percent in its purchasing power from 1989, 73 percent thought so. Though schools learned early caution around spending, 8 percent ended up in deficit for 3 years in a row over the 1991–94 period.

By 1995 locally raised funds—including the voluntary school fees (many of which were increased in the early days of *Tomorrow's Schools*), fundraising and, in secondary schools, fee-paying students from other countries—amounted to 8 percent of the total income received by primary schools and

12 percent by secondary schools. The number of foreign fee-paying students tripled between 1992 and 1997 and they became vital to the budgets of those secondary schools that could attract them.

The 1996 education budget recognised the shortfall and began a gradual increase in operational funding for schools. But it was not enough to make up for the underfunding of the initial years of *Tomorrow's Schools*, or to cover the increasing demands on school budgets. By 1999, 87 percent of primary principals thought their government funding was inadequate. Only a quarter of the primary trustees taking part in the 1999 NZCER national survey said their board had not faced financial issues or problems in the last 2 years. Administrative support staff numbers had had to increase, as did their skills, if the principal was not to spend hours on spreadsheets ('I didn't come into education to be an accountant' was a not infrequent comment from principals in the NZCER national surveys in the early 1990s), and dealing with the increased enquiries and correspondence from government agencies, businesses selling services and resources, and colleges of education and other providers of professional development, which came with schools making their own decisions.

The new curriculum statements that started rolling out in 1994 also brought new costs, as did the new secondary assessments. Computers became must-have: first for administration, then for teachers and students. Installing computers usually required cabling and rewiring. They needed maintenance and created additional printing costs. Many schools relied on internal knowledge and willingness to add new roles to existing responsibilities:

In conversations with friends who are in business, they say they'd employ a computer systems person to do all this organisation, then they'd just dump it all on them. But we don't have those people here—we have people like the HoD [Head of Department] Maths, who's running around getting as much as he can done [setting up computer systems and keeping them running], but he's still got to be the HoD Maths. (Deputy Principal, secondary school, quoted in Murfitt, 1995, p. 193)

Each school was left to conduct its own analysis of needs and find its own deals. The result would be a patchwork of computer equipment and software that would make it difficult for schools to share resources or information between themselves, or with the Ministry of Education.

## Competition between schools

There was competition between schools before *Tomorrow's Schools*, but it was not relied upon to improve the system as it was in the 1990s. The nature and



effect of competition between schools depend on the wider framework in which it occurs. Michael Fullan, one of the world's leading writers and advisers on school and system reform, describes the gains for learning that occur with "collaborative competition", whereby schools are part of the same district, supporting one another to improve, but also wanting to do as well as they individually can (Fullan, 2010, p. 38). In New Zealand, schools experienced competition in the absence of this shared purpose and work. They were not competing to improve student outcomes within a supportive environment, but to increase or maintain their own student numbers. Competition of this kind was not a useful policy lever. Instead, it often diverted school leaders and trustees from a focus on learning, and added obstacles to improvement for schools that found themselves at the bottom of the local competition, even though on an objective scale their quality of education could be as good—or had been as good—as those that fared better. Without some district oversight there will always be a school at the bottom of the local pile, a school that has more than its fair share of students who are harder to teach.

Some schools particularly suffered because of the cumulative effect of other schools' decisions. From 1991 to 1998 a school could decide its own enrolment criteria once it had the Ministry's agreement that it could impose limits to enrolments to avoid its roll going beyond its maximum (decided by the number of students its buildings could accommodate). The number of enrolment schemes leapt from 70 in 1992 to 422 in 1998. Such schemes could be used to signal desirability: here is a school that not everyone can access. It was a useful marketing tool. Schools could devise enrolment criteria that gave them the discretion to allow them to choose students who would bring the school credit, or be undemanding, or to simply take as many students as they could, without the limit of a geographic zone.

Although competition among schools was the desired outcome of student choice of schools, in reality some schools had the upper hand—as they do in most choice systems. Unless school choice is carefully framed and regulated, it does not make educational opportunities more equally available (Musset, 2012). By the mid-1990s the Ministry faced media stories and complaints about children not being able to enrol in their neighbourhood school. It was also seeing under-utilised space in schools, while being faced with increased costs to support the expanding schools. Legislation in 1998 set out a number of principles that schools' enrolment schemes had to comply with, and enrolment schemes now had to be agreed with the Ministry. The principles included the "desirability of students being able to attend a reasonably

convenient school” and enabling “reasonable use of the existing network of schools” (Breakwell, 1999). But individual schools were still devising their own enrolment schemes and the Ministry was approving them individually. There was still no forum for discussion between schools in an area to arrive at criteria that seemed fair to all, as they had done before *Tomorrow's Schools*. This middle ground did not arise naturally now. The Ministry addressed the issue through guidelines for self-managing schools, but it was not able to group schools together. It could not challenge the supremacy of self-managing schools as the fulcrum on which policy had to pivot.

By the time the Ministry did provide this framing for school decisions, damage had been done that left a continuing legacy and increased costs the Ministry had to bear: money that could well have been better spent. Some schools, particularly in Auckland, had used the additional property and operational funding gained from taking students from what had been other schools' zones before *Tomorrow's Schools* to build up large schools with attractive resources. Schools serving low-income communities within striking distance of schools with a higher socio-economic intake that could offer better-resourced facilities (such as computers, sports grounds, music) suffered, particularly at the secondary level. There was also ‘white flight’ in some areas, with some evidence of increased ethnic polarisation. Some parents took note of the decile ratings assigned to schools for funding reasons, with somewhat higher per-student rates for low-decile schools serving low-income communities and higher proportions of Māori and Pasifika students. Low-decile schools were twice as likely as high-decile schools to have suffered significant roll decline between 1993 and 1998 (Minister of Education, 1999). By 1998, decile 1–2 secondary schools' average roll was 419 students, just over half the average roll of 789 in decile 9–10 secondary schools (Harker, 2000). That made it harder for the low-decile schools to provide sufficient curriculum options to cater for all their students, let alone the extracurricular activities that are so important in student development, such as the ability to mount school productions, run a choir or orchestra, or offer a range of sports.

