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When Tomorrow Comes: contextualising the independent review of Tomorrow's Schools

Abstract

The Tomorrow's Schools reforms in 1989 fundamentally changed primary and secondary schooling in New Zealand. While the devolved nature of Tomorrow's Schools has enabled higher levels of local autonomy, it has also been criticised for opening up schools to marketisation and contributing to inequality between schools. Around 30 years after the original reforms, a significant government-sponsored review was undertaken into whether the compulsory schooling system was still fit for purpose under the Tomorrow's Schools settings. This article finds that there is a mismatch between the recommended structural reform and the resulting 'reset' of Tomorrow's schools.

Keywords Tomorrow's Schools, education, policy, reform

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Education policy and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand can be complex and highly contested, with multiple and diverse perspectives (Cherrington et al., 2021). This is not surprising: education is generally the third-largest expense for government after welfare and health (Treasury, 2022), and most people in Aotearoa New Zealand will interact with the compulsory schooling system at some point in their lives. Some of the most significant, albeit contested, changes to compulsory schooling came about through the Tomorrow's Schools reforms in 1989. Some 30 years later, the government established the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce to assess whether the provision of compulsory schooling was still fit for purpose (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2019, p.8). This article begins by situating the Tomorrow's Schools review within the broader history of education in Aotearoa New Zealand, and then considers the implications of the government's response to the review. (See also O'Neill

in this issue for further insights into the roles and aims of the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce.)

Three key shifts for education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand

Since the Second World War, the New Zealand education system has broadly shifted through three distinct eras or 'ways' (Power and Whitty, 1999). It is useful to understand these high-level shifts when considering the independent review of Tomorrow's Schools as it helps to contextualise some of the underpinning philosophies behind educational reforms (see Openshaw, 2009 and Wood, Thrupp and Barker, 2021 for further discussion).

broad consensus for such a system during this period: a fully-funded state education system was fundamentally seen as a public good. Having an educated population was better for everyone and the economy, and it followed that the state should intervene to provide this (ibid.).

The 'second way' (1984–99)

When the fourth Labour government was elected in 1984, it embarked on large-scale neoliberal reforms. Humpage (2017) has described this as New Zealand transforming 'from the land of milk and honey to the land of me and money' (p.132). These reforms made major changes to New Zealand society, not least through the mass

competitive marketplace in which some would 'succeed' while others would 'fail' (Davies and Bansel, 2007). However, Codd (2005b) has argued that neoliberalism reduces education 'to a commodity, a private rather than a public good [where] the central aim of education becomes the narrow instrumental one of preparing people for the job market' (p.196). The neoliberal reforms to education involved two distinct and contradictory policy agendas – a 'process of simultaneous devolution and control' (p.194).

Some state control was devolved ...

During the late 1980s and 1990s, successive governments sought to transform New Zealand's education system through 'devolution' of some state control and opening up the system to marketisation (Dobbins, 2010), as the education system was perceived by many to be outdated and inflexible (Openshaw, 2009). One of the most significant changes to education from this period is what is commonly referred to as Tomorrow's Schools. Following the Picot Report in 1988, the fourth Labour government was persuaded to transform New Zealand's education system into one based on the market-driven ideas of devolution, efficiency and choice (Codd, 2005b). Tomorrow's Schools decentralised New Zealand's education system, and the power to govern schools was devolved to individual schools. Schools became self-managing entities governed by boards of trustees, and were able to differentiate themselves from one another in the education 'marketplace'. One of the main selling points was that communities would have much more say in their local schools.

However, the underlying assumption of Tomorrow's Schools was that what works for business will work best for education – particularly the idea that increasing school choice for parents, and increasing parents' ability to influence school governance, will lead to better educational outcomes. Haque (2014) has critiqued the lack of robust policy analysis at the time to address this assumption, which was not helped by the speed at which the reforms were implemented. Tomorrow's Schools saw schools opened up to increased marketisation; schools were forced to compete with each other for students and

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The 'first way' (1945–84)

