

Education Forum / Maxim Institute Function

Moving School Reform Forward

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Thank you and welcome everyone to this joint Education Forum/Maxim Institute function.

I would especially like to welcome Bernie Ogilvy, United Future education spokesperson, and I am pleased to be sharing the lectern tonight with Paul Henderson from the Maxim Institute.

I want to speak about the general issue of school reform. I also want to discuss the Education Forum's recently released vision document: *A New Deal: Making Education Work for All New Zealanders*.

A New Deal sets out the Education Forum's views on how the education sector should be funded, how it should be regulated and how it should respond to community wishes.

To those who know the Education Forum, there will be much in *A New Deal* that is familiar. The report's recommendations reflect the Education Forum's principles of excellence, choice, self-management and accountability.

The key recommendations in the report include:

- giving parents greater freedom to determine what school will best suit their children and, more importantly, backing up that choice with state funding;
- trusting teachers and principals to determine the best way of organising themselves to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population in New Zealand;
- building a culture of professionalism in the teaching sector;
- providing parents, teachers, principals and the government with the information required to determine how well the education system is serving New Zealand children; and
- ensuring that students, parents and teachers have access to world class curricula and qualifications.

What is different is that *A New Deal* brings together a comprehensive and coherent set of policy proposals for regulating the school sector. And it does so in an accessible format. *A New Deal* offers a positive, sound and proven alternative to the negative, union-driven agenda pursued by our current government.

The document does not attempt to set out a one-size-fits-all plan. We don't want to replace one narrow vision of tomorrow with another.

Instead, it sets out a framework through which parents, teaching professionals, boards of trustees and communities can develop their own vision of what school-level education should look like in their community.

At the heart of the Education Forum ‘manifesto’ is an increase in the decision-making power of parents and families.

We often discuss school choice in abstract terms but this need not be the case. Indeed, the issues underlying the current review of the *Private Schools’ Conditional Integration Act 1975* and the government’s ‘network reviews’ are microcosms of the wider debate over school choice.

These reviews pose a risk to the existing, limited degree of school choice available to New Zealand families. However, they also offer proponents a platform to put forth the arguments in favour of educational choice in a way that is concrete and meaningful to New Zealand families, teachers and principals in all parts of the country.

This is an opportunity that proponents of progressive education reform should not miss.

I am confident that we will prevail in the battle of ideas. There is no lack of intellectual ammunition. And the ‘forces of light’ have been very busy in the past few months.

The National Party has released an excellent discussion document on schooling.

Independent Schools of New Zealand has issued a strong paper on funding.

Deborah Coddington has made the issues surrounding school choice understandable for every New Zealand parent in her book *Let Parents Choose*.

And Paul Henderson has released a hard-hitting examination of the New Zealand curriculum with his book *Vying for Our Children*.

While we can consistently win the battle of ideas, we have not won the vital political battle.

Witness the speedy and effortless demise of the small, but hard-fought policy gains of the 1990s: bulk funding, the Targeted Individual Entitlement scheme and the removal of school zoning.

Witness the creeping ‘red-tapeism’ afflicting schools and the increasing centralisation of decision-making in Wellington – with the promise of more to come.

New Zealand is not unique. The head of one US think-tank once commented to me that the fight for school choice was like the myth of Sisyphus – just as we get the rock to the top of the hill, it rolls back down.

Let's hope that is starting to change. But it will only change if like-minded groups work together with a renewed sense of purpose. The past few months have shown that such groups – both inside and outside politics – can work together. This must continue.

The fight won't be easy. Vested interests such as the teacher union leadership will continue to advocate the failed policies of the past – to the detriment of students, families and their own membership. They will not abandon their 'No Teacher Union Left Behind' policy without a fight.

And you can be sure of one thing: opponents of the progressive education reforms advocated by the Education Forum and the Maxim Institute will not focus on the issues. That is the last thing they want to do.

Instead, they will focus their efforts on attacking their opponents, rather than their opponents' policies. They will 'play the man', as the saying goes. We should not be ashamed of who we are. The Education Forum is proud of its connection to the Business Roundtable and Business New Zealand. We are proud of our cooperation with the Maxim Institute.

Terms such as ideologue, extremist, fundamentalist and right-wing will be thrown around like government appointments at a Labour Party gathering. Readers of the minister of education's response to last Thursday's *New Zealand Herald* article by Paul Henderson would have seen a good example of this strategy in action.

The characterisation is misdirected. The real ideologues and extremists are those who cling to the centralised, one-size-fits-all, Albanian model of schooling that is so favoured by teacher union leaders and much of the education establishment in New Zealand.

However, they are increasingly finding themselves isolated from the policy mainstream. School choice policies have existed for years in Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and Sweden.

And choice-based reforms are spreading:

- a recent report found that over 400 public schools in the United States were being managed by private, for-profit management companies – more than triple the number from four years earlier;

- the June 2002 US Supreme Court decision on school vouchers has given new impetus to vouchers at the state level;
- education services in some parts of the United Kingdom are contracted out to private companies; and
- forty states in the United States have enacted charter school laws – there are now some 2,700 such schools.

Support for these reforms spans the political spectrum, including ‘third way’ Democrats in the United States and the ‘new’ Labour Party in the United Kingdom.

As Tony Blair stated recently: “It’s not reform that is the enemy of public services. It’s the status quo.”

And the Blair government is putting its money where his mouth is. Just last week, it announced a shake-up of London schools that will see the establishment of seven new city academies – independent schools that are funded by the state. These schools will be built with at least two billion pounds of private sector sponsorship.

In a recent *Economist* article, one of the architects of the UK government’s schooling policy described the change in the Labour government’s approach to independent schools as follows: “Old Labour’s attitude toward these schools was, ‘You are a lot of evil bastards who just educate the rich. We’d abolish you if we could.’ New Labour’s is, ‘You run excellent schools, you have a social mission, let’s take you at your word.’”

The difference with New Zealand could not be more stark. Here in New Zealand there is no doubt we have Old Labour, with the government beholden to vested interests such as the teacher union leadership. So much for the ‘third way’ and the prime minister’s claim that you couldn’t put a cigarette paper between her policies and Tony Blair’s.

Other countries are leaving us behind. The teacher union leadership in New Zealand is stuck in a time warp. In contrast, teacher unions in other countries have recognised that the world has, to use our prime minister’s favourite expression, ‘moved on’.

For example:

- teacher unions in New York City are considering operating a charter school under a city plan to have a non-profit organisation – backed by \$50 million in private capital – to operate 50 charter schools;
- the United Teachers of Dade in Miami, Florida have formed a partnership with Edison Schools, a for-profit school management company, to open 10 charter schools; and

- Albert Shanker, the former president of the American Federation of Teachers, was a strong and early advocate of charter schools.

To conclude: a central premise of *A New Deal* is that there is much good in the New Zealand education system. It serves many New Zealand families well. That should be applauded.

At the same time, it fails far too many families – especially those in lower socioeconomic groups, Maori and Pasifika students.

The existence of an educational gap between the haves and the have-nots is clear. And the groups most at risk will represent an ever-increasing proportion of the school age population over the next 20 years. The performance gap must be addressed.

A New Deal offers a way to achieve that. It will require people like you to make it happen.