Competition between schools for students could result in deliberate targeting. A school would find its roll dropping if another school offered students free bus transportation (in one notorious case, taxis were used). Competition could also involve a combination of location and publicity. Small country schools that were just beyond cities could erode the rolls of larger city schools that could not match the attraction for some parents of small schools, often with smaller classes and the promise of strong community.

Some schools were more adept at marketing themselves than others, through placing stories and photographs of student success or completed school amenities in local newspapers and presenting a smart façade to passers-by.

Secondary qualification rates did not improve in low-decile schools: instead, they slipped somewhat. Competition simply made it harder for the schools serving the students who were to be the particular beneficiaries of *Tomorrow's Schools* (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Pearce & Gordon, 2005; Wylie, 1999). There was no coherence between this policy mechanism and one of the key aims of the reforms. The New Zealand experience with school competition has not resulted in gains in student learning for the system as a whole. This absence of gains is consistent with the cumulative international research evidence that competition between schools has, at very best in a few contexts, only limited and uneven positive effects. Competition is not reliable as a systemic means to improve education (Lubienski, 2009; Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010; Wylie, 1999, 2006).

As the Ministry realised by 1998, there were costs to this competition between schools for the system as a whole: it meant more money having to be spent on buildings rather than, for example, on directly improving school capability through well-designed professional development. There were also the costs of entrenching the *self* part of self-management, of putting one's own school first, as if each school was indeed separate from others, not part of a national, publicly funded system that has to be greater than the sum of its parts.

## Development of the governance role

School boards are legally Crown entities, falling within the same general legal framework as large organisations such as the Tertiary Education Commission or the Accident Compensation Corporation, whose boards comprise people appointed by the relevant government Minister. But trustees put the Ministry of Education and the Government at the bottom of their ranking of who they were responsible to (Wylie, 1999, p. 178). In most schools the partnership between parents and the teaching professionals was seen by trustees as complementary. Most trustees saw their role as supporting the school, making common cause with the professional leaders to gain what they needed in the way of funding and a good review from ERO. Their sense of who they were responsible to, like the professionals, was first to the students in the school, then to the school, the parents and the teachers.

Few trustees had taken on the role because they sought major change in their school. Most were also sceptical that they needed the ‘logical completion’ of self-management through bulk funding. Bulk funding was the term used in the early 1990s to refer to the Picot taskforce recommendation that to give boards total flexibility over their government funding, it should cover their staffing costs as well as other costs. Several working groups had looked at this proposal without finding a persuasive answer to the issues of inequity between schools and for teachers in different schools that appeared likely to ensue. These groups included the Schools Consultative Group 1992–1994, which brought together the sector organisations under the independent chair of Sir John Anderson, then CEO of the National Bank, to advise the Minister of Education on school funding and staffing.<sup>5</sup> Anderson’s concluding individual advice to the Minister was that bulk funding could have perverse effects on the *Tomorrow’s Schools* goal of improving the more equal provision of educational opportunities. He also thought there was considerable variability in the capability of school governance, and that “not all boards of trustees would be capable of managing such a system without considerable support” (Anderson, 1994, cited in Pearce, 1996, p. 252). Indeed, he thought that a much more pressing matter for government attention was sufficient resourcing and support for the new curriculum and qualifications frameworks.

Trustees largely did not want to take on a full employer role, which could erode the partnership they had with their school’s professionals. They foresaw future difficulties if they could not afford the teachers they wanted to keep or attract. They also foresaw increasing differences between schools due to differences in the amount of funding schools could raise themselves, with schools in poorer areas losing ground because they could not offer comparable pay, or increase their teacher numbers.

Nonetheless, the National Governments that held power from 1990 to 1999 continued to adhere to their belief that this is what school self-management needed in order to be fully realised. The school boards’ national organisation, the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA), was also initially

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5 The Schools Consultative Group operated independently of the Ministry of Education, a deliberate political decision. But this meant that the Ministry’s own stream of policy work, including a trial of bulk funding in volunteer schools, operated separately and was seen to be competing (Pearce, 1996). The Schools Consultative Group ended without consensus and Anderson made his own report. A Ministerial Reference Group was set up not long after, bringing sector group leaders and the Secretary of Education and senior managers together at regular intervals for discussion. Sometimes these discussions were fruitful; sometimes they were simply used by the Ministry to inform the sector of new policy, of decisions already made. There was no programme of ongoing joint work associated with them.

in favour of bulk funding as a logical completion of school self-management. But because the majority of trustees—who were the ones who would carry the actual responsibility in schools—were largely opposed, it had to shift from this stance to one supporting individual board choice of bulk funding.

Teacher opposition to bulk funding was strong (Grant, 2003). Trustee reluctance to take on even more responsibility, and their mistrust of the claims for the benefits of bulk funding, also played a significant part (Wylie, 1995b, pp. 71–72) in government decisions that led first to a trial and then to a series of non-mandatory offers. This approach culminated in a particularly attractive offer that was still only taken up by 24 percent of primary schools and 20 percent of secondary schools by the end of 1999, when the Labour Party returned to power and ended bulk funding.

The final bulk funding offer, called ‘full funding’ to remove it from the negative image bulk funding now had, funded teaching positions at the top of the national salary scale, not the average. That made it attractive to schools if they had a good portion of teachers who were in their early teaching years and not paid at the top of the salary scale. Schools could also opt out if they thought the full funding option was no longer to their advantage. It was only the additional funding they received that made bulk funding worthwhile for schools and allowed them to allocate resources in new ways. How sustainable this policy would have been long term if made mandatory for all schools is highly questionable. The likely pressure on the education budget would have squeezed even further the already limited funding for the connective and developmental infrastructure that is needed by schools.

The novelty of making decisions about the school was the main source of trustee satisfaction with their role in the early years. By 1999 their main sources of satisfaction shifted to seeing progress at the school, doing things for children, and positive relations at the school. What they disliked increasingly was the paperwork that came with their role.

Much of the support for the trustee role came from school staff, particularly the principal (legally a member of the school board). Initially, trustees also used NZSTA field officers serving local areas and funded by the Government. Despite protests from boards, funding for this vital role was cut by the Government in 1994 on the grounds that schools should choose their own support services. Once again, the principle of choice was elevated over considerations of the need for connection through services that could build a shared knowledge base and develop it further. Such a network had enabled the NZSTA to produce ‘the black book’, the practical handbook on

school self-management and what schools were legally required to do that many found invaluable through the 1990s. When government funding for this support of school governance and management was cut, the NZSTA surveyed its members (88 percent of boards subscribed) to see if it could cover the cost of field officers and maintain a national network that offered local presence. It could not: the pressure on school funds led most boards to put their support for such a service at the end of the priority list.

