

# Tomorrow's Primary Schools: Time to Evaluate Governance Alternatives?

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## Introduction

It is almost two decades since the reforms known as 'Tomorrow's Schools' radically decentralised the administration of New Zealand primary schools. Designed to improve the responsiveness, accountability and community control of schools, the success or otherwise of these administrative reforms has not been formally evaluated. Meanwhile, expectations of what schools should deliver have changed markedly, with policy makers increasingly concerned with reducing educational disparity. This concern has led to Parliament's education and science select committee announcing in May 2006 that it will hold an inquiry into 'making the schooling system work for every child'. The Education Review Office (ERO) – which is responsible for reviewing school effectiveness – is also currently including 'the extent to which ... [schools are] providing a good education for those for whom the system is not working' in its reviews of schools.

If policy makers are serious about addressing student underachievement, perhaps it is time to examine the governance of our primary schools.<sup>1</sup> Although there are many factors affecting student achievement, logically it can be argued that improving the quality of governance should improve school effectiveness.

This article examines evidence for the effectiveness of primary school boards of trustees and suggests how governance may be improved in the interests of reducing educational disparity and raising overall student achievement. The article is based on recent research by the author (Springford, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

## A brief background

Around half a million children are involved in primary schooling, which is compulsory from the age of six. Although New Zealand has high rates of student achievement, it also

has one of the widest gaps in the OECD between the highest and lowest achieving students.<sup>3</sup>

In 1989 the Tomorrow's Schools reforms decentralised primary school administration, from highly centralised control by ten education boards to over 2,000 boards of trustees controlling individual schools. New Zealand primary schools are relatively small, with the median school size being 150–199 students. The same governance structure is used for schools as small as nine students in remote rural localities as for the largest schools of over 1,000 students, despite widely varying needs and pools of potential trustees. The predominantly parent-run boards of trustees are responsible for setting the strategic direction and values of each school, and rely on the professional expertise of the school management for advice and to implement their decisions.

Boards of primary schools comprise between three and seven (commonly five) parent trustees elected by school parents, plus the school principal and a staff trustee elected by the school staff. The accountability of boards to the government and their local communities is expressed in the school charter.

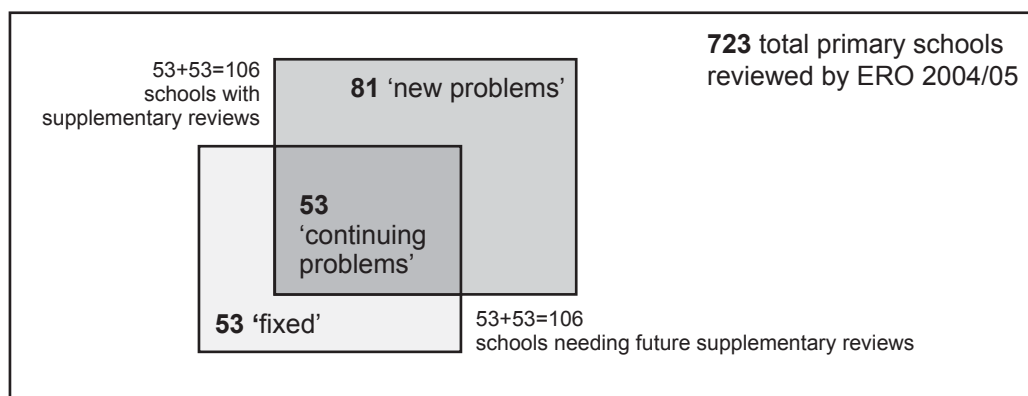
Elections for boards of trustees are mostly held every three

1 Primary schools include full primary schools (years 1–8), contributing primary schools (years 1–6) and intermediate schools (years 7–8). These are both state and state integrated schools, including those kura kaupapa which cater for year 1–year 8 students.

2 I would like to thank Scott Metcalfe, Jonathan Boston, Liz Gordon, Cathy Wylie, Daniel Bulman, Andrew Ladley and Sunniva Zoete-West who commented on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to acknowledge the generous help from the staff of the Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office, Multi Serve and the New Zealand School Trustees Association, Michael Mintram, Amanda Wolf and Deborah Laurs, especially with the original research paper.

3 International studies like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have significantly influenced government expectations of the school system. The 2000 literacy results for 15 year olds showed that the average level of literacy achievement was high, but New Zealand had an unusually long 'tail' of underachievement. These 15 year olds had between one and three years of secondary school, with their main literacy development occurring in the first eight years of schooling at primary school.

