We all want our kids to get the best start in life, but in a rapidly changing world, what does that look like? It certainly doesn’t look like what we have done in the past. As well as the 3Rs, increasingly employers are valuing soft skills, known in some circles as the 4Cs; communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking.

New Zealand has previously performed well in international education surveys, but of late our performance is slipping. This is particularly a problem at the bottom end; some kids from poor families are falling behind and not catching up. We are currently following other countries down the line of greater assessment, and competition based on those results, when there is no evidence that will work.

Instead TOP will:

- Invest earlier, in early childhood education. TOP aims to deliver free full-time early childhood education with a particular focus on improving quality in poorer areas;
- Reduce assessment, giving more time for teaching and learning. TOP will delay National Standards until Year 6 and delay NCEA until student’s final year of school where they will have the choice of sitting NCEA Level 1, 2 or 3;
- Encourage greater mixing by stopping the comparison of schools on assessment results or deciles, and encouraging people to use their local school;
- Save money to reinvest in education (or reduce “donations”) by getting schools to cooperate, not compete;
- Ensure teachers are highly trained, then trust them to get on and do the job;
- Review the tertiary sector to ensure it is keeping up with the need for lifelong learning.
We all want our kids to get the best start in life.

Like health, our education system delivers pretty good results for the money invested. Kiwi kids – particularly white middle and upper income ones – have some of the best education outcomes in the world. But for too many, they start school well behind the rest and that difference is never made up. These children are much more likely to be heading for a life of disadvantage, low income and risk even worse outcomes as a result of all the stresses disadvantage bestows.

Recently even our average student achievement has been slipping compared to previous generations and the rest of the world, and unsurprisingly this is particularly acute at the bottom end. The questions to ask are can we try harder and not allow children to start disadvantaged, can we lift the performance of our schooling across-the-board, and can we better ensure our tertiary education system is effective in keeping New Zealanders’ skills relevant to paid work for our whole lives?

There are two models for a high performing education system. One is a low trust model, where teachers are paid relatively little and are not highly skilled. They are handed a detailed curriculum to teach, and rote learning is encouraged. To make sure teachers and students are doing what they should do, assessment is used heavily to ensure progress. With a whole lot of homework and elbow grease thrown in, some Asian education systems have used this model to get all their children highly proficient in the basics; reading, writing and arithmetic (the 3Rs).

The other approach trusts teachers as professionals. They are highly trained, and given considerable freedom in how and what to teach. Students work in groups, and lessons are customized to their needs and lives. Deep understanding is encouraged, along with soft skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking (the 4Cs). When done well, countries like Finland have been able to achieve this alongside a strong foundation of basic skills.

The New Zealand education system has aspects of both approaches, and seems to be caught on the horns of a dilemma.

NEW ZEALAND PISA RESULTS 2000-2015
MATHS READING AND SCIENCE

KEY:  READING  MATHS  SCIENCE

The Opportunities Party Education and a lifetime of learning policy

Description

The Opportunities Party

Making New Zealand fair again www.top.org.nz
Which way should we head? If we look back these two approaches are pretty similar in terms of outcomes. Looking forward, however – in this world of rapid change, no more jobs for life, casualization of work, demands to retrain and/or acquire new skills – it is the 4Cs that are increasingly prized by employers.

It’s less what you know and more how would you approach and solve a problem, or develop a solution to a customer need that describes what life in the workplace is nowadays. The 4Cs also make for happier, more engaged citizens.

The reality of the workplace has changed dramatically since the 3Rs became the education system’s paradigm. With jobs for life well gone now, it is no longer appropriate trying to get all the education we need by cramming it in before our working life begins. Our education regime needs more smarts than that. We need to spread at least some of that education out over our working lives if we are not to become obsolete before our time.

So while we need to be equipped for that reality, our education providers need to position to help us with our need for lifelong learning. Right now our tertiary system for example is looking to be hopelessly out of touch with the futures its current fee-paying students are investing for. Many of those might struggle to justify the investment they have made. They may well find they’d have been better – at least employment and income-wise, to have saved some of that investment in education for later in life’s journey.

The reality of graduates doing jobs that are not rewarding, of a growing percentage of self employment and casualization of work – all suggest that the 4C’s are the essential skills. The ability to start again, to contract yourself out and work alongside other contractors, to embrace modular learning for the next employment phase – all point to a very different skill set than the information cramming that schooldays or even an early adult tertiary degree, confers.

Most disturbing is the tendency for whole-of-life learning to open up even more inequality in our society – because it is only undertaken by higher earning workers, points to the urgency of ensuring more get aboard this different educational journey now.