The NZSTA did remain contracted by the Government to provide training, though not at a level that met all boards' needs, and to provide personnel and industrial relations advice. In 1997 close to 70 percent of boards had used the latter service and 80 percent wanted the NZSTA to have a similar contract to provide them with a general support service. The same proportion wanted one outcome of a forthcoming review of ERO to be that ERO would play a more supportive role for both school boards and their teaching staff (Wylie, 1997c). It was not just the professionals who had known a different structure of support and challenge who felt something was missing in their work. Those who governed schools also wanted more from those who had expertise, who could bring into their school useful knowledge and discussion.

Many principals found themselves undertaking much of the work of their board, and if there was a high turnover of trustees, having to start afresh every few years to educate them about their role, about the school, about education. Boards usually meant well but often did not have the capacity to provide all the challenge as well as support that school self-management in the New Zealand model was relying on them to provide. Their strength was in the quality of their links with the school community and their understanding of its needs, and in their networks and individual expertise. These networks were important to tap sources of funding or in-kind support for the new management responsibilities of schools, such as advice on financial management or solving employment issues.

Board–staff relations were usually good, but this could change quickly. Things could deteriorate if the board tried to manage rather than govern, or it lost faith in the principal; if there were personal relations that soured; or if there was an issue at the school that divided the school community. My estimate in 1999, drawing on the six NZCER national primary school surveys of the decade, was that around 12 to 15 percent of primary schools would be experiencing some problem in board–principal, board–staff or internal board relations at any given time. In some schools these problems persisted and contributed to school decline. In most cases individuals would leave the

school to solve the difficulty if they could not get the advice and support that helped them work together, or that resolved acrimonious disputes such as personal grievances taken by the principal or a teacher. Beyond personal networks, boards' and principals' sources of advice were often the NZSTA and the unions and principals' associations. The Ministry of Education was usually not much help: it lacked the ongoing relationships. It was set up to fund schools, not to know or support them.

The one sanction the Ministry of Education had when a school's issues appeared to be beyond the capability of the school was to temporarily replace the body legally responsible for the school, the board of trustees, with a commissioner. Only five commissioners were appointed in 1992, the end of the reforms' first 4 years. The numbers then increased somewhat; for example, 11 commissioners were appointed in 1994 (Butterfield & Butterfield, 1998, p. 234), but replacement of a board remained a rare occurrence.

Some boards got to the point of asking the Ministry to replace them, though one of the people I spoke to in 2011 recalled a desperate board whose cry for help went unheeded:

There was a very divisive person on the board who every time something happened that he didn't agree with, he threatened to get his lawyer. The board never ended up doing anything. It just couldn't do anything. And then there was a complication when this man started having an affair with the principal's wife and so it turned to animosity and hostility. They realised that left to themselves nothing was going to happen, so they went to the Ministry, and said, 'Look we're completely stuck. We need help, would you please appoint a commissioner.' And the Ministry said, 'No, because it's quite clear that if you can organise yourselves to come in an organised group like this you're not totally dysfunctional.'<sup>6</sup>

## Cautious reconnections across temporary bridges

It was clear to the Ministry of Education after the first 3 years of *Tomorrow's Schools* that a strict model of separating policy and operations was not feasible. It could not remain hands-off from schools. There were too many stories in the national media about "a growing number of problems between boards and their communities; there were boards in financial difficulties,

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, July 2011, with former secondary teacher, inspector, and ERO and Ministry of Education official.

schools under stress, principals not performing” (Boyd, 1998, p. 163).<sup>7</sup> The unions were also giving them evidence of school issues that were beyond the voluntary support that the unions and other groups were giving to individual schools that had sought their help.

In a telling indication of how little was understood at the centre about the value of ongoing connections, national Ministry of Education managers wondered “why have we got district staff if all the problems are coming in here?” (Boyd, 1998, p. 163). But they had not given their district staff the numbers or roles that would enable them to nip issues in the bud by working with schools. Some small strengthening in the district staff role occurred in the 1990s, but it was not until 1998 that they were given some limited discretionary funding which they could allocate more quickly to schools under the Schools Support project. One of the prime tools of the inspectorate was found to be useful again, albeit much reduced in scope and tending to be focused on issues of school management rather than curriculum or pedagogy.

Support for schools that had run into difficulty began as a national office project in 1994, but not as a new policy. Funding for this work was not included in the Ministry of Education baseline budget until the 1999/2000 financial year. Schools Support began with a small number of “Safety Net” interventions, involving fewer than 30 schools by 1996. These were intended to run for a limited time only: to be interventions, not connections. Nonetheless, a report on the Ministry’s management capability, commissioned by the State Services Commission in 1996, urged it “not to get into the direct provision of advice and support (unless it is essentially explaining the consequences of policy change to providers)”, and to continue to contract the role of advice and support (Laking, 1996, p. 83, cited in Boyd, 1998, p. 166).

This caution seems to be partly because advice and support were perceived as tempting officials into action that might undermine school self-management. Warning was given against “muddling the provision of support with the power of coercion” (Boyd, 1998, pp. 165–166). It was as if it was inconceivable for the Ministry of Education to work together with schools, to make a middle ground, even though it was the government department ultimately responsible for national educational quality and performance. The principle of school self-management was more important. Separation had to be preserved. Yet

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<sup>7</sup> Ross Boyd’s paper offers a candid look at the way the Ministry of Education developed and worked in the 1990s, including experiences and observations from other Ministry employees. I don’t know of any subsequent account of changes in the Ministry as an organisation, and suspect that such an open and independent account is unlikely to appear in the now much more hierarchical and overly risk-sensitive culture of the Ministry and the wider public sector.



it is separation of the government agencies and schools, the absence of the middle ground and shared responsibility, that made and still makes it difficult to harness and use all the knowledge and actions needed to keep developing the quality of New Zealand education. Somewhat ironically, this same report noted the difficulty the Ministry had in leading policy because of the number of separate government education agencies and the ambiguity of its responsibility.