**Figure 1: Primary schools reviewed by ERO in 2004/05, including current and future supplementary reviews (to scale)**



years, although some boards also have mid-term elections. Almost anyone can stand as a trustee to represent the school community, but in practice trustees over-represent New Zealand European students and under-represent students from other ethnic groups. Over half of parent trustees on primary school boards were newly elected in 2004. For most trustees this is their third job, competing for time with paid work and parenting commitments, and averaging three hours a week.

## How effective are primary school boards of trustees?

Many factors affect student achievement – the student's natural ability, family influence, early childhood experience, effectiveness of teaching, principal leadership, school governance and the external resourcing of the school. It is difficult to isolate the impact of school governance. Even evaluating the performance of primary schools by measuring the difference the school makes to student achievement, between school entry (usually at age five) and the end of year 6 or 8 when students go to the next stage of schooling, is impossible because of the current lack of uniform, comprehensive student achievement information across primary schools.

Instead, this article examines the effectiveness of board governance in terms of the expected role for boards within current government expectations of the school sector. Those expectations are that:

- Effective teachers work in partnership with students' families, recognise students as individuals with diverse needs and respond with appropriate teaching strategies.
- The principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school.

- Boards ensure that their schools are quality providers through evidence-based planning centred on student learning needs, a robust self-review programme and an effective principal performance system.
- The Ministry of Education monitors schools and quickly identifies and supports any boards which are struggling with their role.
- In the rare situation where ERO finds a school is not meeting expectations, the ministry ensures swift support to reduce the educational risks for students.<sup>4</sup>

Boards of trustees appear to have substantial responsibility for raising student achievement and reducing educational disparity. Boards are expected by the government to set and monitor the strategic direction of the school, based on student learning needs and in consultation with their communities. To this end, they employ school staff and approve the school budget. Accountability to both the government and local community underpins these responsibilities. These aspects of board effectiveness are examined in turn,<sup>5</sup> beginning with evidence of overall school and board effectiveness from ERO review reports.

### 1. ERO review reports

Evidence for assessing the overall effectiveness of schools and their boards comes from regular ERO review reports. When ERO decides that the school is failing to meet

<sup>4</sup> Drawn in part from the following ministry documents: *The Schooling Strategy 2005–2010*, *Statement of Intent 2005–2010*, *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis* and *Working in Partnership 2004–2007*.

<sup>5</sup> The board's financial role is not discussed, as the government is currently reviewing school operation funding, with a report expected by 31 October 2006.

student learning needs<sup>6</sup> or that the safety of students is at risk, a supplementary review is scheduled. Such follow-up visits usually occur within 12 months.<sup>7</sup>

The aggregated data from ERO review reports suggest that one in five primary schools are under-performing (with half of these having persisting difficulties), and that the frequency of supplementary reviews is increasing. More specifically:

- 18.5% of primary schools were identified by ERO in 2004/05 as being of sufficient concern to warrant a supplementary review within 12 months.
- Half of the boards that had a supplementary review in 2004/05 (due to previously identified poor performance) were not able to 'fix' their school prior to ERO's return (usually one year later).<sup>8</sup>
- The proportion of schools requiring closer monitoring through supplementary reviews has steadily grown in recent years, from 14% in 2002/03 to 19 % in 2004/05.<sup>9</sup>

The data also echo the findings of earlier research on the greater vulnerability of schools that are small, low decile, rural or have a higher proportion of Māori students, (ERO, 1998; Connelly, 1998). The rate of supplementary reviews in 2004/05 for decile 1 and 2 schools (those with the lowest socio-economic status) was four and a half times that for decile 9 and 10 schools. Similarly, 'very small' schools (with fewer than 50 students) were four times more likely than 'large' schools (over 250 students) to need a supplementary review. Some 38% of students in schools identified as poorly performing in 2004/05 were Māori, yet Māori students comprised just 23% of the total primary student population at 1 July 2005.