After the Second World War, New Zealand enjoyed what Cotterell (2017) describes as the 'Post-War Long Boom' (p.164). New Zealand's economy was performing well, and the Keynesian policies of successive governments ensured that New Zealand remained a highly controlled welfare state up to the mid-1980s (Humpage, 2017). This period can be described as the 'first way' (Power and Whitty, 1999). Education policy throughout this period was highly centralised (led by the Department of Education) and interventionist. Compared with education today, this prescriptive approach made it difficult for schools to tailor what they taught, and how, to meet the needs of their communities. It was also difficult for local communities to have a say in how their schools operated (Dobbins, 2010). That said, there was

deregulation and privatisation of assets and services that were previously held, or delivered, by the state (Openshaw, 2009). While much has been written on this transition from a welfare state to a market-driven state, it is important to recognise that these reforms took place during a period when social cohesion was being challenged by high inflation, a growing distrust of government intervention, and calls for progressive law reform and greater recognition of te Tiriti o Waitangi (ibid.).

For education, there was an increasing expectation that the education system needed to be less 'one-size-fits-all', more responsive to the needs of local communities, and more equitable. It was in this context that neoliberal reforms to the administration of schooling were proposed, which led to major changes that transformed the education system into a

resources, while the governance, management and administration of schools were based on ideas from business (Adamson, 2022). Many have criticised the impacts of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms (Dobbins, 2010; Harris, 2017; Openshaw, 2009; O'Neill in this issue), particularly the way that they create 'winner' and 'loser' schools and therefore exacerbate the achievement gap between low- and high-decile schools (see Box 1).

The Tomorrow's Schools reforms were followed in the 1990s by additional devolution of state control to the market: for example, further steps away from school zoning, 'bulk funding' of teacher salaries, and the introduction of user-pays tertiary education. This period therefore saw even more competition and local autonomy in the sector.

... but new controls were put in place

Simultaneously, there was an increase in managerialism and accountability ('control'), primarily conducted by 'steering at a distance' (Sellar and Lingard, 2013, p.716). An outcomes-based approach centred on targets and measurable results in school charters and strategic plans, accompanied by external monitoring from agencies such as the Education Review Office and the Tertiary Education Commission, was used to ensure that objectives were met, amid some emerging concerns about the unevenness of educational experience between schools.

This highlights the paradoxical and contradictory nature of 'devolution and control' (Codd, 2005b). The neoliberal reforms reduced the role of the state in education (and thus exposed the education system to the free market), but also introduced more intense forms of managerialism and accountability (Sahlberg, 2011). Education in Aotearoa New Zealand became 'more responsive locally to market forces' and 'more accountable centrally for measurable outcomes' (Codd, 2005b, p.194). Such accountability mechanisms were particularly encouraged by the Tomorrow's Schools reforms: in this new, devolved environment, there was an increased need for schools and teachers to be managed and held accountable, especially now that schools and teachers were the 'providers' of

Box 1 Challenges faced by low-decile schools as a result of Tomorrow's Schools

- Low-decile schools have far more educational and social challenges than higher-decile schools.
- Low-decile schools often attract fewer high-quality teachers than high-decile schools.
- Many low-decile schools find it harder than high-decile schools to attract board members with the required skills.
- High-decile schools often draw more motivated students from low-decile schools.
- Many parents think that placing their children in a high-decile school will improve their life chances.
- Low-decile schools are more likely to be penalised by the Education Review Office, and yet they have limited financial or personnel resources to address the issues they face.
- Low-decile schools are overwhelmingly populated by Māori and Pasifika students, have more social and discipline issues than high-decile schools, and therefore are not attractive options for some families.

Source: Haque, 2014, pp.79–81

education for their 'consumers' (teachers and parents). These mechanisms create a 'culture of performativity', where schools, teachers and students are judged on their performance against targets (Ball, 2003). Some have argued that such performance-based policy is 'based upon a culture of mistrust' (Codd, 2005b, p.194).

The 'third way' (1999–)

In response to this period of rapid social upheaval, the fifth Labour government sought to pull back from the extremes of the neoliberal reforms. Under the leadership of Helen Clark, and inspired by similar shifts happening in the US and UK, the fifth Labour government set out to follow a 'Third Way' for politics, which sought to renew the emphasis on social cohesion, while still allowing for economic freedom and individualism (Codd, 2005a); that is, 'neoliberalism with a social conscience' (Thrupp, 2018, p.11).