So Schools Support was not launched with the aim of providing a permanent connection between schools and the Ministry of Education. The Ministry was not offering in-kind or in-house support. Formally, its role was more of a broker, though in fact individual officials with relevant expertise did find principals and boards looking to them for guidance. There were four levels of action, and most occurred at the lowest level. “Informal action”, as this lowest level was named, was a potentially creative response to the new environment. Schools Support at the national level, under Mary Sinclair, had brought the sector groups—the unions, the Principals’ Federation, the Intermediate Schools Association and the School Trustees Association—into an External Reference Group: a way to build some knowledge together as well as have the groups’ support. This national group was echoed in the Ministry’s regions with regular meetings between the Ministry and representatives of both education and community organisations “to discuss what is happening in schools in that region”. The sector groups also provided support for individual schools that came into the Schools Support ambit, using their different roles and knowledge to work with school leaders and trustees to sort out their problems.

Some of this action had already been occurring, with the sector groups taking the initiative when problems were raised with them. Much of the effectiveness of this approach depended on local capacity and expertise, and the quality of relationships and trust. The joint work was limited to work with the individual schools that raised their hands for help or that came to notice. It was a safety net for individual schools only. In the separated world, it was difficult to develop these local networks into something more strategic, which could have identified issues occurring across the area’s schools and planned ways to share and build knowledge and connections to improve the schools’ capability as a whole—to prevent rather than react.

Schools Support was a separate project within the Ministry, with no remit to develop anything formally that could be part of all schools’ operating environment. It was only for some schools. The need for more resourcing than the standard formulas could supply individual schools may have been part of

this cordoning off. It is interesting to see how Howard Fancy, Secretary for Education from 1996 to 2006, felt the need to explain that this non-formulaic funding of individual schools was limited:

School support is not a soft way to get extra resources ... I see it as quite a legitimate concern to ensure that additional spending is being used to develop capability, to improve educational outcomes and to minimise the prospects of a problem re-occurring. Not to require such disciplines would effectively penalise the 90% of schools that manage without school support. (Fancy, 2000, p. 19)

Additional funding was to be temporary and cast in a contract form, with specified sums for specified goals. These goals were within projects identified and 'owned' by the school and its board, which contributed some of its own funds and management of the project. Project participation was intended to leave the school in sufficient shape to carry on like other schools: largely on its own.

## Safety-net intervention

By late October 2000, 242 schools, around 9 percent of the country's schools, had experienced a 'safety-net' intervention, many lasting just over a year but some lasting several years or longer. Most of these interventions were the low-key "informal action". The process was more demanding for schools with complex issues. Funding plans on which the schools worked with liaison officers in the regional Ministry office needed multiple sign-off within the national Ministry office. Some business plans involving substantial expenditure also went to Treasury and the Minister for Education. Processes of negotiation and approval often took longer than those in the schools and the Ministry liaison officers working with them thought was warranted. Board chairs found themselves being the squeaky wheel with the national office to try to get faster decisions.

Expertise that schools needed was also not always readily available, able to be contracted, or able to grasp quickly the complexity of schools. This was particularly true for schools whose very existence was on the line. "They lack the knowledge of the education sector so we have to teach them as we go each time," said one official of the contractors they had had to find to prepare and see through business cases (McCauley & Roddick, 2002, p. 73). One wonders whether it would have been more efficient and cost-effective for the Ministry to use the knowledge it had and work directly with the schools. Such direct work would also have enabled an accumulating knowledge base available to schools.

The system for getting support was not quick or straightforward. Indeed, it lacked the ‘flexibility’ that was one of the Picot keywords for the promise of the new system. District staff were not in a position to maintain a watching brief on the schools in their area. They were not going into schools on a regular basis, maintaining connections. Ministry staff with different roles were not meeting regularly to pool their knowledge. It was harder for them to connect schools with each other so that one school could learn from another. This was not just because of the competitive edge to school relations. The local Ministry officials who were going into schools were all too often going into schools with marked problems, not those that were flourishing, so they may well not have had the knowledge base needed to connect schools productively. Too much would depend on the personal networks that Schools Support liaison officers, generally former principals, brought with them to the role.

Ministry identification of schools that might need Schools Support appears to have been an *ad hoc* process. A sequence of ERO reviews that were supplementary (more frequent than the regular 3-year cycle) was a prime trigger. Large roll declines and budget deficits, and major concerns about a principal’s leadership, were also major triggers. Schools themselves were hesitant to put up their hand for help: in the self-managing schools model, seeking help could be seen as an admission of failure. Principals would wonder how this would look if they were applying to another school board for a job, because the help was named, not part of an ongoing relationship. And not unlike the State Services Commission, albeit from the perspective of schools now used to doing their own thing, they also feared that inviting the Ministry of Education into the school would result in it wanting to be “prescriptive and controlling” (McCauley & Roddick, 2002, p. 70).

Ministry officials found themselves walking a fine line in seeking change in schools that had to make their own decisions. Yet when things had got bad, schools often wanted the Ministry to be “more assertive”, more initiating of action that could speed things up and avoid the disharmony and stress often experienced in schools that struck difficulty. Schools could feel helpless:

The school was in crisis such a long time. ERO and the Ministry knew, and no one did anything. Staff morale was low, teachers were leaving. I wasn’t sleeping. No one knew where to get help, and staff were vulnerable. Parents went to the Board and the Ministry wanting help. The Ministry must’ve had a huge file on the school. I think they’d been wondering when to intervene. (McCauley & Roddick, 2002, p. 15)

Thus problems were likely to have deepened by the time schools did get some support, and to cost both the schools and the Ministry more time and money to

work through than if there had been ongoing relations between them. Hidden costs included distraction and loss of energy. Teaching and learning were affected by the attention that was needed to resolve issues of school management and governance, or by roll declines that were sometimes due to these same issues but sometimes to the now hands-off approach to school organisation and enrolments in a given area and the resulting competition between schools.

