

# Picot Report/*Tomorrow's Schools*

New Zealand, 1945-2013

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This entry posted January 7, 2014.

## A prescription for radical change

In April 1988 *Administering for Excellence*, the report of a taskforce headed by Brian Picot, identified 'serious weaknesses' in New Zealand's three-tiered 110 year-old education system that in its view justified replacement by an entirely new two-tiered structure. The Taskforce envisaged the replacement of the Department of Education by a Ministry of Education and the abolition of regional education boards. All schools were to become autonomous, self-managing learning institutions, controlled by locally elected boards of trustees, responsible for learning outcomes, budgeting, and the employment of teachers. Each institution was to produce a charter outlining the school's mission in relation to its clientele and community, incorporating centrally prescribed requirements of safety, equity and national standards. Some four months later in August 1988 *Tomorrow's Schools*, the Government's response to the Taskforce, largely accepted these recommendations. Legislation giving effect to the proposed new era in education came into force on 1 October 1989.

Over the next two decades the reforms were to impact upon most aspects of New Zealand education. There has, however, been little consensus concerning either the original motive for the reforms or their effect. Commentators have largely adopted one or the other of two major positions on the motives and overall impact of the reforms on schools, teachers, parents and students. Many within the education system argue that the reforms were largely driven by neoliberal ideology epitomised by Treasury and the State Service Commission (SSC), whilst a number of those located mainly but not exclusively outside of the education sector, largely accept the Picot Taskforce's assertion that the old education structures were both outdated and inflexible.

## Policy precedents

Some twenty years after the Picot report was published, what does seem evident is that this, the most significant overall of educational administration in New Zealand since 1877, was the end-product of a lengthy, often complex historical process which saw an ideologically mixed grouping of imperatives coalescing by the mid-1980s into an irresistible common discourse, advocating reform. Here, several factors can be identified. First, throughout the twentieth century New Zealand's public education system had been frequently criticised for facilitating the concentration of decision-making in the hands of a centralised bureaucracy. During the 1970s mounting public pressure for change was reflected in the various publications emanating from the ambitious Educational Development Conference of the early to mid 1970s recommending educational devolution. In the mid-1980s, several opinion polls indicated that as few as 25 per cent of respondents thought that the system was working well. Only the 1982 OECD report provided a contrasting view, but this report had been strongly influenced by senior Department of Education officials.

Second, comprehensive education had long been a target for critics. The early post-Second World War years witnessed the national media, employers, conservative educators and parental groups holding the Department accountable for allegedly poor academic standards. Departmental attempts to counter these allegations frequently backfired, leading to accusations of provider-capture and calls for an independent inquiry. Liberal educators were likewise becoming increasingly critical of the educational bureaucracy for its supposed conservatism, lack of adequate consultation, curriculum rigidity and failure to remedy on-going structural inequities.

Third, from the late 1960s on New Zealand faced both an economic and a cultural crisis. During the following decade a combination of trade imbalances, severe youth unemployment, social polarisation and the rise of a new post-war generation to political power saw the creation of a common discourse emanating from all corners of the political spectrum demanding radical educational reform. Neoliberals became dominant in Treasury and to a certain extent within SSC as well. Prompted by successive governments determined to prune public expenditure, these key state agencies critiqued the Department of Education's allegedly lax management structures, with allegations of financial ineptitude leaked to the national press.

At much the same time neo-Marxist educators were gaining currency within the universities to the extent that education faculties, once among the Department of Education's staunchest allies, now saw the centralised bureaucracy as a major impediment to change. In this they were supported by Māori activists, who attacked the Department for its complicity in failing successive generations of Māori students, and by feminists highly critical of

its male-dominated, hierarchical structure. Moreover, the rapid growth of grassroots initiatives such as Te Kohanga Reo together with the political attraction of devolutionary pilot projects such as the Community Education Initiative Scheme (CEIS) bolstered the case for educational reform along the lines of devolution and consumer choice.

By the early 1980s the entire New Zealand policy environment was becoming radically transformed. In the health sector the influential Cartwright Report resulting from feminist concern over an alleged staff cover-up following the deaths of several female cancer patients at National Women's Hospital, advocated greater medical accountability as well as more community input as an antidote to provider-capture. The Scott Report on the quality of teaching called for professional accountability and parental involvement in teacher appraisal. The Fargher-Probine Report on post-compulsory education and training sought to address gender inequities and Māori underachievement in post-compulsory education through competitive, devolved institutions. Such reports not only eclectically blended radical left-wing and neoliberal concepts, but also dismissed the longstanding claims of the state and its agencies to be disinterested upholders of the public good. By mid-decade, therefore, an ideologically disparate coalition of interests articulating a common policy discourse centering on the need for radical structural reforms in education had emerged to threaten the educational status quo.

