

## Trustee Perspectives on 1991

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At the beginning of 1991, most Boards of Trustees were over the teething stage of the reforms. They had developed the school charter which was to form the basis of their "contract" with the Ministry of Education for funding and review purposes. They had controlled their operating budget for a full year, and set up the appropriate financial systems. Most had sorted out, if not signed, their property occupancy agreements with the Ministry, which allocated Ministry and board responsibility for meeting the costs of necessary building, repairs and maintenance.

Many boards had had experience of making staff appointments. Relationships at school level were generally good, though a small number of schools experienced problems. Data from NZCER's October-November 1990 survey of primary and intermediate school trustees,<sup>1</sup> and from the Monitoring Today's Schools (MTS) retrospective survey in March 1991 of secondary school trustees<sup>2</sup> indicated that they were confident in their pioneering role, but wanted time to consolidate, to give more time and reflection to the educational work of the school, rather than the dominant demands of administration.

1991 turned out to be an often frustrating year for this aspiration. Trustees are the apex of a tripartite relationship, active on behalf of and responsible to parents, at the local level, but also on behalf of and accountable to Government, at the national level. Decisions at the national level can have a major impact on the scope of boards, their workload, and morale. Largely due to the change of government in October 1990, 1991 was a particularly active year for Government initiatives in education. Of most direct and immediate impact on boards were:

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- the set of Budget linked reviews announced in the Social and Economic Initiatives package of December 1990, to be complete by the end of March or April 1991, particularly the reviews of the Educational and Economic Viability of Small Schools, Funding, and Teacher/Pupil Ratios;
- the need to revise budgets due to some slight financial cutbacks, and a change from 12 to 11 months for a school's financial year, announced in early December 1990 which affected some schools more than others;<sup>3</sup>
- The previous government allocated \$180 million from the sale of Telecom to schools to meet the large backlog of accumulated necessary maintenance work. The new government gave only \$20 million of the money for this purpose. Strong representations from NZ School Trustees Associations and teacher unions led to the redirection of \$80 million from the \$300 million already set aside for capital expenditure to this deferred maintenance, though little work could begin in 1991.
- some uncertainty over whether schools would have to meet the capital-interest costs of the property in their care in the new regime introduced for state services on 1 July. At this stage, the charge is a book-entry only, for accounting purposes. Nonetheless, after expressions of alarm from the NZ School Trustees Association and teacher unions, the decision was made by Government that this would not be passed onto schools, but met by the Ministry of Education from its funding, with Government funding to the Ministry increased accordingly;
- July Budget cutbacks to staffing; and
- the decision to proceed with full bulk funding of schools on a voluntary basis.

Of direct impact for some schools only at this stage, but with long-term implications were two provisions in the Education Amendment Act passed in June. First, schools were allowed to set their own enrolment limits. This mainly affected secondary schools, though patterns of eligibility for enrolment have also changed at some primary schools.<sup>4</sup>

Second, community education forums were not longer mandatory, though affected schools were still to be consulted if a school was to close.

Initiatives which did not have a direct impact on boards<sup>5</sup> but which could have long term and substantial implications for them, particularly for their ability to exercise local consultation processes and decision-making powers in the areas of curriculum, teaching styles, and pupil assessment practices, were the draft National Curriculum, and the Achievement Initiative.

The Employment Contracts Act did not greatly affect people in schools in 1991, though it is likely to affect the 1992 salary negotiations.

Finally, in the Education Amendment Act at the end of the year, provision was made for the election of people who are not parents of children at a school to its Board of Trustees. Trustees in NZCER's 1991 survey were divided about this provision, with 48% in favour, 38% not, and 14% unsure. Interestingly, trustees who had been on their board less than a year were less in favour of this provision than others. The Act also removed minimum staffing levels for schools choosing full bulk funding. NZSTA circulated MPs for the first time when the bill came back to the House for voting with their objections to both provisions.

