The Administration of Schools – the changing relationship between schools and the state

Executive Summary

- This paper is intended as an introduction to school governance and accountability.

- The relationship between the state and schools has been the subject of reform since 1989. In that time, schools management has moved from central control to a degree of decentralisation.

- Since 1998, the relationship has moved towards a network and support model, whereby schools provide governance under Boards of Trustees and the government provides funding and support.

- Schools are required to operate under centrally-set curriculum frameworks, administration guidelines and education goals.

- The Education Review Office provides accountability monitoring, and schools are now required to provide data directly to the government on progress towards student achievement goals.

Introduction

The operation of primary and secondary education by the state has shifted from a highly centralised system, to a decentralised system in the 1980s, to a more mixed system currently.

The state uses schools to achieve its national purposes of compulsory education: primarily the creation of educated workers and citizens; to ensure that there is equality of opportunity and to close achievement gaps. The government provides most of the resources, and oversees the system of accountability. The role of government and its agencies includes setting the curriculum and administrative guidelines, quality assurance and compliance, through to broader assessments of the school network’s capacity and the
closure of schools through network reviews and support for schools that are “at risk” of failing.

Schools Centrally Administered

The state schooling system was established by the Education Act 1877, on a relatively decentralised basis. The Act provided for compulsory education at primary level only, and it was not until 1944 that free compulsory education was extended to the secondary level, when the school leaving age was raised by Order in Council to fifteen years. Much of the authority for running primary schools lay with regional boards of education that were the vestiges of the former provincial system. The Department of Education acted as little more than a conduit for funds in the early years, but grew over the decades to become a centre of educational governance.

By 1984, the Department had 1,700 employees and it owned the property of all state-run schools, as well as the buses that transported students to them, and supplied architectural and engineering services when needed. It dispersed operating and capital funds and developed national curriculum guidelines. It also negotiated the salaries of teachers and school administrators with their national unions and oversaw teachers’ training and certification\(^1\).

Primary Schools

The department carried out its supervision of primary schools through the boards of education. There were ten regional boards, each with eight to sixteen members elected by representatives of the schools in their areas. These boards appointed principals and teachers in each school in their region, arranged transport, and provided teaching materials and equipment. Funding for boards came from government grants, with very little of it passing through to the schools for the purpose of discretionary spending.

Secondary Schools

Secondary schools evolved separately: they were established by Acts of Parliament and were endowed gifts of Crown land. Secondary schools had their own boards of governors made up of parents, appointees of the local boards of education and community representatives. As secondary school education became more common, these boards generally surrendered much of their independence to the department in return for financial and other support.

Tomorrow’s Schools – a decentralised system

In 1988 the report of the Taskforce to Review Education Administration, Administering for Excellence (the Picot report) recommended that the administrative structure under the department was over-centralised and made overly complex by having too many decision points. The report recommended that local educational institutions were best placed to administer education, because they

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have a direct interest in educational outcomes and the best information about local circumstances.

Administrative and governance reforms followed the recommendations, taking place in the wider context of a fiscal crisis and economic recession: central Government needed to cut social spending in order to regain fiscal control in the face of a large deficit. There was also a move to separate operational and policy functions in the wider state sector, under the new public management framework created by the State Sector Act 1988 and the Public Finance Act 1989².

The Ministry of Education was created and was made responsible for funding schools, negotiating charters, setting national guidelines and providing information resources.

Schools were granted a high degree of operational autonomy, and became agents of the state. The legislative basis for the reforms, the Education Act 1989, enabled each school to form its own board of trustees, to be made up mostly of elected parents. Boards of trustees became responsible for the broad policy objectives and the administration of each school.

Consequently, boards of trustees now govern all state and integrated schools. Boards are made up of elected parent and community volunteers, the school principal and a staff representative. Secondary school boards must also have a student representative. Boards currently sit for three years and elections are held every eighteen months. Only half of each board is elected at each election to ensure that skills and knowledge are not lost.

Boards are held accountable for meeting the objectives in their charter and for managing the funds they receive from the government to run the school. They are expected to operate under the provisions of the Public Finance Act 1989, and generally accepted accounting principles. Boards are required to present an annual report to their community and the Ministry of Education³.

Each board must establish a charter, under section 61 of the Education Act, which is the board’s undertaking that their school will be governed and managed in line with legislation. The board must consult with the local community when negotiating charter objectives with the Ministry and it must report to them regularly on how well these objectives are being achieved.


All school charters must align with the National Education Guidelines, which contain a statement of goals for education in New Zealand, as well as curriculum and administrative requirements.

**National Education Guidelines (NEGs)**

Sections 60A of the Act allows the Minister of Education to periodically produce National Education Guidelines. Broadly, these are intended to provide a framework for schools' operation, containing statements of goals for education in New Zealand as well as curriculum and administrative requirements.

NEGs have four possible components: National education goals; foundation curriculum policy statements; national curriculum statements and national administration guidelines (see following sections for details).

**National Education Goals**

National education goals are government statements of desirable achievements by the school system, and statements of government policy objectives for the school system.