But let’s begin with assessment of our preparation for school, and then consider our primary and secondary schooling, before coming back to our ideas around tertiary.

The most important thing we can do to improve New Zealand’s education performance is to reduce poverty.

If we are truly interested in giving all children and young people a fair start in life, then the early years are the most crucial. Some children, generally those from poorer backgrounds, come to school around 2 years behind, and most of those never catch up despite the best efforts of the education system. That leaves them with greatly reduced chances of going to university or other post-school training, and getting a skilled, secure and well-paid work.

Parents truly are the first teachers, but in today’s society many parents can’t afford the luxury of time with their children at home. TOP’s initial contribution to reducing inequalities is TOP Policy #1: Tax Reform which will vastly reduce taxes on income, particularly for those on low incomes. This will help struggling young families spend more quality time with their children. We will discuss these issues more in our policy on Vulnerable Families. For now we will focus on the Education system, starting with early childhood.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Investing in free or affordable high quality early childhood education from age 3, for as many hours as families need, can make a big difference. The evidence is clear that the return on investment for society is much higher when investing in children early. That is even more the case when we are considering the 4Cs in addition to the 3Rs. This early investment also helps improve equity, as currently the poorest children in society tend to get poorer quality childcare.
Our current scattergun approach to funding Early Childhood Education (ECE), with partial subsidies for parents, and some subsidies for providers, and no truly free full-time ECE is very problematic. As a consequence many families, especially those in poor communities, struggle to find affordable, quality childcare.

Our policy here is quite simple. As money becomes free TOP’s priority is to invest in early childhood education. Over time we would like to see high quality, free, universal full-time ECE for children aged three years and over. New Zealand already has a high part-time employment rate for parents. It is possible this policy would increase female employment rates, as can be seen in other countries with full-time subsidised childcare. This would increase tax revenue, partially offsetting the cost of the policy. The subsidy is for attendance at licensed high-quality childcare providers. At the same time, work needs to be done to target more funding at childcare providers in low-income communities.

**OUR SCHOOLING SYSTEM**

Now let’s turn beyond the home and consider the schools. The evidence on education performance highlights the importance of teacher quality. Their relationship with the students (it’s vital they’re seen as credible), their clarity, ability to provide feedback that enhances the learning experience, involvement in professional development so they’re abreast of approaches that have best impact, ability to teach ‘thinking skills’ and flexibility to assess and adjust their teaching style – are all crucial. Expectations are also vital – if a teacher thinks a child will perform poorly then they generally will (and vice versa). The school and classroom culture (and the soft skills that culture is founded on), the investment in group working and discussion, and the encouragement to create, think from first principles – all make for an environment based on the 4Cs.

And of course more intensive interventions are required for those with special needs.

While assessment is important to customise or mould a child’s learning, as a way to judge the performance of a student, teacher or school it is limited. This presents a huge challenge to the traditional approach to education, which is steeped in testing. Parents face a learning curve if New Zealand’s education system is to make real progress and break the shackles that testing tradition imposes. It is natural for parents and politicians to want to hold teachers and students accountable for the time they spend at school, but the evidence shows that we are using up way too much precious learning time assessing our children. This is one reason we are losing our competitive advantage in education.

**You don’t make a pig fatter by weighing it**

In terms of future-proofing our education system we are focusing on the wrong things. We are obsessed with assessing and ranking our children when test results can only show a part of a child’s development. Our obsession with ranking all our children takes up time and resource, and is counterproductive to helping them all find their strengths.

The fact is that most kids have a very accurate idea of how they are doing. In fact, self-assessment (not external assessment) is the top predictor of student performance. Children also don’t learn in a linear, progressive manner. Progress happens in fits and starts and that doesn’t fit well with a mechanical assessment schedule. It’s as though we forget the organic nature of our children when it comes to schooling, and defer to a cardinal numbers regime of scores when nothing in the real world beyond the school gates is remotely related to such a dumbed-down ranking method.

**The purpose of school should be to help everyone realise their potential, not pigeon-hole people.**

Raw assessment scores are a questionable measure of student learning, but as a measure of school performance they are downright awful. The choice of school makes little difference to a child’s overall attainment. The variability of outcomes within every school is greater than the variability between schools. Around 80% of achievement can be explained by external factors e.g. how often students were read to as children. This doesn’t mean at all that schools don’t have impact but we need to keep it in perspective.

