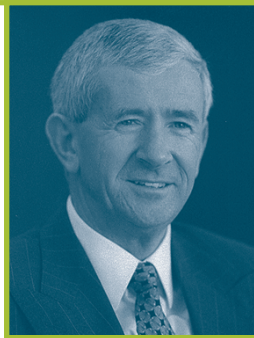


Scoring our schools: what makes for a good education?

by Roger Kerr

Published in the *Otago Daily Times*, 19 October, 2007

As senior school students across the country prepare for their final exams next month, we already know what some of the outcomes will be: students from independent schools, with only 4% of the country's students, are likely to gain around 16% of available scholarships at Level 4 or higher, and double their proportional number of NCEA Level 3 qualifications; among students leaving decile 10 schools, around 66% will have UE or a Level 3 qualification or higher; while of students leaving decile 1 schools, only 14% are likely to attain these qualifications.



We also know that around half of Maori and a third of Pacific Island students will not achieve a Level 1 NCEA qualification, and Maori male leaver attainment levels, while improving, will still be below all other groups.

Some other facts can also be predicted: many independent schools – notably all-boy primary schools – will continue to struggle with bulging rolls; high-achieving public schools will

continue their battles with out-of-zoners trying to get in; and a few thousand families will continue to opt for home schooling.

What can we take from these facts? There are many complex factors behind them. But we do know that too many students fail to achieve their potential, that some schools get better results than others, and that many parents, given a choice, will opt for the school they think is best for their particular child.

Parental opinion is one of several key considerations assessed in a new study on school choice outcomes released by the Cato Institute. In *School Choice: The Findings*, Herbert Walberg of Stanford University's Hoover Institution draws on a very large body of evidence on school choice and focuses in particular on achievement test performance, costs, and parental and public opinion. Rather than traverse emotional or philosophical arguments about school choice, Walberg confines his study largely to empirical research on its effects.

Among the 255 studies cited, the book examines the largest single point-in-time study involving nearly every one of the United States' 4000 charter schools and its nearest public school. It finds that many faced numerous handicaps and obstacles, such as heavy regulation and less funding than their comparison schools. Despite this, the charter schools (with over

one million students) outperformed their comparison schools. Poor, Hispanic and African American students achieved particularly well, and outcomes improved as charter schools overcame start-up issues and were given more autonomy and funding. All the studies found positive effects on the academic achievement of some groups attending voucher schools and no studies found a negative effect on achievement.

In surveying the effects of private schools, Walberg found they perform better, on average, than public schools at substantially less cost, are more likely to have racial compositions resembling the population in their areas, and greater levels of cross-racial friendship. They also do better than public schools at fostering tolerance, civic participation, and social integration.

Walberg also looks beyond America's borders and examines five other countries' experience of school choice, in each case longstanding, large-scale programmes. His findings are compelling, and confirm similar studies in Ireland, Denmark and Australia.

In Sweden, for example, a voucher system in place since 1993, providing for all schools to be funded on a similar basis, opened up a nationwide educational marketplace. It led to improved student achievement, greater parental satisfaction, and a fivefold increase in the number of independent schools across a broad cross section of neighbourhoods.

In the Dutch voucher system, in place since 1917, the private sector now enrolls 76% of all primary and secondary students. The Netherlands performs well in international test scores and parents report high satisfaction in finding schools that meet their children's needs.

Compared with policies in these social democratic countries, the recent knee-jerk reaction by the government to the idea

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of involving the private sector more in education seems ideological, not evidence-based.

Walberg also emphasises the importance of parent satisfaction. He argues that parent opinion does and should matter, and demonstrates through customer satisfaction studies that when parents have a choice they

are more positive about their school of choice. A recent survey showed that New Zealand parents are far less satisfied with the NCEA than teachers and principals.

In addition to the arguments in Walberg's study, there is also a case for recognising freedom as a value in and of itself in public policy analysis, as argued in a pastoral letter by the Catholic bishops of New York State:

"The purpose of a system of parental choice is to enable parents – all parents – to exercise their inherent right and responsibility to direct the upbringing and education of their children. Even if all schools were high performing, the rationale for a system of parental choice remains. The freedom to choose the education best suited for one's children is a basic right of all parents, regardless of income."

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

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