**Foundation curriculum policy statements**

Foundation curriculum policy statements are statements of policy concerning teaching, learning, and assessment. They are made to give direction to schools to manage their curriculum and assessment responsibilities.

**National curriculum statements**

National curriculum statements make up the New Zealand Curriculum Framework. They comprise the areas of skills, knowledge and understanding to be attained by students and outline the desirable outcomes for students.

The Framework is, according to the Ministry of Education, the foundation policy statement covering teaching, learning, and assessment for all students in all New Zealand schools⁴.

**National Administration Guidelines (NAGs)**

The National Administration Guidelines communicate the Government's policy objectives; the rules for school administration, (including statements of desirable codes of conduct) and set out requirements relating to planning and reporting.

**Accountability**

The adoption of a business-orientated approach to school administration required the implementation of accountability measures⁵. Schools are accountable to the Ministry to ensure that the targets set out in their charters such as educational outcomes are met.

Reporting against targets will commence for the first time from 2004, under the Education Standards Act 2001. State schools are required

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to undertake a process of self-review which involves setting goals and objectives for student outcomes and describing these for the school community in an annually updated charter. The school communicates its progress against these objectives in its annual report to the Ministry, which holds copies of the charter and the annual report. The Ministry then makes assessment of progress towards the charter goals.

The Education Review Office

The Education Review Office (ERO) was originally created to provide accountability, based largely on governance and management criteria. It now has a wider role, assigned after a review in 2000, for evaluating and reporting on education in all schools, all early childhood services, and all other forms of pre-tertiary education in New Zealand. ERO conducts three types of reviews:

- **Education Reviews** - ERO investigates and reports to boards of trustees, managers of early childhood education services and the government on the quality of education provided for children and students in individual centres and schools.
- **Home school Reviews** - ERO reports to the Secretary for Education on the education of students exempted from attending a school.
- **Cluster Reviews** - ERO undertakes reviews of education looking at groups or areas with common features. These have included reports on the performance of schools in a defined geographical area, and at particular populations of students, such as boys.

Each school is evaluated approximately every three years, and reviews are undertaken more frequently where the performance of a school or centre is poor and there are risks to the education and safety of the students. ERO’s framework for reviewing and reporting is based on three review strands: school specific priorities; government priorities; and legislative compliance issues.

Schools are encouraged to review their own performance, and the emphasis of the reviews is whether schools are meeting their own priorities, as well as ensuring that students achieve required standards of educational achievement.

Examples of ERO questioning of schools on student achievement:

- What is the extent and quality of the information the school has about individual student achievement in relation to the essential learning areas, essential skills, attitudes and values, and what the school’s community thinks is important in terms of achievement?
- How well is this information used, both formally and informally,

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to develop programmes to meet the needs of individual and
groups of students?
- Do students reach a satisfactory standard in relation to the
  levels of the curriculum?
- Is the rate of progress of students reasonable in relation to
  what could be expected?
- How well does the school use information about student
  achievement to identify individual or groups of students who
  might be of particular interest or concern (for example, special
  abilities, special needs, gender, Māori, Pacific, other)?
- How well do the school's programmes meet identified needs
  of students who might be of a particular interest or concern?
- How useful is the school's reporting to parents on student
  achievement?

Questioning effective governance:

- What is the quality of the governance and management
  relationship and how well are the respective roles of board
  members and principal understood and acted on?
- How transparent are the school's governance processes to its
  community?
- How effectively does the school gain input from its
  community?
- How effective are school strategic planning and self-review
  processes in bringing about improvements likely to impact on
  student achievement?
- How effectively does the school monitor and evaluate its
  performance and take action to secure improvements?
- How well does the board meet its obligations for being a good
  employer?
- How well does the board support school management to
  create a positive environment where teachers can maximise
  their impact on student achievement?

**School Support Strategies**

The Schools Support Project was initiated by the Ministry of
Education in 1994 in response to a Government request to establish
a range of support strategies for schools. It was expected that these
strategies would:

- enable earlier intervention in `at-risk’ situations;
- provide support to communities to resolve difficulties that
  could negatively impact on student achievement;
- assist schools and their communities to develop self-
  management capability; and,
- provide support for sustained change and improvement in
  schools.

The Safety Net strategy was initiated in 1995 and was the first
component of the Schools Support Project to be implemented.
Included in the Safety Net strategy are four types of interventions: Informal Action; Formal Action; Business Case; and Statutory Action. In broad terms, the four types of interventions can be said to represent a continuum of action, from low level informal action through to statutory intervention by the Ministry of Education. Decisions about the appropriate action depend on the severity of risk and the level of support required.

Informal Action is designed as an ‘early warning’ system to minimise the development of serious risk situations. The majority of cases are intended to be of short duration and usually require only low level support. Where the cases require a more structured approach such as the development of an action plan, or the involvement of external advisors, schools are usually expected to fund these interventions themselves. Informal action is underpinned by the support of local education networks and sector groups, working in collaboration with the Ministry.7

Suggestions for further reading / links


The Education Review Office: www.ero.govt.nz


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