The decile system provides extra funding to schools with poor students, but that funding does not remotely make up for this gap. Through fundraising and fees (often disguised as ‘donations’), schools with more affluent students almost always end up with more resources.
In fact, the decile system appears to be making the problem worse by causing the ghettoisation of certain schools. School decile is seen by parents as a proxy for school performance, when that couldn't be further from the truth. Some low decile schools may actually add far more value to their students than high decile ones. When parents pick a high decile school they’re simply choosing that their wee Jenny mix with children of high-income parents. They believe this will drag Jenny ever upwards, but there is no evidence to suggest this is true.6

The way we judge teacher and school performance makes this problem worse. Making raw assessment results public ends up favouring schools in rich neighbourhoods, whose children have a head start before they are even dropped off at the school gate. That is, it has very little to do with the competence of the teaching. Poor information only informs poor decisions. In their unfettered pursuit of assessment results, wealthy parents waste money on private schools, buying houses in ‘grammar’ zones, chasing positions at schools that will not increase children’s performance (except via the “who you know” contacts the old boy’s network might provide).

Meanwhile, this results in ‘white flight’ from schools in poor areas, which ends in the ghettoisation of these schools. This entrenches the gap between rich and poor kids and ensures another generation faces unequal opportunity.

By encouraging competition between schools, Tomorrow’s Schools has only made this problem worse. Seeking to improve schools by having them compete is very 1980’s neoliberal thinking and has no evidence base of success whatsoever. The most outstanding result of that approach has been the deterioration of schools in poorer areas as resources follow the departing students, albeit without commensurate gains in education achievement from students attending the recipient schools. The evidence suggests that a more equitable distribution of resources across schools gives better overall outcomes.7

**We need to get all our neighbourhood schools up to scratch rather than showering a few schools in riches, without them adding commensurate value.**

This doesn’t just impact on a school’s financial resources, but also their social resources. Schools are increasingly stratified, and even within schools, students get stratified into streams and ability groups.8

This doesn’t help the good students, but hugely dents the performance of poor kids. Why such asymmetry? We know that children benefit from working in groups and learning from each other. Recent research also shows children perform according to expectation – a major reason children from poor backgrounds perform poorly is because no one expects them to do well.

By stratifying schools and classes we rob poor performers of positive role models, and leave teachers as the sole vehicle for increasing expectations. Remember also that under Tomorrow’s Schools the community effectively runs the school, so their skills (or lack of) have an impact on the school too. This stratification undermines the performance of poor kids, poor schools, and our entire education system. All this has been undertaken for no noticeable improvement in education achievements of our best students. For poor schools the experiment has been a disaster.

**Pass rate targets (such as 85% achieving NCEA Level 2) have failed overseas and are failing here.**

Using assessments like NCEA as targets doesn’t encourage better performance, but rather, it leads to greater gaming of the system. In practice the focus of the “learning” process goes on dumbing down and teaching students simply to the test. Good students focus on amassing the credits required to pass, and then give up trying, rather than cultivating a love of lifelong learning. Poor performers get shunted around the system in search of the easiest way to pass. It should come as no surprise that our education system fails the worst off – we have one of the largest gaps between education outcomes of rich and poor kids in the world.

Aside from dealing with poverty as we’ve discussed earlier, there are other ways that gap could be closed via the education system. While the home is a bigger predictor of outcomes than the school on average, giving students access to consistently higher quality teachers and resources over time could close the gap. However, these initiatives generally require considerably more resources for schools in poor areas than we are currently providing through the decile system; for example we could invest in more highly trained teachers and school leaders, outreach to engage parents and establish schools as community hubs, increased access to technology and/or more time at school (e.g. supervised homework clubs).
Most of these ideas cost a lot of money, and the evidence is that we would get a better return giving that money to parents during the early years. However, there are promising ways of boosting results that wouldn’t cost much; getting better mixing of pupils of differing abilities and backgrounds.

**This could be achieved by encouraging everyone to attend their local school for the first year, and stopping the formal use of streaming and ability grouping in schools.**

We could also do more to help schools collaborate rather than compete, so they can learn off each other and share resources at the same time. There is no reason why every school needs its own administration, books, auditor, Board of Trustees or even Principal. We will allow encourage schools to merge back office functions and reinvest the savings in the school – for example by paying for uniforms or dropping fees. Schools with falling rolls and large capital programmes may wish to merge entirely and create new top quality institutions.

One area that solving poverty won’t help is special education. Much like our health system, when it comes to special education the squeaky wheel gets the oil. Those that know how to get help for their kids get it, while the rest miss out. For example, decile 10 (the “rich” catchment) schools have 7 times more students getting special assessment conditions as decile 1 (poor catchment) schools. Special education needs reallocating on the basis of true (not requested) need, which will probably create calls for funding to be boosted.