Although the Budget decisions on small schools and teacher:pupil ratios were not as radical as many feared, the review process left a sour taste. The time-frame was very slim. The reviews themselves were carried out by officials, usually from the Ministry of Education, Treasury and State Services Commission. Trustee and teacher representatives were excluded. This differed markedly from their inclusion in the working parties which did much of the translation of the Picot review to the *Tomorrow's Schools* policy, and their inclusion in working groups on full bulk funding, special education, assessment and teacher appraisal. Many trustees were taken aback to find that the Minister of Education regarded their voluntary input into schools as rendering them unfit to comment on the reviews because they now fell into the category of those with "vested interests".<sup>6</sup> Comprehensive submissions from the trustee and teacher representatives were received, and there was in fact some consultation. The School Trustees Association was particularly active in its support for small schools, which are mostly found in rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

The position of the School Trustees Association on full bulk funding was less clear. Earlier in the year it urged boards not to make up their minds on the issue until more details on what was proposed were available.<sup>8</sup> After the release of the funding formulae, it has supported the right of individual boards to make their own decisions. Some trustees and many teachers saw the NZSTA position as a tacit support for full bulk funding. In part this is because of the NZSTA President's emerging belief that full self-management was only possible if trustees had control of all school funds.<sup>9</sup> In part it was because of the "knock-on" effects for other schools of one school's decisions. This is very usefully documented in Ruth Mansell's study of the Wellington eastern suburbs community forum called in 1990 when a school decided to recapitate. Opponents of full bulk funding were also not unmindful that the estimated \$20 million to set up the full bulk funding trial scheme was probably at the cost of cuts in other areas, such as school staffing which would have a detrimental effect on all other schools.

The 1990 NZCER survey results showed 79% of trustees in its national sample were opposed to full bulk funding, with 11% unsure, and only 9% in favour. The main reasons given for opposing full bulk funding were board workload, that this was Government's responsibility, not trustees, that trustees were part-timers, and amateurs, it would have negative effects on their relations with school staff, and it would increase inequity between schools. Given that boards were making decisions as to whether they would "opt-in" to full bulk funding at the time of the NZCER 1991 survey, trustees were asked what they thought their board decision would be, and the reasons for it. Two percent said their boards would opt for full bulk funding for 1992, and 9% were unsure. (Final figures of schools opting in at 1 April, 1992 were, 41 primary and intermediate, 6 secondary and 2 area schools, 1.8% of the total number of state schools.) The main reasons they gave for their board's likely decision are given in Table 1 (next page).

There is a very important point to take from these views. Most trustees continue to see their role in schools as one of partnership with school staff, rather than the more hierarchical relationship implicit in the full bulk funding model of school self-management. Trustee views of the staff representative on their boards were positive in both the

NZCER and MTS surveys. Data from the NZCER and MTS surveys on trustee responsibilities, and what boards spend their time on also support this conclusion. The model trustees have so far realised in shouldering their responsibilities is more akin to the board of a very cost-conscious voluntary organisation than a profit-seeking business, eager to do what they can to ensure that as much money as possible goes to children in classrooms.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1 Trustee reasons for their Board's likely decision on bulk funding

Reasons	% (N=322)
School would be disadvantaged	39
We have enough to do already	20
We do not want this responsibility	13
No answer	12
Will upset Board/staff relations	12
A way to cut education funding	11
Not good for New Zealand education in the long term	9
Lack of convincing evidence	9

Just over half the trustees in both the 1991 and 1990 NZCER surveys had two or more responsibilities on their boards; it appears from preliminary data from the MTS 1991 secondary survey that this holds true for secondary trustees also. Fewer secondary trustees have secretary or treasurer responsibilities, as befits the larger size of most secondary schools, and their concomitant administrative staffing. The survey data for both secondary and primary trustees shows that they gave time to practical matters as well as the more abstract matters of governance. The MTS 1991 survey asked secondary school trustees to say how much of their time they had spent on governance, and how much on management. It also asked them to describe these terms, which were introduced in 1989 by the then Director-General of Education, Russ Ballard, to distinguish between the roles of the board and the role of the principal. Only 14% of the trustees said they spent

75% or more of their time on governance; another 25% between 50-75%, and 48% spent less than 50%. (13% did not answer the question.) It would appear that the distinction is not shared by many: the boundaries are blurred.

