



SUBMISSION on Updating the Education Act 1989

Paper 081/15

Prepared on behalf of COMET Auckland, December 14, 2015

Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi
ki te raranga i te whāriki
kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.
Mā te mahi tahi o ngā whenu,
mā te mahi tahi o ngā kairaranga,
ka oti tēnei whāriki.
I te otinga
me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.
Ā tana wā,
me titiro hoki
ki ngā raranga i makere
nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

The tapestry of understanding
cannot be woven by one strand alone.
Only by the working together of strands
and the working together of weavers
will such a tapestry be completed.
With its completion
let us look at the good that comes from it
and, in time
we should also look
at those stitches which have been dropped,
because they also have a message.

- Kūkupa Tirikatene

About COMET Auckland

COMET Auckland, Te Hononga Akoranga (Community Education Trust Auckland) is a charitable trust and Council Controlled Organisation (CCO) of Auckland Council. Our role is to support education and skills across Auckland, contributing to the relevant social and economic goals in the Auckland Plan.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the consultation document on Updating the Education Act 1989.

Over-arching comments

We welcome the decision to review the Act, and we specifically welcome the decision to look beyond the administrative focus of the original Act, to include consideration of the purpose of education and to consider how the system can best serve that purpose. However we see the current consultation document as too limited in its scope and too conservative in its proposals.

The diagram on page 5 of the consultation document is one indication of the conservative, narrow focus of the consultation process. It is good to see the child at the centre, but the child's pathway of learning does not feature, nor do the transitions between stages of learning. It seems as if the main focus of the diagram is on the schools as individual institutions and on how they relate to one another, not on the learning of the child wherever it happens – in schools, in whānau, in the community, online etc. 21st Century learning principles would suggest a move away from schools as buildings/ institutions towards learners having control of their learning pathway and making use of different learning opportunities to fit their needs and interests.

Ideally, the new Act should look at the whole pathway of learning, incorporating tertiary (and ideally also community and workplace learning) as well as early learning and schooling. This pathway approach is necessary to achieve the stated intention for the Act to be student-centred. Given that the Ministry of Education now handles tertiary policy, it would be logical to bring at least the purpose and over-arching organisation of education across all sectors into one document. We have been encouraged to see that the recent Ministry of Education Four Year Strategic Plan incorporates all three sectors. We recommend that the review of the Act should be expanded to align with this cross-sector focus.

The goals of education

We endorse the proposal to include the purpose of education within the Act, provided that this can be kept general. We also agree with the recognition that we need many voices, including “learners, parents, whānau, teachers, education services, businesses and the public” to shape that goal.

In a spirit of adding our voice to that discussion, we have included here some thoughts on what we believe would need to be included in any goal of education.

1. We would like to see a focus on lifelong learning, rather than only on what young people know and can do at the end of their schooling.
2. We believe any goal should be holistic, recognising that education contributes to social, emotional, physical and intellectual growth, and that it supports learners to contribute to their own social and economic wellbeing and that of their whānau, community, nation and world.
3. We recognise the importance of culture and identity for learning, and the key role that language plays in this. We therefore believe the goals of education should include ensuring learners are confident in their own language and culture and that they have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable them to actively engage with other languages and cultures.
4. We would like to see a system-level goal that relates to equity of outcomes, to ensure that the gaps between achievement for learners by ethnicity, gender or socio-economic group are closing over time.

The role of Boards of Trustees

We suggest that Boards' responsibility to collaborate with other boards in their community be clarified to explicitly state the purposes of this collaboration. We believe that these purposes should include planning for effective transition between different levels of the education system, and for achievement for all learners in their community.

The suggestion to allow a four-year planning cycle for "high-performing schools" would need consideration. A four-year cycle would reduce compliance costs and could increase continuity of planning, but there is a risk that it could reduce a school's ability to respond to changes in the school or community.

The proposal to allow schools to plan collaboratively is positive and could enable a more strategic, cohesive approach at the community level, provided it is optional, a collaborative approach is only likely to be effective if all partners enter into the collaboration willingly.

Enabling collaboration

It is encouraging to see reference to collaboration. In addition to collaboration among educational institutions, the review should also consider collaboration with organisations outside the sector that interact with young people and families, for example employers, churches, marae and social service organisations.

The current focus of school-community relationships is on “parent engagement” (which usually involves one-way messages from the school to the parents) and occasionally on “community consultation” (which rarely gives any real power to the community). The provision in the original Act to establish Community Education Forums was intended as a way to give communities more of a say in education. This could be considered again, especially for Communities of Schools, where two-way engagement with the broader community could be particularly valuable.

Enabling innovation

Cohort entry is already possible under the current Education Act, for children who have already turned five. If it was proposed to allow children to start before age five (e.g. at the start of the year/term after turning 4 ½ as in Australia), schools would need to show that they can offer a programme that is suitable for younger children.

We agree with the proposal for school attendance to be compulsory from the time of starting school, rather than age 6. Given the very high rates of unexplained absence for 5-year-olds in some communities, and the impact this has on children’s learning, this change is an important way to support achievement.

An additional area of flexibility that would be useful is the ability for schools to be able to vary the timing and length of the school day (beyond a minimum number of hours). This would allow schools to be responsive to the evidence that young children work best early in the day while teenagers work best when they sleep later. It would also allow schools to respond to community need, for example prevalent work hours or pressures on school buildings (as happened after the Christchurch earthquakes).

Recognising quality

In principle, we agree with the proposal to base assessments of school quality on learning outcomes. However we note that performance measures are extremely difficult to get right, and that any increase in measures will affect compliance costs for schools. It is essential, however, that any indicators should go well beyond literacy, numeracy and qualifications. They need to include a balance of process and outcome measures and they need to focus on gains rather than on absolute achievement.

If it is decided to include outcome measures in judgments of school effectiveness, we recommend that:

- Indicators and measures of performance need to be holistic, including student wellbeing, cultural capital (including identity and language), attitudes (e.g. love of learning) and competencies (e.g. resilience, self-control) as well as academic achievement.
- Measures should include tracking equity – the gap between high and low-performing learners within a school, and whether there is a systematic difference in achievement levels or gains according to ethnicity and/or gender and/or socio-economic group.
- Measures need to focus on gains over time, rather than on absolute achievement levels. Given the high rates of transience in many areas, this will require being able to track individual students' data as they move between schools.
- Process measures of evidence-based teaching and leadership practices should be included alongside outcome measures.

The main focus when schools are identified as “doing well” should be on ensuring that that situation continues, and on ensuring that the system is learning from what is bringing about that success, rather than on rewarding success. Less frequent ERO visits, for example, make sense in terms of reducing compliance and costs when there is confidence in a school's practice, but there is also an argument for a less frequent but more intensive visit for outstanding schools, so the system can learn what that school is doing to achieve their gains.

Additional options to support schools and kura to get back on track should include earlier access to expertise for leaders and boards, and more intensive support at an earlier stage when difficulties are identified. Additional pay for leaders and teachers in hard-to-staff schools would also help attract the best staff to places where the need is greatest.

In addition to addressing schools that are struggling, the goal of “making every school and kura a great one” needs to focus also on identifying and learning from excellence, as described above.

Local education provision

The focus for decisions about local education provision needs to be on finding a structure that will ensure the best outcomes for all learners in a community, with a particular focus on equity.

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