## **The Picot Taskforce deliberates**

Given the growing avalanche of criticism concerning public education, the announcement of the Picot Taskforce in July 1987 may well have been a pre-emptive strike by the office of embattled Minister of Education, Russell Marshall. Certainly, the choice of members reflected a belated realisation that the policy environment had radically altered. Taskforce chairman Brian Picot, for example, had a prominent background in the retail industry, a fact subsequently highlighted by opponents of the reforms as *prima facie* evidence of a neoliberal conspiracy to privatize state education. Here the similarities ended, however, for, in addition to being the director of several companies and a past-President of the Auckland Chamber of Commerce, Picot had worked for the National Development Conference and the New Zealand Planning Council as well as having been a University of Auckland councillor, a record that made him attractive both to the Labour Cabinet and to senior education officials. Picot had also authored several papers on contemporary industrial and social issues in which he had expressed admiration for the Scandinavian consensus model of industrial conciliation and distaste for what he saw as an unhealthy social divisiveness.

The Treasury Briefing Papers have often been singled out as the major influence on the Taskforce. However, even before these had made their appearance, Taskforce members had agreed that the existing system of educational administration was outmoded. Hence at its initial meeting the Taskforce discussed the recommendations of the EDC-sponsored Nordmeyer Working Party, and the Fargher-Probine Report, both of which had supported educational devolution.

Devolution, however, was to raise a number of concerns, especially that any devolution of power might lead to school 'hijacking.' Thus the Taskforce concluded that a new Ministry of Education would be necessary to set minimum standards, develop national curriculum guidelines, and facilitate accountability. Decisions on resource allocation, however, were to be relocated at the institutional level. The middle tier of the existing structure, represented since 1877 by the regional education boards, was therefore left with no particular function.

The second meeting of the Taskforce, on 17 August, examined more closely the possible advantages and disadvantages of devolving authority. The ensuing discussion centred on the inevitable tensions between central and local control that had been so astutely identified by commentators such as Leicester Webb some fifty years previously. Like Webb, Taskforce members highlighted the competing interests likely to be present in any devolved system, emphasising the need for controls specifically designed to forestall arbitrary action. Opportunities for choice of school, however, were to be maximised for all groups, especially for those holding strong views about what schools should provide.

Amongst the multiplicity of papers available to the Taskforce as it deliberated during the second half of 1987 the two-volume Treasury Briefing Papers were to become the most controversial, with education policy commentators in particular subsequently singling them out as virtually the only influence on Taskforce members. The second volume, prepared by Simon Smelt and Michael Irwin was, in fact, devoted entirely to education. New Zealand's education system, it was argued, allowed for little consumer choice apart from the Kohanga Reo movement and the post-compulsory sector's ACCESS work training programme. Both these initiatives were regarded as successful attempts to by-pass a system that had failed to react sufficiently to the needs of disadvantaged groups. Moreover, echoing the prevailing anti-provider-capture rhetoric, the Treasury document claimed that a unified teacher workforce hindered the application of incentives for high performance whilst discouraging sanctions for poor performance.

In its critique of public education, Treasury was able to draw upon a wealth of recent academic research both in New Zealand and elsewhere. This included Richard Harker's work on social control, hegemony and cultural

capital, Ranginui Walker's research together with that of Linda and Graham Smith on Pakeha capture of Taha Māori and the struggles of urban Māori, Judith Simon's revelations of how teachers' practices contributed to the denigration of Māori culture in classrooms, Richard Benton's continuing advocacy of a separate Māori-controlled system, and the research of Roy Nash on differential attainment. Treasury was also able to point to increasingly strident range of calls for the centralised education bureaucracy to be held to account for failing Māori and neglecting its Treaty of Waitangi obligations, culminating in the charges levelled at the Department of education by the influential Waitangi Tribunal. In making these points, however, Treasury was largely summarizing the issues raised by educational critics both to the right and the left of the political centre.

## Picot recommendations

Not surprisingly the resulting Picot report, released in April 1988 was to encapsulate the decidedly mixed ideological positions and interests that had given rise to the new policy rhetoric of the 1980s. Individual learning institutions were to constitute the basic unit of educational administration, because these it was contended, were where there was the strongest interest in educational outcomes and where the best information about local circumstances resided. The notion that individual learning institutions could be effectively run by a partnership between teachers and community, can be traced not only to concerns about provider capture, but also to North-Western European industrial precedents about which Picot had previously written with approval. Even the school charter which, as the contract between institution, community and state, was to be the lynchpin of the new structure, was grounded in a number of earlier precedents of decidedly mixed ideological parentage, having been previously suggested in several earlier education policy documents as well as by the Citizen's Association for Racial Equality in its 1984 submission to the Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in Forms 1-7 set up by Labour's Minister of Education, Russell Marshall. The dominant role biculturalism had gained within the policy environment as a result of Māori agitation, supported by an increasing number of liberal Pakeha educators, was likewise strongly reflected in the devolutionary tenor of the Picot Report on the grounds that the new structures would better assist Māori.