As well as 'snapshot' data from schools reviewed in any year, aggregated ERO review data can give a longitudinal view of students' educational environment as they move through their primary years. This shows similar school performance problems, with adverse effects for students. For instance, 38% of full primary schools attended by the cohort of children starting as new entrants in 1996 came under supplementary or special review during the children's eight years of primary schooling.<sup>10</sup>

The evidence from ERO reviews if anything understates the extent of poor performance because of the following limitations:

- Schools are reviewed on average every three years. This is potentially a long time in the education of a child (who is at primary school for six or eight years or at intermediate for only two years) and can mean a significant delay in identifying a decline in school performance, which may adversely affect particular children.
- Such reviews provide only a 'snapshot' in the life of the school. Schools are notified of a review about a month in advance of visits by ERO officers, and these visits last from two to eight days. However, ERO does look at the school's documentation, including policy documents and the school's records of student achievement, before the on-site phase of the review.
- ERO relies to some extent on boards' ability to self-review through the board assurance statement (BAS) and the self-audit checklist, yet evidence discussed later in this article suggests that trustee self-awareness may be limited.
- ERO does not report on other agencies in the school sector, which may be better placed to influence some aspects of school effectiveness than individual boards.

## 2. Planning, monitoring and reporting

Boards have been increasingly encouraged to focus on raising student achievement. These requirements have existed for some time, with the first national administration guidelines (NAGs) in 1993 requiring

6 Some students may still experience effective teaching in a school under supplementary review, just as a school on ERO's regular review cycle may have classes where teaching is ineffective.

7 The Picot report, which ushered in the Tomorrow's Schools reforms, recommended reviewing all schools every two years. The current official expectation is that schools are reviewed three years, and ERO has increased the frequency of its regular reviews from an average of three years and four months in 2004/05 to an average of three years in 2005/06. The goal suggests an incentive to reduce the rate of supplementary reviews. ERO's decision to schedule a supplementary review is based on its confidence in the board to remedy problems identified in the regular review.

8 This pattern of ERO needing to undertake subsequent repeat supplementary visits was also noted by ERO five years ago, when 45% of schools having supplementary reviews did not meet requirements in that subsequent review (Clothier, 2001).

9 The increase may be partly due to the bedding in of both changes in expectations through the Education Standards Act and ERO's new approach to school reviews.

10 The overall proportion of students in these 475 poorly performing schools will be less than 38% of the primary school population, as full primary schools tend to be smaller schools.

boards, through school management, to identify and address barriers to student achievement. The 1999 NAGs, which took effect from July 2000, required that boards address the needs of students at risk of underachievement, consult with and report to their communities, and develop strategic plans.

The most recent development, the Education Standards Act 2001, strengthened the requirement for school boards – ‘like the government departments but with considerably fewer resources’ (Smelt, 1998) – to plan, monitor and report in order to reduce disparity and raise student achievement. Boards had almost a year after enactment – during which time they received ministry-funded training and support – before beginning implementation for 2003. From 2004 boards have been required to give the ministry a copy of their school charter and an analysis of student outcomes against annual targets.

Planning and monitoring a school’s strategic direction based on student learning needs requires complex skills. Primary school trustees need to be capable of robust self-review, to be able to critique aggregated student achievement data, to consult effectively, to base principal performance expectations and school resourcing on strategic priorities, to effectively monitor progress and to take appropriate action as good employers if progress is inadequate. Yet evidence suggests that trustee capacity for planning and reporting was still developing. When the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) conducted its periodic survey of primary trustees in term two of 2003,<sup>11</sup> boards should have had their charter and first set of annual targets in place, having analysed their student learning needs and consulted with their communities. Boards would also have been getting reports, over an agreed timeframe, on how well the targets were being met. However, only 55% of trustees reported that they had student achievement data in all areas to use for 2003 achievement targets. In other words, around half of boards had not been able to organise their schools in time to implement the new planning and reporting requirements in their school, although the ministry figures for 2004 show that 89% of primary boards did submit charters. According to the survey, many trustees had not shifted their focus from the traditional parent committee priorities of property, fund-raising and school finances to student learning outcomes.

Given that submitting the annual charter was a clear legal requirement for boards under the Education Standards

Act 2001, and that both monitoring at-risk students and strategic planning had been requirements since 2000, the figure of one out of ten schools failing to submit charters in 2004 seems high.

Further, more than half of the boards in the NZCER survey did not fulfil the Act’s requirements to focus with their communities on student achievement by consulting over ‘strategic planning/charter’. Similarly, half of the two-thirds of trustees who felt their school had an identifiable Māori community had not consulted with their Māori community in the past year. Trustees were mostly unaware of their failures to meet legislative requirements for consultation: when asked if there were any issues for the board around community consultation, two-thirds said ‘no’ and just 17% said ‘yes’.