There were 15 Schools Support liaison officers by mid-2000, some working part time. Liaison officers could be working with up to 20 schools at any one time, some of which needed much more attention than others. Along with other regional staff, they were also responsible for communicating national policy changes to schools, which sometimes took priority over their work with individual schools, and later, clusters. I wonder whether there would have been more schools identified as needing Schools Support had the process been more systematic. Even so, there was probably not the capacity to cater for more work with individual schools, possibly one reason for the greater emphasis that began to go on schooling improvement clusters. Indeed, by 2001 need was outstripping Ministry capacity, in terms of both the number of people and the sharing of knowledge between the national and regional offices so that individuals were not having to re-invent the wheel or find themselves unaware of what another level of the Ministry of Education had agreed with a school or cluster.

## Holes in the safety nets

In the new contractual environment, support was often framed formally. It had to be delimited in relation to a specified plan of action and outcomes, and regular milestone reports made. This gave an additional layer of work to the Ministry of Education, schools and those contracted to provide support. Milestones too often seemed to take priority because they were affixed to set dates. The Ministry saw the milestone reporting as having a double value. The Schools Support project needed the reports in a certain format to give both it and the wider Ministry the information (or reassurance) it needed for its own quality assurance processes. But regular reporting against goals and targets should also develop individual school capacity for self-review. Evaluating its own progress against the goals in the funding agreement would build on the needs analysis done at the start (with help) to gain the Ministry's support.

Self-review meant standing back and asking whether something was making a positive difference and how it could be developed further. It meant

having information about what you were doing so you could make that assessment. It meant looking at how coherent the work was: whether, say, new computer equipment was being used for the curriculum areas where performance was of most concern, and whether funding priorities matched curriculum priorities. But by now many schools associated anything the Ministry required them to do with legal requirements, with ‘compliance’ rather than their own development, particularly if it had to be done by a given time. They were also careful about what they shared on paper, and what they specified. Milestones could not have the developmental value for schools that the Ministry intended.

Ministry of Education support for schools as a time-limited ‘intervention’ also struck snags. By 2001 “Ministry respondents acknowledged that there was an element of naiveté in early expectations that individual Schools Support projects would be completed within three years” (McCauley & Roddick, 2002, p. 58). Both schools and the Ministry officials working in Schools Support thought that their relationship should be ongoing after the funding agreement came to an end, the connections maintained so that the school continued to have a source of support and advice. Once they were spending time in schools, Ministry people could see that substantial changes were often needed, changes that were not realistic for the existing capability and knowledge in these schools. Some could also see that new knowledge was needed for schools to make progress.

There was talk of long-term partnerships “supporting collaborative initiatives that develop local education infrastructure” (McCauley & Roddick, 2002, p. 59). In the new era, here was some realisation of the importance of a middle ground on which schools and the Ministry could meet and work together. But the means for building the local education infrastructure would be hampered by the centrality of school self-management and its entrenchment in the first decade of *Tomorrow’s Schools*. Any sustainable infrastructure would need a recasting of roles and responsibilities, and shared work that went beyond putting together cases for funding.

## Schooling improvement: Attempting some reconnection

As the Ministry of Education worked more with schools in difficulty, and as ERO identified areas where there were more than the usual proportion of

schools struggling to meet student need or getting tangled in the requirements of school self-management, there was an expansion of the Schools Support project into “preventative” schooling improvement, based on grouping schools into (mainly) geographic clusters. By 2001 around 10 percent of schools were in a Schooling Improvement cluster, working with 14 Schools Support staff, members of a national office team stationed in local Ministry offices. There was some overlap between the two forms of Ministry support for schools, so probably around 15 percent of schools would have been involved in one or both at the same time, and probably around 20 percent of all schools had had some support through the Schools Support project up to 2001. Not all of the schools in the Schooling Improvement clusters were struggling or distracted by issues of management and governance; some were included in a cluster simply because they were located in the area. Cluster membership and ongoing commitment were voluntary. The attraction was additional resourcing and the opportunity to interact with outside expertise and other schools.

Why clusters? There seems to have been some awareness of the costs that could accrue to schools left on their own. The Ministry had to keep its distance in the overall policy framework and was in no position to work consistently with individual schools. Some of the first clusters arose from ERO area reviews, which indicated common issues. There would presumably be economies of scale in hiring people to work on those issues across a number of schools. If the schools could be brought closer together, through making decisions together and shared professional development, they would form peer relations.

But the cluster approach would prove patchy, again dependent on the expertise that was locally available, the use made of it and, even more, the composition of the cluster. What it also highlighted was the need for better processes to share the knowledge that schools needed in order to change their practices, and new approaches to professional development.

It often took a year or two for these clusters to reach the first stage of developing a plan. Inter-school competition for students interfered with the openness and trust needed for real sharing (McCauley & Roddick, 2002, p. 32). Also, clusters were usually governed by the schools’ principals. The principal is where ‘the buck stops’ in a school. Cluster meetings often had at least one principal missing as one of the group dealt with something more urgent, often issues of student welfare or behaviour, but also with things going awry with the school’s buildings or systems: the property and finance twins.

So cluster understanding and plans often had to be revisited or renegotiated. Cluster work could feel more like ‘talk’ than ‘walk’. There was little a cluster could do if one of its members made empty promises and then gradually faded from involvement.

In the *Tomorrow’s Schools* model the board of trustees of a school is the body that is legally responsible for the school. ERO reports are addressed to the school board, as is much of the Ministry correspondence. The Ministry’s Schooling Improvement model included trustees—and sometimes other groups with a stake in the schools—as ‘partners’. This was particularly important at the start of cluster work. But it was not a simple matter for everyone to be able to get in the same room, physically or conceptually. Trustees had paid work and family commitments, for example. Where the cluster arose from one of the highly critical ERO area reviews, there was often considerable anger and pain to work through before there was even the glint of a preparedness to trust the Ministry. For iwi groups and others, issues relating to their children’s quality of education were not solely the responsibility of the schools involved. The Ministry also bore responsibility. Iwi groups sought greater involvement, and a number of innovative long-term iwi–Ministry partnerships were formed.

None of the Schooling Improvement clusters were formed in middle-class or wealthy communities. Low-income communities, where Māori and Pasifika students were most concentrated, were the clusters’ domain.<sup>8</sup> Schooling Improvement clusters were the Ministry’s prime response in the mid- to late 1990s to the inequalities of educational opportunity that had fuelled the impetus for the *Tomorrow’s Schools* reforms, and which continued—and, indeed, often appeared to worsen—when schools had been ‘freed’ to self-manage.

