Executive summary[1]

This evaluation was commissioned to collect information about the effectiveness of Secondary Futures in promoting futures thinking and change in secondary education. It was intended that this information could feed into the ongoing development of Secondary Futures in Phase Two of its project.

The Labour Party's 2002 pre-election policy pledged its commitment to setting up an independent body to consider the future of New Zealand secondary schools. This promise was realised with the launch of Secondary Futures in September 2003. The project was tasked with stimulating futures thinking about the role and purpose of education and to create a guiding vision for secondary education. Through a range of engagements with educational stakeholders, including workshops, meetings, and presentations, Secondary Futures set out to achieve six objectives for Phase One of their project:

1. Creating space to contemplate the future;
2. Providing tools to resource thinking about the future of education;
3. Sharing trends for the future direction of New Zealand society;
4. Sharing information about possibilities to make more students more successful;
5. Eliciting people's preferences in relation to the future of the New Zealand education system; and
6. Supporting change by taking information to others.

Four key theoretical areas appear to underpin the Secondary Futures project and provided a theoretical frame for the evaluation. The first is *futures studies,* which is a collection of theories and tools that allow people to imagine possible futures in order to begin to "create the future every day". The second is a *complex systems* approach, which assumes that sustainable educational change is unpredictable, networked, and transformative, but should be guided by vision and core values with careful attention to inputs. This contrasts with a managerialist paradigm operating in many schools and organisations, which focuses more on predictable outputs. Thirdly, knowledge and understanding about successful *school change*, which incorporates both complex systems and

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[1] Roberts, J. and Gardiner, B. (2005) *Exploring possibilities: an evaluation of the short-term effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process.* Wellington, New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

managerialist ideas, advocates for a whole-school approach to working towards goals in a flexible and ongoing manner. The fourth is *dialogue*, in which a range of methods facilitate a space for exploration, negotiation, and transformative change.

Three research questions guided the evaluation:

7. How do participants perceive the effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process?
8. How do participants' expectations and perceptions of secondary education change as a result of their engagement with the Secondary Futures process?
9. What are the outcomes and actions that result from participants' engagement with the Secondary Futures process?

The research questions encapsulate and go beyond the scope of the project's Phase One objectives, which were focused on stimulating thinking and eliciting preferences, as opposed to actively directing change. Each research question provided a different theoretical lens through which to judge the effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process.

The evaluation incorporated two main methods: a document analysis was undertaken utilising people's responses to feedback forms from 59 workshops; and interviews were conducted with 42 engagement participants and eight members of the Touchstone Group. Interviewees came from schools, the wider education system, and non-education sectors. Most had experienced more than one engagement with Secondary Futures, including participating in at least one workshop.

The findings suggest that the processes used by Secondary Futures were very effective in relation to their first four Phase One objectives: creating space; providing tools; sharing trends; and sharing information about possibilities. Participants valued Secondary Futures for their thought-provoking tools and activities, allowing time out from daily pressures, and for the group-based learning environments that were well-established by the facilitators. Beyond the engagements interviewees appreciated Secondary Futures for retaining a good level of political independence, managing to bring together a range of stakeholders in a non-threatening manner, and raising the profile of futures thinking in New Zealand.

If change is framed as a linear process, thinking, talking, and taking action can be understood to be consecutive phases towards change. In most cases the Secondary Futures process was seen to extend participants' thinking, particularly in terms of helping people to adopt a futures lens on education. Although the whole engagement process was seen to encourage new thinking, of particular effect were the tools used, the focus on opening up possibilities beyond current constraints, and inclusive group discussion. Clarity on how secondary education could change for a better future was rated more negatively than other questions relating to the Phase One objectives. The tension between the aim of eliciting a shared vision and the aim of opening up possibilities is evident in futures thinking literature itself.

Four-fifths of interviewees considered that Secondary Futures raises the level of discussion about futures thinking outside of the engagements themselves. Participants had spoken to a range of people. They generally directed their attention to those at a similar or lower level on an

educational decision-making hierarchy and mostly discussed what futures thinking could mean for their organisation.

Less than two-fifths of interviewees clearly suggested that actions followed on from engagements, while another fifth gave more qualified agreement. Considering that a greater proportion of feedback form comments stated an intention to act, it appears that good intentions were not always followed through. Still, interviewees who had taken action as a result of their experience were most likely to have: sought further involvement with Secondary Futures; used the Secondary Futures tools elsewhere; or fed futures thinking ideas into organisational planning or policy development. The desire for ongoing connection with the project indicates that people find the engagement stimulating but that, as is suggested by school-based professional development literature, a one-off experience is not always sufficient for them to be able to translate the ideas into actions within their own environment.

Interviewees believed that there were constraints to making changes. While some constraints were seen to reside within Secondary Futures, the rest were located within organisations, particularly schools, as well as the wider education system and policy environment. Interviewees offered a range of suggestions to address these constraints and improve Secondary Futures as a whole. Suggestions mainly recommended that Secondary Futures should work towards having a greater sphere of influence, particularly in the domains of policy and practice. The suggestions provided also highlighted that there are conflicting views and expectations of the project.

Overall, the findings suggest that Secondary Futures has developed tools and techniques to successfully work with a range of stakeholders and open up futures thinking. However, the project has now come to a point where many stakeholders are asking "What happens next?" On the basis of the evaluation we suggest that Secondary Futures develop processes to help manage challenges that are symptomatic of the project attempting to adopt a systems change approach with stakeholders who operate within more managerialist environments. We also pose a number of questions that could be considered to help shape the focus and implementation of Phase Two. In line with the Secondary Futures principle of collective ownership, we suggest that this discussion should involve a range of stakeholders, and any decisions be clearly and widely disseminated.