

Democracy in Education: Stealth Politics and Myth Making

People often complain about the operation of government, but how much do we know about people's preferred type of government? A recent American study found that contrary to the prevailing view that people want greater involvement, ("the community wants ...", "society expects ...") most do not care about most policies and therefore are content to turn over decision-making authority to someone else. Perhaps the same applies in New Zealand. Studies have also told us that for the most part, parents are happy with their schools and teachers, and that they trust teachers more than they trust politicians and their policy pushing bureaucrats...

Herein lies the great paradox of democracy, which in a quirky way is illustrated in the title of a resource for Year 9 - 11 students received today from Learning Media: Power to the People Interestingly, the booklet is about geothermal power (energy from hot steam)! When the Labour government launched Tomorrow's Schools in 1988, the great democratic ideal was an underpinning rationale in the reform of education administration in New Zealand to the extent that the opening statement in the little yellow book (Tomorrow's Schools) quoted and translated into Maori, the words of pre-capitalist thinker and American president, Thomas Jefferson:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate power of the society but the people themselves and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform them of their discretion.

But was this really just a lot of hot steam? The education system, always good at espousing the democratic ideal, has long illustrated and perpetuated the tension between educational administration operating within a genuine environment of freedom, democracy and devolved responsibility, and an educational environment typified by central regulatory devices requiring obedience, sub-ordination, compliance with "our way", and systemic accountability.

Absolutism, of whatever kind, whether democratic or autocratic, is risky, and invariably counterproductive to the empowerment and enrichment of people and communities. Neither top-down nor bottom-up control in a democratic society's institutions (e.g. schools) is ever entirely satisfactory. Somehow there needs to be a sensibly crafted middle ground which respects and understands the respective roles of those elected to govern at a national or macro policy level (central government - New Zealand society - school system) and those responsible at the local or micro level (the school, its people and its community). To suggest that the "top" is more responsible and knows better is a proven nonsense.

It is fundamentally reasonable for the State to set broad policy expectations for the workings of institutions funded by the tax payer. Yet it is also reasonable to expect that tax payers will have some sense of control over the policies they are paying for, along with the capacity to exercise discretion, interpretation and initiative appropriate to local situations. In the school sector this means that schools and their boards should not have to work within a regime of highly prescriptive and circumscribed planning, documenting and reporting procedures formulated on unsubstantiated and simplistic assumptions about how to "raise achievement and reduce disparity" (that oxymoron again). When the new National Administration Guidelines are released after the general election (when the voting is over and done), school boards are entitled to expect that those "guidelines" (a funny word in this usage) will be consistent with the fundamental idea that they are accountable first and foremost to their students, teachers and parents - not to regulatory centralised systems of administrative paperwork, checking, approving, monitoring, overseeing by government officials.

Footnote for School Boards

Have you had the opportunity to examine and comment on the intended new National Administration Guidelines to which you will be required to comply. Or do you prefer to trust bureaucrats to get them right? Or is it too late for such a poll? Do let me know if you, also, have seen a pre-election copy of what is being put up.