Self-management was proving problematic for schools in low-income areas, small schools, and rural schools: these were over-represented among the schools that had difficulty staying in ERO’s regular review cycle. They were also the schools “where the risk of teacher shortage is constant” (Ministry of Education, 1996), as was the case in the new kura kaupapa Māori. They were the schools that found it more difficult to attract experienced principals, and to find the knowledge and skills needed for a board of trustees. Low-

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8 Here is the list of Schooling Improvement clusters in 2001: Far North (78 schools), Gisborne (41), SEMO [Mangere Otara] (32), Tuwharetoa (23), East Coast (19), AIMHI [secondary schools in South Auckland and one in Porirua] (9), Paerangi [Māori boarding schools] (6), ICAN [a Porirua cluster] (8), the SMAD [(Schools Making a Difference) cluster in Christchurch] (7), West Coast (5), Wairoa West (5), Flaxmere (5), Waiiau (2), Ohai (3), Taita (2), Kelston Van Asch (2).

decile schools had more trouble attracting and keeping teachers. They had to re-advertise positions more often, and more often had to employ overseas-trained teachers, who sometimes brought more rigid approaches with them that did not sit well with New Zealand students.<sup>9</sup> They also employed beginning teachers more often, but then lost them more often to other schools with fewer demands, once they had completed their 2 years and gained the certification they needed from the school's principal to become fully registered.

Constant staff changes, and staff starting with less experience, made it more difficult for many of these schools to build and sustain strong school cultures and systems that shared knowledge among teachers, and that provided the learning organisations schools need to be if they are to make a positive difference to student learning. There were some notable exceptions, but an education system needs to produce more than exceptions if it is to produce overall improvements in learning and achievement.

The exceptions included clusters where there was a deliberate effort to undertake collective knowledge building of how better to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged groups. Joint work in schools over time brought researchers and professional developers together with educators and the Ministry, and sometimes boards, so that what came out of one phase of work could be used to build the next phase of work. This iterative joint work and ongoing connections not only provided knowledge

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9 Nationally, teacher numbers were too low to adequately staff all primary schools from the mid- to late 1990s. This was due to a combination of improved teacher:student ratios and large increases in the number of young children, partly due to increased migration to New Zealand which the Ministry's predictions had not been able to encompass. Primary school rolls rose 10 percent overall in the 1990s. Finding enough teachers to staff their school was beyond the ability of many schools, though it hit the low-decile and rural schools hardest. Teacher shortages also attracted newspaper headlines. Teaching supply was not originally included in the Ministry's programme, such was the faith in the new freedoms granted colleges of education to cater for as many students as they wished, and in school self-management.

The difficulties schools were having led to the restoration of teaching supply as a central government function in 1995/96, with a multi-pronged approach that: gave additional money to teachers taking positions in remote areas, all decile 1 schools, and low-decile schools in the north and east of the North Island; increased the number of students that institutions could take for initial teacher education; extended eligibility for this funding of new places to a wider number of institutions (increasing the competition between them); and encouraged 'compressed' courses for university graduates. Waivers on work permits for teachers recruited from overseas were introduced. Included in the Ministry's 1996 outline of the measures that would improve teacher supply were recent increases in secondary teacher pay, and slowing the introduction of new curriculum—an acknowledgement of the workload in schools.



in ways that changed school practice for the better, but also fed into some policy changes. The SEMO and AIMHI clusters would prove particularly fruitful (Annan, 2007; Annan, Fa'amoe-Timoteo, Carpenter, Hucker, & Warren, 2002; Hill & Hawk, 2003; McNaughton, 2011). Both these clusters were prompted by critical ERO reviews.

## ERO: The watchdog and scold

In the early days of *Tomorrow's Schools*, ERO reviews were focused on school compliance with legislation, through assurance audits that were largely paper based, checking school policies and paper trails. ERO shifted to 'effectiveness' reviews in late 1993, asking schools to demonstrate the difference they had made to their students' learning in terms of the school's expectations. ERO had no formal relationship with the schools. It relied on the publication of its reports and schools' knowledge that these would be available to community and media scrutiny. "Moral suasion and the creation of public pressure" were its main tools to improve schools (Ellis, 1996, p. 11).

By 1994 the Chief Review Officer during the 1990s, Judith Aitken, felt in a position to provide some sharp assessments of the *Tomorrow's Schools* system. Board ignorance of legal obligations and changes in national policy were "surprisingly common" (ERO, 1994, p. 7). There was an "extremely wide" variation in the quality of curriculum that schools provided (p. 9). Few schools were using student achievement and engagement information to continuously monitor and improve their programmes. But then, she noted, "there are only very limited support and advisory services available to principals and teachers interested in systematic assessment of achievement" (p. 9), and few reliable qualitative and quantitative assessments nationally available.

There were "repeated demands for the Office to provide more advice to schools" (p. 13). The Chief Review Officer made it clear that she thought that schools were not making sufficient use of ERO's national evaluative reports or their own ERO reviews. They were not reflecting on the reasons for the questions they were asked during the course of a review, from "an external perspective on a school from a wide knowledge base of the comparative performance of principals, teachers and schools as a whole" (p. 13). But, as principals thought (Wylie, 1997b), and an ERO reviewer at the time noted, the expertise of ERO reviewers was variable:

There was a significant unevenness in the staff. I felt some of us could actually have a serious conversation with a principal or an HOD or a syndicate leader which was

a conversation of educational peers, and it worked *because* it was a conversation of educational peers. The sort of conversation I'm thinking of is: Look Sarah, I think there's some great work going on in this syndicate but actually have you thought about X, Y, Z, Q? You don't think that would work? Tell me more about that? Why did you think that wouldn't work? Well actually I could connect you. I'm pretty sure if I rang a couple of people for you and got them to ring you—you know there's a productive conversation worth having. These people are doing something in this line that I think would work here.