Worryingly, a study in 2002 of school board chairpersons in South Auckland reported that only two of 16 chairpersons were able to interpret accurately their school’s student achievement reports. However, on average the same chairperson group rated their confidence in their ability to interpret the data as seven out of ten.<sup>12</sup> Trustee capacity ‘has been assumed rather than systematically developed, and the result is, that in the most disadvantaged communities at least, lay governors struggle to perform the governance role that was envisaged’ (Robinson et al., 2003).

In terms of robust self-review – necessary for effective strategic planning – trustees’ perceptions of their performance as recorded in the NZCER survey seem to be much more positive than the reality indicated by the survey results. The similarly high rates of positive relationships reported gives the impression that boards use quality of relationships as the indicator that they are fulfilling expectations.

### 3. Employer role

Boards appear uncomfortable with their employer role. Where possible, employer responsibilities are delegated to the principal as day-to-day manager of the school, and the

<sup>11</sup> The NZCER survey data are now three years old and the trustee response was 50% (albeit from 69% of surveyed schools, which were a representative selection of New Zealand primary schools as a whole), but the revealed attitudes and practices are sufficiently at odds with government direction over the years to cast serious doubt on board effectiveness in meeting current expectations.

<sup>12</sup> The study is of interest because of what it suggests about boards of trustees’ capacity, rather than about South Auckland schools in particular. Since this study, the Otara Boards’ Forum now supports a number of South Auckland schools.

board's role is to receive reports that these responsibilities have been met. With the tasks of principal appointment and appraisal, where delegation to the principal is not possible, most boards contract outside expertise to help. Using outside expertise and delegating to the principal is prudent, but the extent of delegation and outsourcing does raise questions about the efficiency and appropriateness of boards of trustees being employers. Brooking's 2002 study of principal appointments also showed that too often boards struggled with their task of appointing the best-suited person. That 19% of schools reviewed in 2004/05 were judged to be poorly performing further raises doubts about boards' ability to use the principal performance management process to ensure that their school is a quality provider.

#### 4. Relationship with the government

A key assumption of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms is that boards will be accountable to the government. Just as there can be difficulties with the model of voluntary organisations as agents of the government (Cribb, 2005), the evidence from the NZCER survey in 2003 suggests that trustee perceptions of accountability to the government are quite weak. Of the trustees responding to that survey, around a quarter each felt responsible to the government, to the ministry and to ERO. If around three-quarters of trustees in primary schools do not feel responsible to the government, this must have significant implications for the successful implementation of any school sector policies. The only partial success, at least initially, of the Education Standards Act planning and reporting requirements, apparent from the NZCER survey, demonstrates that there are problems with trustees' understanding of, and capacity to implement, the government requirements.

Research by Robinson and colleagues (2003) implied that schools tend to develop their own expectations and ways of doing things that are very much locally driven. And 'locally driven' means not so much by the wider school community of parents, but by the school staff and the trustees, past and present. This local school 'culture' may override boards' responsiveness to government requirements and expectations.

The extent of decentralisation under Tomorrow's Schools creates challenges for the government in communicating required changes, let alone ensuring effective implementation of them.<sup>13</sup> When the ministry needs to communicate required school changes through

boards of trustees, the circulars and booklets have to reach the board chairperson and the board agenda, and be understood and accepted by both trustees and the school staff. At every stage of this long chain of communication there is a potential for breakdown or misunderstanding. This may partly explain an increasing trend for agencies to work directly with schools (Wylie, 2002).

Boards also appear to be relying increasingly on income from school donations, fund-raising and foreign, fee-paying students. A government review of school operation funding will be completed by 31 October 2006. However, if trustees believe the government cannot be relied upon to fund their school adequately, this may affect their sense of accountability. Trustees will not necessarily share the ethos of New Zealand's public service.

#### 5. Relationship with community

Although ensuring that New Zealand has a school system that works for all students is a government priority, the self-governing nature of schools is not on the policy agenda: the school board model is not open for debate. This suggests, perhaps, that the strongest reason for the continued government commitment to Tomorrow's Schools is the democratic-populist ethos (Fiske and Ladd, 2000), which assumes that local communities should have a real voice in their school.