Table 2 shows the proportion of time which primary trustees in NZCER's 1991 survey were devoting to different aspects of school administration.

Table 2 Trustee ranking of time spent on major Board activities by their Board

Areas	Most time %	Second most %	Third most %	Fourth most %	Fifth most %
Financial management	34	31	19	6	6
Day to day management	28	15	16	24	1
Property/maintenance	21	20	30	18	1
Policy decisions	16	22	23	27	2
Other	1	2	2	2	14

While some of trustees' work is initiated by Government, and central government agencies, some by the board itself, other work is initiated by parents. Just under two-thirds of the primary trustees in the NZCER survey had dealt with matters raised by parents. The main areas described by trustees were: discipline, including school uniforms and dress codes, (15%), funding and fundraising (12%), health and safety

(11%), extracurricular provision (9%), the future of the school or dissatisfaction with a staff member (8% each). Others mentioned were school transport (6%), curriculum (5%), class size (4%), provision for Maori children (3%), and homework (2%).

A third of the trustees reported that their board had altered or developed school policy as a result of these parental approaches, and a quarter had sought external advice or assistance in deciding what action to take. Quite a number of the matters raised by parents were dealt with by either the principal (36%) or an individual trustee (37%) discussing it with the parent/s concerned. Only 4% of the matters went to special community/parent meetings.

Primary trustees also reported that their boards had faced and resolved issues and problems arising from their responsibilities such as financial management (68% of trustees in the survey), staff appointments (52%), conflict or difficulty within the Board, or between the Board and school staff (36%) and industrial relations (32%). Most of the responses were made within the Board, with a major source of outside advice being other local schools or principals. Advice on appointments, industrial relations and difficulties in school relations was sought from both NZSTA and NZEI in almost equal proportions. The Ministry of Education was also used.

Many trustees thought their Board did not, in fact, need outside support or assistance. (See Table 3, next page).

Slightly more trustees (26%) judged their board's performance in 1991 as "on top of the task" compared to 1990 (18%), with no change in the percentage of those who regarded themselves as coping (28%) or struggling (3%). Table 4 (next page) gives trustee views of their board's main achievements during the year.

Trustee impressions of their relationships with each other and the school staff during 1991 show little change from the positive picture reported in the 1990 survey results.

The picture these survey results give is of boards who are able to deal confidently with the issues which arise in the normal course of school events. The issues they identified as currently facing their school are mainly issues which arise from outside the school. Funding and property maintenance and development have been top of the list since

1989. It is telling that in 1991 trustees were also giving prominence to a Government policy, bulk funding, which would substantially alter their role.

Table 3 Trustee views of their Board's need for outside support

Topic (N=316)	Yes %	Not Sure %	No %
Financial management	29	8	61
Staff appointments/promotions	23	9	63
Industrial relations	20	15	62
Major policy decisions	15	13	67
Difficulty in school relations	13	9	72

Table 4 Trustee views of their Board's three main achievements in 1991

Views	% (N=322)
Improvement of buildings/grounds	35
Lived within budget	32
Developed policies/planned for future	26
School was a happy place	24
School kept going	17
Purchase of equipment/materials	16
Came to grips with outside requirements	14
Made staff appointments	14
No answer	14
Took initiative	11
Avoided conflict	5

Table 5 Trustee views of the three major issues confronting their Board

Views	% (N=322)
Funding/budgeting	33
Bulk funding	31
Staffing numbers	27
Property and maintenance	25
No answer	17
Future of school	16
Board elections in 1992	11
Changing government policies/lack of stability	8
Parent/community support	8
Relationships at school	8
Updating policies/priority setting	8

For the first time also in this annual survey, changing Government policy became one of the main sources of trustee dissatisfaction with their work. The other major sources of dissatisfaction were, as before, paperwork, dealing with outside agencies (mainly the Ministry of Education), workload, and lack of funding. By contrast, the main sources of satisfaction were largely from tangible contact and achievements within the school. As before, these included an input into school decision-making, doing things for children, seeing positive results from the work, being part of a team, and the school running well.