As opposed to 'it's for us to know and you to find out' kind of low grade evaluation that some of my colleagues specialised in. It was because they actually didn't have a lot of educational experience or depth themselves before they went into that role.<sup>10</sup>

Aitken thought that school managers could improve the quality of advice they received from others by taking a contractual approach: specifying outcomes and the price they were prepared to pay. Her comments in 1994 include concerns about the quality of education for Māori, and issues relating to the quality of governance that affect the quality of education in "less affluent areas". Shortages of te reo Māori-speaking teacher graduates are noted. But the self-managing schools framework itself is unchallenged, with one marked exception. There were too many poorly performing rural schools, with pockets on the East Coast, the West Coast and north of Auckland:

These communities need assistance to upgrade radically the quality of education available to their children ... Ways must be found, in partnership with State agencies, to establish more effective schools in many rural areas. It is doubtful whether, on its own, a simple increase in operating funds will be sufficient to effect positive improvements in areas where economic growth is likely to be very sluggish and such problems are endemic. (ERO, 1994, p. 18)

Two years later, with no sign of any action on the Ministry of Education's part (it was still in the early stages of developing Schools Support, working only with individual schools on limited project funding and taking care not to cross the self-managing schools boundary), ERO resorted to using a megaphone to reach the Ministry and the education sector. Media coverage of its first report on an area where it saw systemic failure certainly jolted the Ministry into action. ERO's first such report was not, however, on these rural pockets. It was on Mangere–Otara: that area of urban poverty whose disadvantage had only deepened with the economic reforms of the 1980s, followed by the welfare cuts in the early 1990s. Current students in Mangere–Otara included those whose parents had been the young people Peter Ramsay and colleagues

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, July 2011, with former principal, ERO reviewer, Ministry official and consultant.

wrote about in 1981, saying it was already too late for them to have had the education they needed.

## *Tomorrow's Schools*: Still too late?

The test of the new system was surely whether it could make a better fist than the previous system of improving student engagement and achievement in Mangere–Otara, and in other areas of high poverty or with a history of finding little purpose in education. The 1996 ERO report on Mangere–Otara schools indicated that school self-management was not making a positive difference. ERO's measure was the building block of the new system: each school on its own. By ERO criteria, only seven of the 45 schools serving this mainly very poor area were performing effectively. These seven effective schools did not include Nga Tapuwae, the secondary school where David Lange as the Minister of Education had been powerless to intervene, and whose board's resistance to any involvement by the Department of Education had led to the provision in the new era for boards to be replaced by a commissioner. Nga Tapuwae, along with two other secondary schools and one primary school in the area, were now receiving safety-net support from the Ministry.

ERO made a set of strongly worded recommendations that would have resulted in more connection between the schools and the Ministry. But the form of connection it recommended would not have generated new knowledge and understanding through joint work between partners sharing responsibility. It was consistent with the more segmented approach of the 1990s. ERO recommended connection through the hierarchical form of a tight contract, reviewed and renegotiated annually with each school.

ERO did note that in terms of improving their work, the schools were not well served in terms of advice, training, services such as principal appraisal, or support, describing these in the new public sector language as a “market vacuum”. Infrastructure for the area was recommended, along the lines of the area resource that Peter Ramsay and colleagues had suggested. But in the new regime ERO could conceive only of the area resource as a broker of services, not a provider, and not the joint developer of knowledge to better serve the area's students that had been recommended in *Tomorrow May Be Too Late* (Ramsay et al., 1981). Central funding for this area resource was to be time limited. In a few years it should largely pay its own way, through schools using their operational funding to buy its services. Where schools continued to perform poorly, ERO recommended that they be required to “purchase an appropriate package of development or restructuring services” (ERO, 1996, p. 16).

Although the ERO report makes much of the fact that some schools in these disadvantaged areas had teachers who had “the margins of skill necessary to bring educational opportunities and outcomes for their students closer to that of the national average” (ERO, 1996, p. 26), there is no suggestion that these schools could be sources of sharing knowledge. There is no sense in the ERO report of the value of collective work over time, within and across schools, enlisting other expertise as well, to build and share the knowledge needed to make the schools more engaging and productive for students and teachers alike. ERO’s evaluation and recommendations confined themselves to the underlying assumptions of *Tomorrow’s Schools*, which positioned schools as best performing when operating separately.

Growing competition for students had led primary schools in the area to recapitate (extending the year levels they catered for), with knock-on effects as the intermediate schools, losing some of their student base, extended into middle schools. ERO thought these changes were more about preserving school funding and staffing than about improving the quality of education. This was probably true in most cases, though not for the innovative Clover Park middle school, which offered a bilingual programme that was producing notable improvements in Māori school engagement and achievement. ERO was certainly right when it noted that “there appears to have been little consideration of the likely impact of middle schools on the resource base and curriculum structure of local secondary schools” (ERO, 1996, p. 18). But it did not depart from the centrality of school self-management. It did not recommend collective work on planning for the area to make the best use of the government funding available.

The lack of infrastructure that could improve education in Mangere–Otago had not gone unnoticed by its principals. Ironically, just as the ERO report came out, the Otago Principals’ Association, working with Charmaine Pountney (then teaching a course on school leadership at the University of Auckland, which some of the area’s principals attended), had put in a bid for one of the Ministry of Education’s management development contracts:

We decided that what the area needed was innovative centres of educational excellence, not imitations of existing mediocre practice elsewhere. We wanted, for instance, to set up a centre for language education and research, and a centre for technology education, involving tertiary research staff and business sponsors as well as the best teachers available. We had all kinds of exciting ideas, and a wide network of talented people available to help ... The Ministry of Education declined our proposal, awarding funding instead to a Hamilton human resources firm for work with some Waikato schools, and spent several months struggling to respond to ERO’s report. (Pountney, 2000, p. 130)

I wonder whether the section of the Ministry of Education that decided this contract was narrowly focused on management, a generic approach that a human resources firm could supply. But schools need more than generic approaches. Pountney suggests that some of the ideas in the Otago principals' proposal resurfaced when a different section of the Ministry, the Schools Support team, put together a response that did in fact go much further in situating school self-management within a more developmental frame than ERO had recommended.<sup>11</sup>

ERO's report sparked anger, defensiveness and pain—among the community as well as the schools. But it also spurred discussion and then a commitment by the Ministry to work with the schools and community. Out of the hurt came a set of initiatives under the umbrella Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otago (SEMO), explicitly casting this as a “three way partnership”. At the start, “the Ministry's capacity to interact in educational discussions with representatives from schools and communities was minimal ... building educational relationships was extremely difficult” (Annan et al., 2002, p. 64). But time and additional resourcing made possible the joint work and ongoing connections that—with much dedication to continued learning from the inquiries undertaken through joint work—did result in some real changes for student engagement and achievement in schools in these clusters.

