

Plenty of evidence to justify competition in education

By Bruce Logan

Published in *Otago Daily Times*, 21 August 2003

As President of the New Zealand Educational Institute, let us hope that Bruce Adin's grasp of education is deeper than his apparent understanding of economics, certainly as he explored educational choice on these pages (*Otago Daily Times*, 13 August).



Part from Mr Adin's somewhat inadequate comparison of schools with television channels his criticism of school choice in New Zealand is profoundly flawed. The competition and choice among government run schools instigated with the Tomorrow's Schools reforms, fell far short of what is ordinarily meant by market competition, which requires the free entry of, and choice among, different types of providers. The Ministry of Education and the unions still collectively decided salaries and conditions for most schools. The Ministry decided each school's budget and size; it controlled teacher training, property management and assessment. It regulated the curriculum and restricts Boards of Trustees greatly. If this very limited form of autonomy has not delivered why should we be surprised?

Bruce Adin asks where's the evidence that school choice will lift pupil achievement and increase the quality of education across the board. Well, there is plenty of evidence.

Students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, one of

the longest running choice programmes in the US, have shown significant gains in maths test scores, equivalent to the gap between black and white students. In the UK, 86% of 3000 schools surveyed improved their performance when school choice was introduced. In Sweden, the first country in the world to introduce education vouchers, results have been encouraging. In some country areas schools destined for closure were revitalised.

Some of the most convincing and thorough research has been conducted by Caroline Minter Hoxby of Harvard University, who found that an increase in choice not only had a significant positive effect on measures of achievement ranging from test scores at school to wages at age 32 years. But also lowered per pupil spending.

Researchers at the Programme on Education Policy and Governance in the Harvard Department of Government state that for African Americans the latest findings show higher levels of performance in private schools in a wide variety of statistical estimations. "All the standard ways of estimating voucher effects showed significant positive effects," reports the senior author of the study, Professor of Government, Paul E. Peterson.

Markets are certainly associated with inequality. But then so is every other social system, with markets far from being the worst. Our current non-market education system hardly represents equality: the rich go to the best schools. Abolition of the TIE scheme which gave scholarships to able pupils in poorer schools to enable them to attend private schools has not helped.

Why would problems serving disadvantaged schools be

exacerbated? Under a voucher system the poor and dysfunctional would now have purchasing power. It would be a strange market where demand did not bring forth a response.

Mr Adin claims that "Competition also creates inefficiencies": that is a ridiculous statement. Evidence shows competing schools run more efficiently. Would he suggest we go back to the days of the behemoth Department of Education where 70% of Education spending went to administration costs, 30% to classroom spending. Post-reform only 33% went to administration costs although that is increasing as the Ministry grows.

I must absolutely disagree with Mr Adin's final analysis on the relationship of the taxpayer to private and public education. And I do so on the grounds of justice.

We have in New Zealand a state system actually imposing on its citizens a worldview while at the same time claiming quite boldly this is what an education system must not do. On the one hand it applauds pluralism and diversity but at the same time its own presumption of secular neutrality excludes those who reject secularism as a sufficient view of reality. One recalls the following from J.S. Mill.

A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.

A state education attending to the vast bulk of the school age population cannot help but mould people to be like one another. In spite of integration, which attends to a very small proportion of the students, the present state education system does eventually establish a despotism over the mind and body. The time has come for a revisitation of parental rights and responsibilities.

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The problem inherent in state education is whether it, as a legitimate public function, requires control and conformity. Certainly Mill's concern with despotism displays a strong individualism which is perhaps at the expense of community responsibility. Nevertheless we must remember that the government, which includes state schools, exists for the benefit of the people, not the other way around. It remains a matter of fact that the ideological framework and value choices of state schools are controlled by a political ideology and interest groups who directly influence the education system.

Certainly a recent National Business Review poll found that nearly 80% of parents are satisfied with the education their children are receiving but if they had known that the four international surveys of education in New Zealand since 1999 very clearly indicate declining standards, would they hold the same opinion? Indeed one of those surveys (PISA 2000) says, the tendency for countries with greater degrees of school autonomy to show higher average levels of pupil performance suggests that there is a case for pursuing school autonomy (choice) as one route to school improvement.

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

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