Building a 'knowledge economy'

For education, this Third Way primarily manifested as policies influenced by the 'knowledge economy' discourse. Education was seen as the vital link between economic prosperity and social cohesion (Codd, 2005a). It was argued by proponents of the Third Way that the way to achieve this was to move away from the divisive individualism of the 'second way' and instead focus on building a 'knowledge

society' or 'knowledge economy'. Lauder et al. (2012) have described this transition as a process of drawing up a 'new informal social contract between citizens and the state' through which 'the state could achieve both economic competitiveness and social justice' (p.1); that is, reframing education as a way to ensure that New Zealand will be economically competitive in the age of globalisation (Codd, 2005a). The knowledge economy discourse aligns tightly with Third Way politics, for it appeals to the idea that education is for the benefit of the individual *and* society.

While the knowledge economy approach softened the neoliberal extremes to some extent, it still perpetuated an individualistic and competitive approach to education. Wood and Sheehan (2012) have summarised the key ideas that underpin a knowledge economy as: a shift from content to processes (from knowing what to knowing how); an individual (learner-centred) approach to learning; and life-long learning. There is insufficient space to critique this discourse here, but others have written about the influence of this discourse on education policy, particularly its impact on knowledge and the teaching profession (Roberts, 2005; Young, 2012; McPhail and Rata, 2016; Hirschman and Wood, 2018).

Education policy throughout this period was influenced by this discourse, including the introduction of the National

Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2002, and the New Zealand Curriculum in 2007. Many argued that the old 'norm-based' ranking system pre-NCEA was no longer appropriate for 21st-century learners, as it prohibited many from further study, thus reducing the number of educated citizens required for a knowledge economy (Strachan, 2002; Hipkins, Johnston and Sheehan, 2016). NCEA was designed to meet the needs of a broad range of students, allowing more people to gain the skills needed to be economically competitive within a knowledge economy, and encourage life-long learning through the way that credits can be gained and retained for life (Strachan, 2002). Similarly, the influence

by the state but operated outside the state system – effectively, 'publicly funded private education' (McMaster, 2013, p.527). They did not need to follow the New Zealand Curriculum, nor employ qualified and registered teachers. However, partnership schools remained a niche – only a small number of partnership schools were established – indicating some Third Way restraint.

Similarly, the government's Investing in Educational Success policy encouraged schools to form clusters called 'communities of learning'. Each community of learning was enabled to work in a collaborative way to address the education needs of their community. While schools were encouraged to be collaborative within a

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of the knowledge economy on policy could be seen with the implementation of a new national curriculum in 2007. Updates have been made since, but this was the first to prioritise student-centred pedagogies, flexible skills derived from generic core competencies, and inquiry-based learning, all key to building a knowledge economy (Wood and Sheehan, 2012).

Further 'devolution' and 'control'

The period between 2008 and 2017 under the fifth National government saw a continued emphasis on market-driven policy, while balancing this with social cohesion (particularly the need to address disparities in educational achievement).

Partnership schools ('charter schools') were introduced as a devolutionary policy, advocated for by National's coalition political partner ACT, providing an alternative pathway for those for whom the state system had 'failed' (O'Connor and Holland, 2013). These schools were funded

community of learning, the policy arguably encourages competition between communities of learning (Devine and Benade, 2015).

There were also further 'control' measures. Perhaps the most controversial was the introduction of 'National Standards' for primary schools. National Standards have been heavily criticised as an accountability tool that narrows the curriculum, focuses on outputs, and promotes competition between schools (Thrupp and White, 2013; Haque, 2014).

This period also saw a growing emphasis on 21st-century learning in education policy, particularly through building 'modern learning environments' and establishing 'bring your own device' policies, largely promoted to 'keep up' with the global economy. These have not been without criticism (Bisset, 2014; Baker, 2014), but nonetheless indicate the ongoing impact of the knowledge economy discourse.

Haque (2014) reflected that Tomorrow's Schools had been 'watered down' over time, but 'its bedrock philosophy remains based on individual schools acting to further their own interests' (p.79).

