

Militant unions failing our students

By Muriel Newman

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Last month an estimated 280,000 students and their parents were badly disrupted by the strike action of members of the Post Primary Teachers' Union. Some 16,000 teachers went on strike, affecting 450 intermediate and secondary schools. The protest was part of a planned programme of industrial action being taken by the PPTA over stalled pay negotiations with the Ministry of Education. Eight rolling strikes are scheduled between now and Christmas as well as further action next year. In addition, teachers have been told to refuse to attend all meetings after 5pm, including staff meetings, parent interviews, and student tutorials.



At the heart of the PPTA's complaint is the failure of the government to agree to their demand for a 4 percent pay increase – the annual rate of pay increase that they have enjoyed for the last three years. In addition teachers are asking for a one percent increase in the employer's contribution to

their Kiwisaver accounts, a laptop each, and class sizes capped at 30 pupils for general classes, or 24 in 'hazardous' classes like woodwork or science.

In response, the Ministry has offered a 1.5 percent pay increase this year, with a further 1 percent next year - but that offer has been rejected outright.

The PPTA's demands appear to completely ignore the fact that the global recession is causing the whole country to tighten its belt. National, like governments around the world, is being forced to reduce the cost of the public service. In the United Kingdom, public servants earning more than \$40,000 are facing a two year wage freeze, with performance-related pay for civil servants being cut by two thirds. In Italy, public sector wages have been frozen. In Ireland public service salaries - including those of doctors, nurses, and teachers – have been cut by up to 15 percent. In Greece, public sector wages and pensions have been frozen for the next three years. In Hungary, all government spending is being frozen and public servants' pay will be cut by 15 percent. The Portuguese government has cut wages for top earners in the public sector by 5 percent. In Germany, the public service will be reduced by 15,000 employees and salaries cut by 2.5 percent. And in Canada public service wages have been frozen for the next two to three years.

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According to the Ministry of Education, between March 2000 and March 2010 the average pay of secondary teachers (including salaries and allowances) increased by 45 percent - almost double the rate of the public service as a whole - from \$47,764 to \$71,110. Over the same period, primary teachers' overall pay increased by 52 percent from \$45,936 to \$68,535. This compares to the average New Zealand wage of \$49,875.

Protest action has not been confined to secondary teachers either. The primary teachers' union, the New Zealand Educational Institute, is embroiled in a battle against the implementation of national standards, a new system of assessment that is designed to improve achievement outcomes by introducing better accountability for children's progress in reading, writing and mathematics.

Freelance journalist Karl du Fresne, in his NZCPR article *It's Time to Call the Teachers' Bluff*, explains how union influence has shifted away from the old blue-collar unions to the white collar unions like the PPTA and NZEI, who appear convinced that they, rather than the government, are in control of the education system!

"On national standards, it's time for the government to start getting more assertive. It's not for teachers to decide whether national standards work. That's a decision to be made at future elections by the people of New Zealand, who pay the teachers' salaries and expect them to respect the democratic process. This means accepting the government's right to introduce new and perhaps distasteful policies, just as all other public servants do.

"The NZEI has made its objections clear and that should be an end to it. But as long as National appears less than resolute, the NZEI will use every opportunity to sabotage national standards. The teachers will have been greatly encouraged by

the fact that Education Minister Anne Tolley appears to have been left to fight the battle alone, creating the impression (perhaps falsely) that the government has little stomach for a fight. If John Key and his senior ministers are seriously committed to education reform, they should show it."

The familiar themes of teacher union protests including demands for pay increases based on experience and qualifications, the need for lower class sizes, and a rejection of any official measure of performance outcomes, have recently been challenged by a major study commissioned by the *Los Angeles Times*. The study is based on longitudinal data from 700,000 school students and 35,000 teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District - the second largest school district in the USA. Being an inner city school district, the challenges facing teachers is significant, with many students falling into an 'at-risk' category: 84 percent of the students are identified as coming from poor families, with 40 percent from families where neither parent completed high school; 76 percent of students identified as Hispanic, and 9 percent as African American.

The results are groundbreaking. They show that many of the important criteria long regarded as crucial to teacher success, have little effect on student outcomes: "More experienced or better educated teachers are no more effective in the classroom than inexperienced teachers with only undergraduate diplomas".

The study showed that the quality of teaching has a far greater impact on student performance than factors such as class size or socio-economic background. Nor is the classroom "magic" that makes a student learn necessarily connected to measures that are traditionally valued in the education system such as years of experience and higher qualifications. In fact, when you think about it, this should come as no surprise: we

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can all remember teachers from our own days at school, who were experienced and well qualified, but dreadful at their jobs, while others who were less well qualified and experienced had that “magic” that commanded our attention and ensured that we did our very best.

While the local Los Angeles teacher union continues to maintain that standardised test scores are a bad indicator of teaching performance, what the research clearly shows is that if one teacher’s students consistently do well, while another’s don’t, then schools that place students with such ineffective teachers are irresponsibly failing those students. It can be argued that they are also failing their good teachers by continuing to pay poor performers as though they contributed equally.

Standardised test scores from the Los Angeles school network clearly shows that students who attend charter schools or magnet schools, which are free but have a greater focus on academic performance, significantly outperform those who attend traditional public schools. The high incidence of African American students from poor backgrounds, who achieve exceptional results by attending charter schools and magnet schools, shatters the conventional wisdom that race and socioeconomic background are the greatest predictors of academic success.

New Zealand could learn many lessons from the information being published by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Firstly, implementing national standards is a very worthwhile exercise since standardised tests are an important indicator of student achievement. While they don’t tell the whole story they are indicative of teaching success and will enable parents and teachers to identify students who are in danger of falling behind.

Secondly, if the union movement was genuinely committed to improving educational standards, they would

work with the Ministry of Education to devise a pay system that better rewarded high performing teachers, in order to create a real incentive to attract and retain New Zealand’s best teaching professionals. Such a performance based

system would also send a strong message to those who are harming students and are not suited to teaching to look for a different career.

Thirdly, there are many New Zealanders who would make great teachers who are locked out of the profession because of stringent qualification and training requirements. In light of the longitudinal research that shows that more experienced or better educated teachers are no more effective in the classroom than inexperienced teachers with only undergraduate diplomas, why not change the requirements so that such good people could become teachers.

And fourthly, if students at primary and secondary school were funded in the same way as students in the early childhood and tertiary sectors (where funding goes to the provider of choice) a greater diversity of schools would provide parents and their children the sort of choice that has enabled charter schools and magnet schools to dramatically lift the performance of disadvantaged children in the US.

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the Education Forum

Dr Muriel Newman is the founder and director of the New Zealand Centre for Political Research and was a member of parliament for ACT New Zealand from 1996–2005.

Education Forum

P.O. Box 10 539

The Terrace

Wellington, New Zealand

Telephone: +64 21 607 636

Fax: +64 4 471 1304

Email: info@educationforum.org.nz

Web: www.educationforum.org.nz