## Missing connections

The SEMO experience shows just how vital for school development are interconnections focused on joint work and knowledge building, and how limited is any national policy that relies on self-managed schools left to themselves. Even so, SEMO was limited. It lacked the authority to take an area-wide view of teacher and school supply, or to reduce some of the costs of competition between schools. Sir John Anderson was already warning the Government in 1994 of systemic issues arising from the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms that were creating “a degree of inertia and uncertainty in schools” (Anderson, 1994, p. 244) and that were impeding progress and the achievement of equality of educational opportunity. He did not think the latter was possible if schools remained stand-alone competitive units. He noted that New Zealand was unique in the OECD countries in having no intermediary structures between schools and the centre, and suggested that

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<sup>11</sup> She also suggests that the ERO recommendations were similar to the Otago group's proposals, but I cannot see that.

“many functions such as property management, equity funding, sharing of best practice, risk management and dispute resolution could well be managed in regional support units” (Anderson, 1994, p. 244).

But the 1990s saw school self-management entrenched as stand-alone, rather than broadened through also working collectively. It was difficult for the Ministry to envisage ongoing relationships with individual schools because it was first and foremost set up as a policy ministry, its primary relationship being with the Minister. It was also operating within a public sector model that separated policy and operations and preferred to specify what it funded through contracts, not models of shared responsibility and ongoing joint work. Its own organisation was becoming more siloed, and it lacked effective ongoing connections with the other government education agencies. Anderson noted “confusion and chaos” in schools as a result of “the existence of over five central bureaucracies with no overall effective co-ordination of the various policy strands” (Anderson, 1994, p. 244).

The Ministry did seek to encourage schools to work together, through the lever of cluster funding. Such funding was attached to particular policies or support, such as the sharing of administrative staff in rural schools or using computers in schools. Evaluation after evaluation of each new policy clustering would show that schools appreciated the additional resources or professional development clustering had enabled them to access. But often what was gained stayed inside individual schools. Many clusters dissolved once their funding ceased for a given policy initiative: this mechanism was not sufficient on its own to connect schools in collective support.

Some clusters built sufficient trust over time to keep going. For example, some of the rural school administrative support clusters went on to develop cases for new cluster initiatives they were offered, such as ICT or the literacy and numeracy innovative funding pools. They formed (often useful) networks and in some cases produced new knowledge to improve learning. But many schools joined clusters simply to access additional resources. Some clusters were cosy clubs, or sessions of superficial sharing. There was no clear authority in them that could provide the combination of challenge and support that leads to change, and no systemic processes to share the new knowledge further. Clusters could not resolve the issue of how best to meet the needs of an area’s students, free of any loyalty to a particular school. Schools that felt in direct competition with each other were unlikely to form a cluster together.

There were, as always, exceptions that grew from existing strong ties and joint work. The West Auckland Principals’ Association co-ordinated

professional development and support for their schools, emphasising the importance of ongoing learning and strong collective school cultures. Dunedin secondary principals collaborated to provide a programme for students with behavioural issues so that one school did not end up with all the students who were hardest to teach. But clusters that endured, that had their own momentum over and above any Ministry funding, were rare.

The interconnecting roles that inspectors and other officials had played were not able to be filled by individuals who were, in any case, largely preoccupied with the new responsibilities of self-management, focused on their own school. The system became reliant on sporadic professional development funded by the Ministry, individual contacts and sector organisations. Primary teachers missed the opportunities they had had to learn more by visiting other schools. Subject associations gave secondary teachers some links across schools, though the associations were not as strong as they had been. Principals were reliant on personal networks built through their previous colleagues, sharing professional development, or conversations at local principals' associations meetings or national conferences. The education unions, NZEI and PPTA, NZSTA and the Principals' Federation, all established help-lines. Principals and teachers volunteered their expertise to provide help through their organisations, giving time to support their peers who reached the limits of their confidence, knowledge or energy. It was a system that circulated some knowledge. But it was not a system that could keep steadily advancing knowledge of how better to provide learning opportunities in different circumstances, and ensure that schools, principals and teachers most in need of changing their practice were enabled to do so.

Most principals, teachers and trustees thought schools needed more support or advice from the Ministry. By 1999, after a decade's experience of operating as self-managing schools, and without ongoing connections with the Ministry as a matter of course, only 53 percent of primary principals, 39 percent of primary trustees and 28 percent of primary teachers were satisfied with the level of Ministry support or advice for schools. The vehicles that could have been used for ongoing connection—the school charter and the annual report of the school's activities relating to the National Education Guidelines and National Administrative Guidelines (tellingly often referred to as “the NEGs and NAGs”)—were rarely used. “All I got every year was a little letter back” said one experienced principal.<sup>12</sup> The district offices were

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<sup>12</sup> Personal interview, June 2011.

not staffed to have regular discussions on school development. Their role was largely reactive, not initiatory. They had no role in developing the capability of all schools in their area. ERO's role was not to discuss or advise, but to evaluate and report.

People in primary schools, whether they were governors, managers or teachers, also felt left out of the Ministry's prime function: policy. Only around a quarter were satisfied with the involvement of the education sector in policy development and change in 1999 (Wylie, 1999, p. 179). That was at a time when the current government was looking to further reduce the national infrastructure available to schools by cutting the advisory services. Schools did not think they were sufficiently resourced, but they preferred to keep some infrastructure that had some national connections rather than have the funding for the advisory services transferred to school operational grants.

It was not that principals and boards had not come to grips with their new roles. They enjoyed making their own decisions, seeing some changes in their programmes and buildings as a result. But at the end of the first decade of *Tomorrow's Schools*, they could also see that they needed more support—more connections, not just dollars—to do the job as well as they wanted to. That was especially so when it came to the major changes in curriculum and the debates around qualifications that also preoccupied this decade. I turn next to what those changes meant for students and schools, and why the lack of interconnections, joint work to design national frameworks for teachers and learners, and ongoing knowledge building made it difficult to see any gains at the national level.