Independent review of Tomorrow's Schools

When the sixth Labour government took office in 2017, it sent a clear signal that education was in for a shake-up; indeed, it promised to 'revolutionise education' (Ardern, 2017). The government appeared particularly concerned with what it saw as the big issues facing the sector: an overworked and under-appreciated teaching profession; a general over-reliance on market-driven policy; a culture of testing, measurement and accountability; ongoing equity and access issues; and a lack of urgency in preparing students for the 21st century (Barker and Wood, 2019). To address these concerns, the government established an education work programme in 2018 (refreshed in 2021) consisting of large-scale reviews (e.g., the Tomorrow's Schools review, updating NCEA, refreshing the New Zealand Curriculum), various strategies and action plans (e.g., the Early Learning Action Plan, the Learning Support Action Plan), and standalone policies (e.g., removing National Standards, integrating partnership schools back into the state system proper, adding New Zealand history to the curriculum, reforming vocational education, shifting from a funding model based on socio-economic status (decile system) to an 'equity index' based on individual indicators of risk). This list is by no means exhaustive, but it reflects a scale and pace of change not seen since the Tomorrow's Schools reforms in 1989 (Cherrington, Higgins and Zouch, 2021).

The taskforce's recommendations – 'structural transformation' required

One of the first, and most significant, initiatives to be progressed on the education work programme was the independent review of compulsory schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand (the Tomorrow's Schools review). Despite the Tomorrow's Schools reforms being the subject of much analysis and criticism over the last 30 years, this was the first time that such a large-scale review of compulsory

schooling had been commissioned by the government since the original reforms (Adamson, 2022).

The taskforce released its final report (*Our Schooling Futures: stronger together*) in June 2019. Its recommendations touched on almost every aspect of the compulsory schooling system, from supporting individual students and teachers, to governance and leadership of schools, to broader system-level changes (Adamson, 2022). These recommendations were grouped under eight key issues, as explained by Thrupp and McChesney (2019b):

1. Governance (including the appropriate role of school Boards of Trustees and the proposal to establish education hubs)
2. Schooling provision (including school types, school hours, transitions between schools, the overall provision across all the schools in a geographic area, and pathways for Kaupapa Māori and distance schooling)
3. Competition and choice (including enrolment schemes/zones, school donations, international fee-paying students, staffing and funding formulae, and the consequences of those policies for certain schools and groups of learners)
4. Disability and learning support (including students' access to schools, teacher preparation for catering to diverse needs, specialist staffing, and funding)
5. Teaching (including how we attract, train, treat and retain teachers, current models for teacher appraisal and Kāhui Ako | Communities of Learning, and pathways for support staff)
6. School leadership (including workload, performance management, appointment processes, and how to attract and develop school leaders)
7. School resourcing (especially compensatory funding)
8. Central education agencies (how to position and reposition central agencies such as the Ministry of Education and Education Review Office).

Further detailed analysis of the taskforce's recommendations is needed, but some of the main recommendations included:

- establishing 'education hubs' as separate from the Ministry of Education, to take over all legal governance duties of school boards;
- replacing the decile system with the equity index;
- establishing an Education Evaluation Office to provide overall oversight of the education system, and disestablishing the Education Review Office and New Zealand Qualifications Authority; and
- expanding the role of the Teaching Council.

The taskforce argued that there was a lack of evidence that the current model of self-governing schools had led to

challenges we face ... we have to cut through the assumptions that underpin 'self-governing schools'. (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, p.11)

As an aside, it is interesting to observe *how* the taskforce undertook its review. Before the taskforce explored how the current system was operating, it first sought to step back and answer the question, what should be the purpose of our education system? This question was also posed to the public when the taskforce held 'education conversations' around the country. Taking such a first-principles approach enabled the taskforce to consider options for change beyond the status quo,

The government's response acknowledged many of the same issues as identified by the taskforce: the presence of persistent disparities in the education system, the challenges with such a decentralised model, and a lack of trust in the system' ...

improved educational outcomes, particularly with respect to student achievement and equity. The taskforce was especially critical of the inherent trade-off at the heart of Tomorrow's Schools between devolving power to communities and opening up schools to marketisation and competition.

Overall, the key message from the taskforce was that, while some students do well, many students are poorly served by the system, and only substantial 'cultural and structural transformation' of the system will ensure that all students can succeed. As it explained:

Tinkering with the existing system simply will not work, especially if future generations are to be well prepared to cope with the large and complex economic, social, and environmental

as reflected in its recommendations (Adamson, 2022).