Newport (2000) used the phrase 'parent power' to encapsulate the uniqueness of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms. Yet parent communities appear to be relatively powerless in their theoretical partnerships with boards of trustees. The option of moving their children to another school is limited for some families and comes with costs for others. The board of trustee model in practice appears to be not particularly democratic, and sections of school communities seem to be disengaged. Issues include:

- Low electoral participation. During the last round of board elections in 2004, almost half of primary schools had insufficient candidates standing to require a voting election. Thirteen per cent had fewer candidates than positions on the board. Where elections were held, the number of candidates

13 John Martin's description of contracting under the 1993 health reforms as a 'long chain of accountability' appears to apply equally to the decentralisation under Tomorrow's Schools (Martin, lecture to Victoria University Masters of Public Policy students, 2003).

standing for election was still small, with, on average, around two more candidates than positions. If Hamilton trustee elections are typical of voting patterns, then in the half of schools that actually hold elections, perhaps only a quarter of parents elect their boards of trustees.<sup>14</sup>

- Limited sense of responsibility to the community. Of the trustees who responded to the NZCER's 2003 survey, less than three-quarters felt responsible to their students, less than half felt responsible to parents, and just over a quarter felt responsible to the community.
- Inadequate consultation with the community over strategic direction, as previously mentioned.
- Increasing parental complaints to ERO and calls for an alternative agency to hear individual family complaints about schools.<sup>15</sup>

Clarence Beeby provided the ultimate justification for a community voice in schools when he quoted James Shelley from 1921: 'You tell me the aims of life and I'll tell you the aims of education' (Beeby, 1992, p.300). In other words, education concerns all aspects of life, which the community represents. In the Tomorrow's Schools reforms, David Lange sought to create a structure that was 'capable of change in response to what was happening in the wider community', because of concern about the rigidity of the education administration in the 1980s (Lange, 1992, p.43). It may be time to explore, however, whether there are more effective ways of ensuring community voice at school level.

## Summary

If reducing educational disparity is a priority for policy makers, then the current governance model needs scrutiny. Although certainly not the only factor influencing student achievement, boards are currently expected to

have a substantial role in reducing disparity. Yet the available evidence suggests that too many boards are having difficulty fulfilling their responsibilities. In order to meet expectations, boards need firstly to accept their responsibilities, and secondly to understand and employ current good practice. Current government expectations imply a high level of managerial skills on the part of trustees for boards to govern effectively; publications to advise trustees require high literacy levels; and much of the training and support provided relies on boards' ability to self-review and recognise need. Primary school boards appear to have made a shaky start to meeting the strengthened legal requirements to plan strategically. They also appear uncomfortable with their employer role. Finally, the dual accountability to the government and the local community that underpins the current governance model appears more theoretical than real.

## Future directions

There are at least three possible directions for the future: continue with the self-governing school model, but strengthen support for at-risk boards of trustees; implement a completely different structure for administering schools; or pilot new governance arrangements and evaluate their effectiveness.

### Option 1: Better support for boards of trustees

This option would involve enhanced early detection of and then support for at-risk boards. This would build on current structures. The ministry could, for instance, aim to double both its detection rate of at-risk primary boards and schools, and the rate of statutory intervention.

### Option 2: An alternative administration structure

A second possibility would be the creation of formalised school clusters. For example, approximately 200 ministry-designated geographic clusters of primary schools could be established, each one under the oversight of a ministry-appointed cluster principal. Features of such a governance system could include:

- the continuation of many of the current freedoms of individual primary schools (such as teacher and support staff appointments, budget-setting and property management);

<sup>14</sup> An analysis of election return data for parent trustees for schools in Hamilton during the 2004 elections indicates that voting turnouts (participation rates) for primary schools were on average 18–28% of potential voters (results compiled by G. Kitto from data published in the *Waikato Times*; personal email, 1 November 2005). This contrasts with the 82% voting turnout for the Hamilton East and Hamilton West seats in the September 2005 parliamentary election.

<sup>15</sup> Although two extra staff to act as advocates for young people in the education system were appointed to the office of the children's commissioner around five years ago, there have been a number of calls for an alternative agency to hear individual family complaints about schools, for example an education ombudsman, or a legal review agency.

- the cluster principal having responsibility for the appointment, support and development of each school principal;
- the cluster principal having responsibility for ensuring that each school's strategic direction was developed in consultation with its community, and was based on valid and reliable student achievement data;
- instead of school boards of trustees, each local school community having the option (depending on community interest) of electing one or two parents to form an advisory group for the cluster principal to consult;
- students and their families having a chain of appeal, starting with the local school principal, then the cluster principal, and finally a highly visible appeal authority within the ministry.

