

Enlightenment Strikes the Education Review Office. Part 1 and Part 2

Part 1

Remember ERO's slogan "Strip away the bark. Expose the heartwood." Well, it seems that it has rid itself of its pestilential bark and is beginning to show some empathetic heart. Its new slogan, "The Child - The Heart of the Matter" signals some hugely significant changes in ethos, method and, most particularly, leadership at the top.

How refreshing it was for me to be told by a group of not uncritical senior management secondary school leaders after a conference session with Karen Sewell (the Chief Review Officer who is successfully succeeding the previous head of this government office) that they actually enjoyed listening to her presentation and company. That is wonderfully refreshing.

The silliness that still prevails in some quarters, however, is that because we no longer have an ERO leadership that barks and shames, the office no longer has its necessary teeth. What absolute nonsense. At the end of the day the effectiveness of leadership should be measured in terms of influence of the kind that constructively motivates and gives confidence to build improved pathways that are likely to be of genuine and enduring worth. In education, that worth is unequivocally invested in the child.

But we should all know that in pursuing that worth, the teacher and the community are central and inseparable. For too long that so-called "stripping away of the bark" stunted and severely damaged the growth, creativity, spirit and initiative of too many in the forest of teachers. This is not to deny that ERO doesn't have a role in exercising a firm yet fair hand when necessary. As the State's agent, its integrity depends on its impartiality and great good sense. Technocratic tongue lashings were never particularly clever or professionally appropriate ways of advancing the work of our schools.

To give credit where it is due, the Rodgers Review of the Education Review Office (December 2000) was the catalyst for change. This remarkably insightful and astute analysis of the performance, conduct and systems of ERO which was commissioned by the Minister of Education, paved the way for new thinking and new leadership. Apart from a couple of Ministerial decisions following the report (e.g. not to have an Education Review Office - Ministry of Education EDI), the initiative and willingness to adopt the spirit of this report have been taken up by ERO's new leadership. In particular, its new "Education Reviews" are very well thought through. They will be the focus of Part 2.

Part 2

Over the years schools have witnessed and been subjected to a seemingly endless series of changes to ERO's review systems and methodologies. In total, they would provide bulky substance for anyone contemplating a PhD topic! Up until this year ERO reviews have been strongly directed towards matters of compliance with statutory and regulatory (NEGs) requirements (paper work). Many labelled the approach "technocracy".

The latest review framework has been titled "Education Reviews" (replacing "Accountability Reviews"). The change in title signals a significant shift in focus towards student achievement and school improvement through self-review. This doesn't mean that compliance is now out the window.

Far from it. There is still a process for checking school's governance policies and associated management procedures. But what is wonderful about the new reviews is that they recognise the potential power and validity of self-review, as opposed to external review, for strengthening school practice.

Moreover, the focus is on children's learning - the core business of schools. Hopefully, with changes to the curriculum framework resulting from the Ministry of Education's "curriculum stocktake", schools might be given leave to exercise greater localisation, innovation, initiative, discernment and enterprise in programme content and delivery.

"Education Reviews", we are told, involve three strands: school specific priorities, government priorities of literacy, numeracy, closing the gaps, health and safety, etc. etc. (much the same as those of other countries and their governments), and compliance issues. In essence, we are told that the reviews will recognise what schools are doing well, help identify what they need to improve, and offer ideas about what they should or could do next.

Nothing fancy about this - it is all fundamentally good sense. The school worth its salt shouldn't really find any surprises in what ERO manages to identify and report, accepting the limitations of time given over to the external review (about 5 days worth for 3 years worth) and in a number of cases the extent of reviewer experience, insightfulness and capacity for sensible judgement. If there are surprises, then they might arise from either the school not being sufficiently resourceful and thorough in examining its own strengths and limitations, or the review team having difficulty in aligning itself to the situational realities of the school.

The framework for "Education Reviews" is well conceived in many respects. For example:

- It recognises the inseparability of intertwined factors of governance, professional leadership, high quality teaching, and student achievement. These are ERO's links in the "chain of quality".
- It acknowledges and gives status to the school's own priorities for teaching and learning.
- It gives substantial focus to the school's *self*-reviews, and has the potential to help strengthen the importance, practice and quality of those self-reviews.
- It acts to a more collaborative manner in reaching conclusions about successes and recommendations for future development.

Many schools have struggled over the years to develop effective, time efficient and satisfying methodologies for self-review and associated reporting. This is not to suggest that self-review is a misplaced conception, but shows that a range of models of good practice will take time to develop. "Education Reviews", done well, could help strengthen this development.

ERO's new framework is to be applauded, but we have all come to know that a framework is one thing; it's application is another. As with all good intentions, its efficacy and integrity will depend very substantially on the credibility, quality, skills, experience, wisdom and sensibilities of reviewers and their managers. So far the feedback from around New Zealand has been largely but not entirely reassuring. This simply tells us that ERO itself is not above those over whom it exercises *ascribed* governmental authority - which is very different from *achieved* professional credibility.