It was to be expected that the more "bureaucratic" aspects of the reforms would be a new experience for many trustees. There would be parallels in other social services where community groups or individuals have taken on responsibilities in return for funding. The Tomorrow's Schools reforms offered parents more involvement in their children's schools, but they also stressed accountability. Trustees do not appear to shirk this: In the 1991 NZCER survey 65% thought schools needed regular outside reviews, 19% were unsure, and only 12% thought they did not.

Judging by trustee estimations of their satisfaction levels, the tangible satisfactions outweigh the dissatisfactions. However, while stable satisfaction at a medium or high level was much the same as in 1990, fewer trustees reported an increase in satisfaction (16% compared with 26% in 1990), and there was a slight increase in those reporting a decline (29% compared with 22% in 1990).

Satisfaction levels and changes have some bearing on trustee intentions to stand again in the second round of elections, to be held in July 1992. Trustees with a low level of satisfaction, or decreases in satisfaction, were more likely than others to have decided not to stand again, or to be unsure. Twenty-six percent of the trustees in the survey had decided to stand again, 30% were undecided, and 34% had decided not to stand again. Length of service was also a factor, with 38% of the trustees who had been on their board since the first elections in 1989 saying they did not intend to stand again, compared with 17% for those who had been on their board for two years or less.

It is worth noting that 80% of the NZCER 1991 survey participants had been on their boards since 1989, 11% for one to two years, and 9% less than a year. Just under a third of the trustees said their board had retained all its original elected parent trustees, with only 12% reporting that their board had kept only one or two, and only 1% saying that none of the original parent members remained. Results from the December 1991 NZSTA national telephone survey of primary, intermediate and secondary school trustees in relation to the 1992 elections<sup>11</sup> gave similar indications of stability in boards' first terms of office. Continuity between the first and second terms of the boards also looked assured (if parents support existing trustees) for most schools, with only a fifth of the schools in the NZSTA survey facing the prospect of an entirely new board after the elections.

It seems to me that the more problematic aspects of the role of Boards of Trustees lie in their relationship with Government and the Ministry of Education. One wonders whether the knots in this relationship would have been so prominent if these reforms had taken place when the economy was buoyant, or a different approach to resolving economic structures had been taken. Funding, the lack of it, or the loss of it, remains a major concern of trustees. The 1991 survey

results show more trustees than in the previous year judging their school's funding both adequate (55% compared with 40%), and inadequate (33% compared with 24%). This may indicate increasing clarity after the first cautious year of responsibility for the operating grants; it may also indicate that inequities in resources remain or are growing between schools. A January 1989 Heylen poll of teachers, principals and the public found that the majority agreed that "schools in different areas will not be equal as a result of the new system", despite the emphasis on equity, and better meeting the needs of disadvantaged students in the Picot report, and Tomorrow's Schools framework.

While trustees think increasingly in terms of securing what resources they can for their own schools, sometimes at the doubting of the worth of national support systems and the size of the central education agencies, they also continue to perceive those schools as located in a national system of educational provision, without major disparities. Trustee responses to a question in the 1991 NZCER survey on whether some of a school's government funding should be linked to its pupils' performance on national assessment tasks or tests are also revealing. Only 5% thought it should, 74% said no, and 17% were unsure. The main reasons were that this would be unfair, create elitist schools, and that other variables other than the school were related to pupil performance.

