

A decade on, a decade ahead

NZ Principals Federation Moot 11.15am Friday March 24 2006

Introductions

Thank you for inviting me here again today.

I have always seen this forum as a key opportunity in my calendar.

As this is my last as Secretary for Education I will reflect on the experience of education reform since 1990, and look ahead towards the next 10 years.

Slide - A Decade of Change

A quick 10 question quiz.

I first took on the job of Secretary for Education in 1996. Think back.

1. What was text-messaging?
2. What was pay-parity?
3. What was Trade-Me?
4. What were communities of professional practice?
5. Who was Peter Jackson?
6. What were the three most important drivers of student achievement?
7. What was an i-pod?
8. What sort of knowledge and information was there to support teaching and learning?
9. What was NCEA?
10. What was a blog?

These 10 questions give an insight into just how much change popular culture and education has absorbed over the past decade.

During a period of considerable change we have maintained an education system that compares well internationally.

And I believe we have within our collective grasp the opportunity to develop a great system that is arguably the best in the world.

Slide - Our Place in the World

Don't doubt that our education system is good. International benchmarking tells us it is.

- Over three quarters of us aged between 25 and 64 years-old have achieved secondary or tertiary qualifications. This is at the upper end of the OECD scale and well above the OECD average of 65 percent.
- Many of our students are achieving in the top 25% of students in the OECD.
- Over the past four years there has been a substantial decline in the proportion of students leaving school without a school qualification.
- The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2003), which assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy puts New Zealand in the second highest performing group of countries for each subject area.
- We have higher rates of participation in early childhood education than most other OECD countries.
- And our teachers are highly regarded both for their achievements here in New Zealand and in their contributions to many classrooms around the world.

We haven't got these results by sitting on our hands. Huge effort has taken place in schools to respond to today's students. And we all know the challenges needed to make our system a great system.

Slide - Change, Change and More Change

I think those outside education underestimate the amount of change that's taken place in New Zealand's education system let alone the impact of that change on you as principals, on teachers and particularly for students.

Reform, which started with Tomorrow's Schools, has been education's bedfellow for over 15 years.

Over a relatively short period all the major levers of influence over schools have changed significantly.

If I quote from the authors of a 2000 Brookings Institute Press publication from Fiske and Ladd:

"Rarely has any country engaged in such a sustained and far-reaching overhaul of its education systems."

Tomorrow's schools and the curriculum changes of the 1990s created conditions for schools to be more innovative in their teaching and their responsiveness to different students and communities.

They recognised that students not only required strong basics but also the skills to keep learning and adapting in a rapidly changing world because the future world would be quite different to the one we were brought up in.

The initial changes were built upon by a growing focus on student achievement and professional practice. These were centred on the teaching of literacy, numeracy, the professional assessment practices and the use of ICT to enhance teaching and learning.

At this time a major investment in developing a strong knowledge base relating to student achievement through exemplars and surveys of student achievement was initiated.

This informed an intense focus to reverse the tail of under achievement that had long been a long-term characteristic of the New Zealand education system.

Slide – Lifting Student Achievement

Reform Focused on Student Achievement

Tomorrow's schools are now today's schools.

In the space of 15 years some of the assumptions that have underpinned education have been turned on their head.

- Teaching is becoming a genuine knowledge profession where policy and practice is being underpinned by good information about what all students should be capable of achieving, and the teaching practices that most successfully teach and support diverse students.
- A decade ago the backgrounds or particular needs of some children were seen as a barrier to learning. Now they are being tapped into as strengths.
- Instead of each student being treated the same student diversity is being recognised and responded to.
- Successful learning includes a very strong focus on the basics such as reading and maths, but is also looking to prepare students for a world where success values creativity, problem solving, teamwork, resilience and the ability to relate and adapt to different people and situations.
- In 1996 debates centred on methods of funding and issues outside of the classroom. Now the focus is strongly centred on effective teaching and the engagement of families and communities as the two most powerful influences on a student's learning.

Slide - Evidence Based Education

One of the single most important changes I have seen is the huge growth in knowledge and the knowledge base within our education system and profession.

As Secretary for Education I remember vividly those early days where the debates and pressures were based on anecdote and prejudice. Everyone I met had a very clear view about what mattered and what needed to change. More often than not views varied enormously from person to person. This did not make for quality, robust decisions or the development of strong professional practice across the system.

Evidence is now driving change. This is a major and historic shift. It is providing a knowledge base that is changing expectations, practice and policy.

It was great talking to teachers on the West Coast a couple of weeks ago. They are sharing and using both national and local achievement information to lift the reading and writing of all their children. They use the information to question what they can do differently. They experiment more deliberately – always with an eye on student learning. They all see their teaching improving as a result and in a number of cases are able to point to significant lifts in student achievement.

The impressive results teachers and schools have been able to achieve in schools in Mangere, Otara, Northland, East Coast and elsewhere are clearly demonstrating the fact that being poor, being Māori or needing additional support are not reasons for not doing as well as other children in our system.

Across the system the increased investment and focus is on professional development, better tools to support teachers, and teachers working together rather than in the isolation of their classrooms, is increasingly showing results in terms of better achievement.

Professional development now emphasises different dimensions of teaching – effective content, knowledge, knowledge of the students, and the range of teaching strategies that could be used.

There is a greater understanding that we can all add value to learning and teaching.

It is great to see some of the dreams of Tomorrow's Schools become the reality in the more sophisticated ways in which teachers see the potential of basing teaching and learning beyond the schools and into their communities.