### Option 3: Piloting an alternative administration structure

A third possibility would be to establish a series of clusters (as above) on a pilot basis and evaluate their effectiveness. Poorly performing schools or areas would be the priority for inclusion in such clusters, but it would also be important to include a representative sample of primary schools. The measure of success would be whether the cluster approach was more effective in raising overall student achievement, particularly for students at risk of underachievement. The model could be extended to all primary schools if found to be successful.

Such options will need further analysis, including examining overseas experience with clustering and comparative data relevant to New Zealand's current approach. Clearly, the effectiveness and efficiency of more intensified support and intervention (option 1) should be assessed against alternatives for primary school administration. However, the available evidence certainly suggests that intensified early detection and support in itself might be insufficient, for a number of reasons.

The 12–15% of schools identified in the ministry's Statement of Intent 2005–2010 as at risk (primary and secondary), and thus open to possible action, is at odds with the 19% of primary schools identified by ERO in 2004/05 as poorly performing. There is a real risk that the ministry may be reaching only around half of the boards that need support. The low rate of statutory intervention seems to indicate that the ministry is underestimating the

seriousness of an adverse ERO report;<sup>16</sup> and that both the ministry and ERO are overestimating the ability of boards to 'fix' schools on their own, given that only half were able to do so within a year.

Further, aspects of adverse ERO reports are not the only indicators that the ministry uses to identify at-risk boards through its schools monitoring system.

And while the ministry funds four main regional training providers for school boards, and various School Trustees Association services, none of these support contracts have been formally evaluated. In addition, the self-governing nature of school boards means that almost all support of this kind relies on trustees recognising their own needs. Both the NZCER survey results and other literature indicate that board self-awareness is not high.

On the other hand, formalising the cluster approach (either option 2 or option 3) might mean only minimal change in practice for those working in the primary school sector, as many support services for schools are currently provided at a cluster level. Formalising clusters could make it easier for school management to focus on student achievement, by allowing for greater efficiency and support in areas such as professional development, pooling relief teachers and property support.

Whatever the preferred option, it will be essential that any change to the future administration of primary schools is evidence-based. As well as literature on overseas administrative systems, significant New Zealand research will become available over the next 12 months to help fine-tune the way forward: the education and science select committee inquiry into 'making the schooling system work for every child'; ERO's reporting on 'the extent to which the school is providing a good education for those for whom the system is not working'; the government review of school operation funding; the next NZCER survey of primary trustees in early 2007; and the next Best Evidence Synthesis on Leadership report in June 2007. The level of community support and capacity for the current board of trustees model could be ascertained by evaluating voter turnout and

16 Intervention under part 7A of the Education Act – by the minister of education or the secretary for education – ranges from asking boards to supply information to replacing a board with a commissioner. A limited statutory manager to take over some of the board's responsibilities for up to two years is the mechanism most commonly used. In 2005, 4.7% of primary school boards experienced statutory interventions, with the use of 64 limited statutory managers and 28 commissioners.

candidate availability during the next trustee elections in early 2007. There is also considerable potential to get a better picture of board functioning with existing data by matching ERO reports, ministry support and intervention and trustee uptake of voluntary training.

In the meantime, the detection of and support for at-risk and poorly performing boards by ERO and the ministry can and should be intensified, so that students are not put at risk because they are in schools that do not become part of any clustering should such options be pursued.

## Conclusion

This article suggests that, given current government expectations, and evidence of ineffectiveness and limited community voice, an unquestioned commitment to the current board of trustees model for all primary schools puts a significant proportion of New Zealand children at risk of failing to achieve their learning potential. While the most pressing priority is quickly detecting and supporting all at-risk schools and their boards, the real challenge is to find the right scale of administration of primary schools, and a system that is evidence-based and can better deliver high achievement and high equity outcomes.

I would like to acknowledge everyone, both paid and voluntary, working in the school sector and doing their best to make Tomorrow's Schools work for our children. I hope this article can be part of a dialogue as we look for evidence of what will reduce educational disparity. There seems to be a consensus in New Zealand that we want all children to get a good education, regardless of where in the country they are, which school they are at or whose classroom they are in. In the face of potential widespread environmental, economic and societal change, it seems more important than ever that all children achieve their potential.

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