The report has not been without criticism, however. The proposal for 'education hubs' received the most attention (pushback) – especially from some school principals – for suggesting that some of the powers of individual school boards should be shifted to regional hubs (Collins, 2019). Others have suggested that the overall framing of the report may not have lent itself well to receiving 'buy in' from the sector, not least parents, when Tomorrow's Schools has become so deeply embedded (Thrupp and McChesney, 2019a). There was also criticism that such large-scale changes were suggested at a time when the sector is under pressure and is already undergoing significant change across all levels (Thrupp and McChesney, 2019c)

The government's response – 'resetting' Tomorrow's Schools

The government formally responded to the taskforce's recommendations in November 2019, releasing its own report, *Supporting All Schools to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, 2019). As with the taskforce's report, further detailed analysis of the government's response is needed. For now, it is interesting to observe its overall framing.

Like the taskforce, the government acknowledged that Tomorrow's Schools had worked well for some, but not for others. The government's response acknowledged many of the same issues as identified by the taskforce: the presence of

This reset was to involve progressing several initiatives 'inspired by' the taskforce (Hipkins, 2019) and designed to achieve the following objectives:

- learners at the centre of education;
- barrier-free access;
- quality teaching and leadership;
- future of learning and work;
- world-class inclusive public education.

As the minister of education, Chris Hipkins, explained, 'this is not about more centralised decision making or smothering schools that already perform well. It's about making pragmatic and workable improvements that we believe can gain broad support' (ibid.). In other words, Tomorrow's Schools would not be thrown

property will now be centrally administered, removing a complex and demanding responsibility from school boards. While there were other changes, including replacing the decile system with the equity index, Adamson (2022) has observed that the government's response highlights some reluctance on its part to make transformational change to schooling: 'The current system will be fine, if only we can explain it better, resource it better, and talk to each other more often' (p.570). Indeed, the minister himself said that some of the structural changes proposed by the taskforce would be 'too disruptive and a distraction from dealing with the issues facing our learners, teachers and school leaders'. He went on to say, 'we think the intent of the Taskforce's recommendations can be achieved through changes to our existing structures' (Hipkins, 2019).

Conclusion

The Tomorrow's Schools reforms in 1989 fundamentally changed primary and secondary schooling in New Zealand. The reforms were also a product of their time – a time of significant change influenced by neoliberalism. Despite the obvious benefits of a devolved schooling system, it is widely accepted that the reforms have had unintended consequences, particularly the way they have contributed to maintaining, and even widening, disparities in the system (Openshaw, 2009).

Thirty or so years later, the reforms were revisited. These ongoing challenges were acknowledged by both the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce and the government. However, while the taskforce proposed structural transformation, the government proposed a 'reset' of existing structures. A substantial education work programme is already underway, including many changes in response to the Tomorrow's Schools review, but some have asked whether these changes are able to move the system away from a prevailing neoliberal attitude and towards meaningfully addressing the ongoing challenges faced by the sector (Wood and Thornton, 2019; Benade, Devine and Stewart, 2021; Adamson, 2022). Indeed, the five objectives driving the work programme have been critiqued for appearing to be contradictory and reflecting ongoing

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persistent disparities in the education system, the challenges with such a decentralised model, and a lack of trust in the system (particularly for the teaching profession). Whereas the taskforce had deliberately set out to go beyond the status quo and avoid proposals that involved 'tinkering with the system', the government's response was framed around a 'reset' of the existing system:

The Government will reset the governance, management and administration of the schooling system – moving from a highly devolved, largely disconnected and autonomous set of institutions, to a much more deliberately networked and supported system that is more responsive to the needs of learners/ākonga and their whānau. (p.12)

out, but improved, requiring a careful balance between centralisation and devolution.

As a result, much of the focus appears to be at the regional level, halfway between the ministry proper and the school board level. Perhaps the most significant proposal is the establishment of an Education Service Agency within the Ministry of Education. The Education Service Agency is intended to bolster support for schools at the regional level, where once those responsibilities would have been handled centrally (via the Ministry of Education) or locally (via the individual school board). For example, a school's enrolment scheme will now be managed by the Education Service Agency at a regional level rather than at the level of a school's board.

Similarly, property was another area of significant change. The government announced that matters relating to school

marketisation (Barker and Wood, 2019) and perhaps being too aspirational and lacking detail (Adamson, 2022).

Regardless, it may well be another 30 years before another opportunity arises to conduct a large-scale review of schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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- Human capital theory: the end of a research programme?
- How do we do things?

We would welcome your attendance and/or guest presentation, if you are interested.

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