For example, I think of the technology teacher who based her teaching around the practices on a farm and the potential impacts of farming on local river quality. The kids not only learned a lot about science, social studies and technology. They also learned firsthand about different occupations and the training that might be required. The learning was real, varied and motivating. Many different future potential interests and passions for those children were ignited as a result.

Slide - From Good To Great

We are making real progress lifting student achievements. Today:

- Students can be expected to achieve regardless of their backgrounds.
- We are building on our successes as we learn more about what works.
- The system wide investment in literacy and numeracy is showing through in better results.
- The investment in the professional practice of teachers is increasing teaching effectiveness.
- Teaching is being supported by a growing evidence base, research, evaluation and supports.

Challenges remain and I don't under estimate these.

Generally, the spread of achievement *within* schools is more significant, particularly in an international context, than the spread of achievement *between* different groups of schools. This is an issue for every school not just some.

We have issues of behaviour, attendance and transience to address.

The kids of today are different from those of yesterday. They are technically literate and confident. They think and engage differently.

We have a responsibility to respond to these realities. But over the next decade I believe we have the ability and momentum within our collective capabilities to make substantial gains.

Let me talk a little about the literacy and numeracy strategies and how their success is generating lifts in student achievement. Success in this work opens many doors for future success across our education system. The benefits cascade into all areas of education and student achievement.

Our students have a wide spread of achievement in reading and mathematics compared to other highly achieving countries.

The strategies and work programmes for teachers and students aim to lift literacy and numeracy levels, strengthen teacher competencies, share professional practice and strengthen student abilities.

The numeracy project will have touched most of your teachers in some way.

In its five years some 23,000 primary teachers have been involved and 575,000 primary students. In secondary 75 schools, 750 teachers and 22,000 students have been involved so far.

- Research shows that significant improvements have been recorded in the maths achievement of all students. It is showing improvements across all groups along with some reduction in disparity between the top and lowest achievers.
- Schooling improvement projects that seek to add value to the numeracy projects in lower decile schools can have a significant impact.
- The quality of maths teaching in New Zealand primary schools continues to improve. Teacher confidence in maths continues to be enhanced as their content knowledge improves and their understanding of effective maths teaching is extended.

- Higher levels of student achievement in maths can be sustained, especially in schools where student achievement information influences planning and teaching.
- The experience and involvement of the principal, the strength of lead teachers, collaborative environments and te reo Māori proficiency are key features that ensure the success and sustainability of Te Poutama Tau in Māori medium settings.

A strength of these projects is the identification of barriers to learning, and help to provide teachers and students with the tools and skills to lift those barriers.

Families and Communities

The evidence tells us that the effectiveness of these approaches must be coupled by stronger relationships with families and communities.

If we do this we get a win: win.

Families and communities become more confident and capable of engaging with their children's learning, and can contribute to building their children's resilience, identity and self management.

Change here is seeing results.

Across our education system proactive initiatives like the Team Up programme fronted by Tana Umaga is seeing a lot more information, advice and guidance going out to parents and families.

At a local level stronger iwi partnerships and strong engagement and interaction with Pasifika communities, families and parents are strengthening education at an individual school level.

Connections between education and families and communities are strengthening. They need to be a lot stronger if we are to get the gains in achievement that the evidence tells us we can. This includes strengthening the coordination and effectiveness of services provided to students and schools from different government agencies.

Leadership

When I came into the job the focus of professional leadership centred very strongly on advocacy rather than practice. In large part this reflected a sense of disenfranchisement and lack of engagement with policy processes and debates and the challenge associated with the language of reform.

Advocacy will always be an important concern for teacher, trustee and principal associations. But alongside this, the development of a great system needs stronger professional leadership at all levels.

We are all accountable for improvement. This is one of the big opportunities associated with the processes to develop a school sector strategy and for all of us to contribute leadership to the process.

The NZPF has had a strong, constructive role over the past decade. I think in particular of your influence in developing approaches to principal development.

But, what will you as an organisation be doing differently over the next 10 years to help achieve a great education system?

Slide - The Future

We can achieve an excellent education system. We will achieve this if we:

- Have a depth of focus and analysis of achievement to understand the barriers each child must overcome to reach higher achievement.
- Recognise the importance of seeing underachievement within a school and acting on it at all levels in the system.
- Have strong professional associations within schools and beyond, including stronger research/practice links and stronger policy and practice links.

- Do fewer things at a school and system level but do them really well and with sufficient depth to make a difference.
- Support and develop strong leadership.
- Have a strong focus on the longer term and one that not only recognises different roles within a system but also the importance of sharing responsibilities for system outcomes.

Conclusion

Hearts and minds matter.

The experience of the last 15 years confirms this.

If people believe a child can succeed and if teachers believe they can make a difference then that child probably will succeed. If those beliefs are not there, then the child probably won't succeed.

Good information is powerful – especially when it can demonstrate what is irrespective of a child's background and circumstances and when it can inform and support positive changes to teaching practices and stronger relationships between teachers, schools, students and parents.

Increasing the availability of hard evidence and linking every debate and discussion to learning outcomes is important.

Effective teaching and the role of families are the two most powerful influences for improving student achievement and it is important that policies focus on these.

Success is more likely when there is agreement about common goals and the kind of shifts needed to achieve them.

The more willing people are to see the world through different eyes the more likely will be the development of common understandings and shared goals.

If I refer to my plane analogy that I've talked about at previous sessions here:

We're still building the plane while we're flying – that's the nature of education – but we've completed large sections and we've got the plane heading to the right destination.

Thank you.