Education boards were to be abolished, leaving learning institutions free to choose their own services. For decades, however, education boards had been the subject of controversy, with successive calls for their abolition coming to nothing. A number of ministers of education had criticised them for blocking policy initiatives and their disappearance, therefore, was hardly surprising.

The Picot Report's recommendations for improved coordination between primary and secondary institutions were likewise an acknowledgement of the concerns expressed by radical academics, teachers' unions, business organisations, politicians, traditional conservatives and neo-liberals about the inadequacies of existing assessment regimes and the consequent wastage of young people—a longstanding critique culminating in the Probine-Fargher Report. Arguing that too many people leave school disaffected, with no formal qualifications, the Report proposed the establishment of a single state authority which would be responsible for developing a coordinated system of course offerings and credits to be available full-time or part-time, from any learning institution. This recommendation was later to lead to the National Qualifications Framework.

## What was achieved?

In February 1990, some nine months prior to a general election that saw the National sweep into power, Elizabeth Tennet, the Labour member for Island Bay, sought to justify the educational reforms by claiming that *Tomorrow's Schools* had given parents a real say in their children's education. They would now demand better education from schools in order to both increase their children's future job prospects, and create balanced social individuals. Some nine years later however, a Massey University College of Education Policy Response Group's briefing paper for the APEC Summit concluded that there was scant evidence of any tangible improvements to teaching and learning as a result of site-based management.

Whom then should we believe? Part of the problem in ascertaining the actual impact of the reforms is that there are continuing disagreements over what might constitute 'success' for an education system. The reform's supporters argue that increased parental involvement in schools in itself constitutes evidence that the reforms have not only been successful in their aim, but have also struck a responsive chord in the wider New Zealand society. Cathy Wylie's annual surveys of the impact of *Tomorrow's Schools* on primary and intermediate schools provide some indicative information on boards of trustees in particular. Some four years after implementation, Wylie concluded that whilst the workload of principals, teachers and boards of trustees had soared, education professionals and the community had largely worked together in harmony rather than conflict, as once feared. The concern that boards of trustees would impose rigid and outdated beliefs of what should be taught had not been borne out. However, some parents were becoming more selective with regard to school choice, whilst some schools were more selective in taking students. Moreover, existing resource gaps between schools appeared to be widening, with the best resourced schools tending to be in middle class areas with a high proportion of European students and the least resourced schools in working class areas with significant Māori rolls

A series of reports in the *New Zealand Herald* based largely on interviews with academics, principals, teachers and parents conducted after ten years of *Tomorrow's Schools* concluded that parental choice had not happened for all because the best schools still selected their students. The most successful schools tended to market heavily, but advertising was seen to cut into limited funds, with many teachers resenting both the time and cost involved in marketing. Māori were still disadvantaged, with some 40 per cent of Māori leaving school with no formal qualifications. School principals were now working longer hours and reported spending more time on administration than on leadership. The reforms had thus widened the gap between rich and poor schools. On the other hand the report concluded that most parents seemed happy with the new system, claiming on the basis of polls that some 85 per cent of those with children currently at school were satisfied with their schooling.

In an article for the *Dominion Post* marking the twentieth anniversary of the reforms, Wylie suggested that teachers and community members now had the opportunity to learn from each other, forging links that might have been more difficult, pre-*Tomorrow's Schools*. Conversely, about 15 percent of secondary boards of trustees at any one time were experiencing difficulties, with some 70 percent of boards reporting gaps in expertise in areas such as legal skills and strategic planning. The situation appeared most acute for schools in lower socio-economic areas—however there was no sign of a groundswell of parental dissatisfaction with boards. The system was not about to fall over.

In short, whilst reservations still remain concerning the impact of the reforms, few critics appear to have advocated any serious alternative to the present reformed system. Any suggested changes appear to be more along the lines of tinkering, rather than wholesale change. Possible remedies for identified shortcomings have included: amalgamating boards of trustees in order to pool resources, more funded development programmes and advice for struggling boards, more professional advice regarding the appointment of school principals, and the setting up of a formal disputes resolution process for both parents and students.

Teacher unions remain generally opposed to the reforms. The new Zealand Post-Primary Teachers' Association for instance, tends to regard *Tomorrow's Schools* as having been a mistake, resulting in the systematic polarisation of schools along ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Other critics point to the continuing concentration of resources within the centralized state bureaucracy, accompanied by claims that the number of people employed by state education bureaucracies since the 1980s has actually grown rather than diminished. The National Government from 2008 has been concerned to implement cost-efficiencies throughout the state sector, including education. This has brought criticism from opposition parties, but by 2013 at least, no major political grouping appears to be planning for radical reform of existing educational administrative structures.

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## **Citation of this entry**

Openshaw, R. 2014. Picot Report/Tomorrow's Schools. *Dictionary of Educational History in Australia and New Zealand (DEHANZ)*, 7 January. Available <http://dehanz.net.au>