**Within the education system, teacher quality is paramount.**

The best education systems around the world treat teachers as valued professionals. They set the bar high for teachers to get in (e.g. a Masters degree), and encourage them to keep learning over their career. Politicians need to stop their micromanaging and tinkering. Better to take the global evidence and just sign off on a best-of-breed public education system letting the professionals (education academics and of course teachers) do the business. Reforms have to be undertaken within the profession, based on evidence and thoroughly evaluated – not driven by ideological bias of political appointees.

**LIFELONG LEARNING – THE NEED FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION REFORM**

We have already discussed the challenges this sector is facing to stay relevant. Tertiary education providers need to at least cost-effectively provide what students need to have – first to appeal to employers or start out on their own. Even more importantly they need to ensure people stay capable of earning at a level they desire and in occupations they enjoy.

Tertiary education plays an important role in our society, particularly in developing the critical thinking skills that are becoming increasingly important to the economy and civil society. However, TOP has particular concerns with the demand-led, bums-on-seats model that has led to the student visa debacle and appears to be overproducing low quality qualifications, which don’t add much value to society.

Further, given the inequities in our primary and secondary system, tertiary education is overwhelmingly accessed by the children of middle and upper class parents. TOP’s main priority is making New Zealand fair again, because we believe that prosperity built on fairness is enduring – whereas if built on worsening inequality, it’s at risk. That is the reason for our investment in early education.

Our focus will be to ensure that the considerable and ongoing investment of taxpayer money in the tertiary sector is not impeding the sector’s ability to adapt from its start-of-adult-life model to a whole-of-adult-life provision of relevant educational modules to support a productive and well-rewarded paid workforce.

How are we going to do this? There are several pathways of change emerging now including Singapore’s regime to provide vouchers that people can use over their working life at approved providers, a UBI that a worker can use to privately fund their retraining or upskilling, universities and technical institutes moving to online courses, ensuring that effective new providers can enter the market, the role played by occupational licensing… the list goes on. But in short this needs a thorough review of the sector to ensure the taxpayer is not wasting resources propping up a system that has less and less relevance to the reality of people’s lives.
New Zealand’s “bums on seats” funding model for tertiary is highly suspect and controversial too now that our overseas education provision has compromised our immigration policy (see "Immigration, TOP policy priority #2")

**TOP’S POLICY TO ADDRESS EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING:**

- New money in education has to go where the return is greatest; early childhood. TOP’s priority is early childhood education, with our goal to deliver free full-time ECE from the age of 3.
- Restore the status of teachers by setting the quality standards at the entry point. Teachers should require a post-grad degree at least (including the disciplines of education and learning), and in the case of primary school teachers at least NCEA Level 2 in Maths and Science. The existing stock of teachers also needs to be raised to this standard through Continuous Professional Development. Focus on proven, cost effective strategies such as thinking skills, group learning and high expectations teaching. As the status of teachers rises over time, their salaries will need to rise also.
- Testing is for circus animals that the public pays to see doing tricks. Reduce the administrative burden on teachers by delaying National Standards until Year 6 and give students in their final year of school the choice of sitting NCEA 1, 2 or 3. The extra time would be spent on learning and developing individual learning plans to ensure that students have the qualifications and skills they will need.
- Encourage people to use their local school, at least for the first year of education. Provide guidance and training on the appropriate use of streaming and ability grouping.
- Generate cost savings in schools by merging administrative functions with other schools in the region so that they have one Board of Trustees, one set of policies and accounts, and one auditor. Savings could be redirected into reducing the costs that parents face, such as fees and uniforms, or providing new services such as greater outreach to engage parents in their child’s learning. Schools with falling rolls and large capital build programmes ahead would be physically merged and the savings reinvested in education.
- Special education requires more equitable entry criteria (at the moment the squeaky wheel gets oiled) and potentially greater funding. We need to improve the coordination between our health and education systems for people with special needs.
- Scrap the publishing of National Standards and NCEA results and the NCEA Level 2 target unless they can be translated into true ‘added value’ results. Restore the previous internal Ministry performance monitoring system of internal performance targets on the basis of sample monitoring data, not on constant assessment and testing of all students.
- Conduct a Tertiary Sector Review with the specific objective of delivering recommendations to ensure taxpayer funding of this sector is aligned with the lifelong needs for learning that secure, well-paid employment requires.

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