Apart from funding and the inevitable paperwork, trustee uneasiness with the relationship seems to stem largely from an abiding sense that the partnership mooted at the start of the reforms is not always realized. The dismay at the speed of change, the amount of continual change, lack of full consultation over bulk funding, and lack of inclusion of trustee representatives on the Social and Economic Initiatives review teams is evidence of that.<sup>12</sup> The fact that most boards missed the Ministry set deadlines for charters and property occupancy agreement, without penalty, and that many boards were not on schedule to meet the deadline for policy creation also shows that boards are prepared to take the initiative where they can, and to create room for manoeuvre where possible.

The major question at the start of 1992 for trustees is probably whether their emphasis on partnership as the main principle of their relations at both school and national level can be maintained in the first case, and enhanced in the second.

#### Notes

- 1 Wylie, C. *The Impact of Tomorrow's Schools in Primary Schools and Intermediates – 1990 Survey Report* Wellington: NZCER, 1991.
- 2 Keown, P. & McGee, C. *National Survey of Secondary Schools Working Paper 1*, Hamilton: Monitoring Today's Schools Research Project, University of Waikato, 1991.
- 3 Detailed in "Funding Plans in Chaos", *Dominion Sunday Times*, 9 December, 1990, p. 17.
- 4 The underlying constraint is the school property, and school views of optimum roll numbers. Contributing school decisions to recapitate, i.e., to offer Form 1 and 2 levels, can mean restrictions on numbers coming in at the new entrant level, as some parents in a Wellington suburb found when they could not enrol their children at the school closest to them. Some elements of school selectivity also appear to be at work. (See Camille Guy, "Tomorrow's Schools: A Touch of Class", *NZ Herald*, 7 December, 1991.)
- 5 Indeed, I suspect that the disdain with which the semi-glossy artistic cover of the draft statement was greeted by some trustees of my acquaintance was not an untypical reaction. Trustees generally did not consider the document in depth, perhaps because they did not find it controversial, echoing what they understood to be happening in their school anyway. The cost of producing the draft statement was of more immediate interest to those trustees who believe that the costs of the work of the central Government agencies is at the expense of children in classrooms.
- 6 See e.g., *NZ Herald*, 19 December, 1991. Roger McClay, the Associate Minister for schools also gave similar views:  

The exclusion of teachers and school trustees from the education reviews is to avoid special interests being pushed.
- 7 In March 1991 it was able to release the results of a postal survey of rural schools undertaken in September-October 1990, and additional comments from schools reacting to the review, with the support of Federated Farmers (*Rural Schools – The Fabric of the Rural Community*). It is

interesting in this context to note that most of NZSTA's National Council in 1991 were from schools in rural areas: probably a fair representation of schools as institutions, though not of the school population. Most were also from secondary school boards. (STA News, July 1991).

8 Evening Post, 12 February, 1991

9 In NZSTA's Annual Report, he said:

There is concern at the apparent reluctance of the central education bureaucracy to devolve real power to boards of trustees compounded by the reluctance of many boards of trustees to take on the responsibility of effective power.

See also Shattky, G. "Self Management for Schools – A Personal Perspective" in Wylie, C. (Ed.) *Self-Managing Schools Conference – What's Best for Our Children?* Wellington: NZCER, 1991. The transcript of a conversation between the President and the Minister of Education, in which the President seemed to give his support to full bulk funding also reached many trustees and teachers. (Otago Daily Times, 21 June, 1991)

10 This is explored more fully in Wylie (1992).

11 NZSTA has been contracted by the Ministry of Education to run the elections, encourage people to stand and provide initial training for new trustees after the elections.

12 In 1990, trustees were also publicly upset when the preamble to the mandatory part of the charters stating a contractual agreement between Government and boards was changed without consultation. The Government's desire to change from what would have been a legal requirement for it to provide schools with funding to meet their locally decided charter objectives is understandable, but the way it was done was regrettable.

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