

SUMMARY

This paper examines the extent of the failure of the charter school experiment to provide an improved alternative to the public education system in New Zealand.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Playing politics with schools

Charter schools¹ were dropped on an unsuspecting electorate in 2011 apparently because it was the price that the National Party had to pay for a coalition agreement with the ACT Party – though many suspected that National was more than happy to go along with it. The initiative was accompanied by widespread cheerleading and promises that charter schools would unleash a new era of educational success in New Zealand.

1.2 The charter school experiment

Despite evidence to the contrary, charter school proponents insisted that educational under-achievement was caused by regulation. They argued that the key to better educational achievement was removing things like:

- a nationally-agreed curriculum;
- trained and qualified teachers;
- close scrutiny of taxpayer money;
- public accountability through the Official Information Act; and
- transparency around salary payments as guaranteed by the national collective agreements.

The legislation setting up charter schools duly empowered them to act in secrecy

¹ In an attempt to dissociate the name charter school from the body of critical overseas research, they were marketed as partnership schools/kura hourua but the public has determinedly stuck to the original name.

and without proper scrutiny. It also enabled them make profits out of public education though they, perhaps wisely, did not attempt to explain how that would enhance achievement.

2. What could possibly go wrong?

2.1 Control student intake = get better results

Even in 2011, it was clear that the claims about the academic success of charter schools were highly exaggerated and more a product of being able to control student entry than anything that happened inside the school. Some charter schools were also discovered to be enhancing results by using "drill and kill" techniques and teaching to the test.² The prime minister, John Key, dismissed the concerns, saying:

Are you really telling me that because we might trial in parts of the country, one or two schools, to see whether they can deliver better results, that somehow it's undermining the education system in New Zealand? Sorry but it sounds a bit far-fetched to me.³

3. Chickens coming home to roost?

3.1 Mismanagement and fraud

Since then, international evidence linking charter schools with financial mismanagement, fraud and corruption has been growing⁴ and evidence is emerging of very unsatisfactory practices in New Zealand charter schools. In a little over three years, there is already growing evidence of mismanagement within New Zealand charter schools including:

- [The use of taxpayer funding to purchase a \\$650,000 farm](#) which is now owned by a trust so is unlikely to return to the Crown even though the school may close;
- [Failure to meet roll expectations but retaining full funding](#);
- [Building up significant cash reserves](#);
- [Management failure](#); and

² Charter Schools for New Zealand. Education Policy Response Group. Massey University College of Education April 2012. Retrieved from: <http://www.parliament.nz/resource/0000252342>

³ Key defends charter schools Stuff 6/12/2011 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/6091158/Key-defends-charter-schools>

⁴ Charter School Vulnerabilities to Waste, Fraud, & Abuse. A report from the Centre for Popular Democracy and Integrity in Education. May 2014. Retrieved from:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/221993993/Charter-School-Vulnerabilities-to-Waste-Fraud-Abuse> and:

Washington Post 28 April 2015 Report: [Millions of Dollars in fraud, waste found in charter school sector](#) and: Conflicts of interest in academy sponsorship arrangements. A report for the Education Select Committee (UK) September 2014. Retrieved from: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Education/Conflicts-of-interest-in-academies-report.pdf>

- [Inability to manage student behaviour.](#)

3.2 Dubious data

The one secondary charter school that has escaped much of this criticism has been the Vanguard Military Academy which was already a functioning private provider before it was given access to full taxpayer funding. Even then its claim to have been widely successful and to have achieved 100% pass rates does not stand up to analysis and turns out to be mainly a factor of a very narrow senior curriculum and, we may infer, some of the practices associated with rote learning and drilling.

[Fact checking the myth-buster from Vanguard Charter School](#)

3.3 NZ – no secrets here

It is interesting that despite the efforts made in the legislation to protect charter schools from public scrutiny, information about their operations has not been hard to come by. This probably reflects the "Rainbow Warrior effect" – New Zealand is still a small and relatively close-knit society where things cannot stay hidden for long.

4. What's the damage?

4.1 Charter schools and the community

One of the most frustrating aspects of the introduction of charter schools to New Zealand has been a complete failure to acknowledge the damaging effects that they have on students in surrounding schools. It was completely irresponsible to set up additional schools in areas like Whangarei and Manurewa, which already had declining rolls and surplus places in the school network. Adding further schools has reduced student numbers in surrounding schools, thus undermining the depth and range of curriculum subjects they can offer. Charter schools put the education of other students in the community at risk.

4.2 Charter schools and evaluation

This experiment is being evaluated, but in such a way that it is unlikely to provide any useful evidence because the report is restricted to consider only the students at the schools themselves, not the negative impact they have on the local school community. This means it is really a public relations exercise and of little worth.

[The charter school evaluation: what it won't tell us.](#)

4.3 Charter schools and accountability

4.3.1 Accountable? Not so much...

One of the supposed strengths of charter schools is that they purport to be more accountable than public schools. This is very mysterious given the extent to which they have been legislatively excused from so much of the scrutiny and monitoring that public schools are subject to.

4.3.2 School closure as a punishment for under-achievement

It appears that what is really meant by “accountability” is the threat of closure. It is perverse in the extreme for charter school cheerleaders to argue that closing a charter school would actually demonstrate the success of the model. Any belief that the threat of school closure can be used as a way of lifting educational achievement is misguided and irresponsible. Transitions between school types constitute a risk for student learning – a finding that seems to be totally disregarded when it comes to discussions about school closure. The dislocation and uncertainty caused by school closure is profoundly distressing for parents and children and educationally destructive. It is unconscionable to require students to go to school by law then expect them to shuttle from school to school in search of one that might meet their needs. Every child should be able to attend a well-functioning and well-resourced neighbourhood school.

4.3.3 Students as collateral damage

There is also a glib assumption that the line between a struggling school and a failing school is clear-cut and definable. In reality, teachers, parents and students will do everything they can to try to turn around a struggling school, often succeeding only in slowing the rate of decline while not actually arresting it. Every year funding and staffing decrease with a consequent reduction in curriculum choice, extra-curricular options and pastoral support for students. Recruiting and retaining staff and board members becomes difficult. During all this time, successive cohorts of students pass through the school and receive an impoverished educational experience.

4.3.4 Avoiding political embarrassment at all cost

These complications around school closure are probably part of the reason why the minister has not been able to simply close the charter school at Whangaruru. Another reason is that it will expose the extent of the financial mismanagement that has characterised this school. Lastly, it is unlikely that the minister wants to provoke a debate in the House about the impossibility of the Crown getting any of its investment back.

4.4 Charter schools and innovation

4.4.1 New wine in old bottles

One of the more fanciful claims made about charter schools has been that “culture and regulation limit the extent” to which new

ideas can be developed in public schools and that freed from constraints, such as teacher registration and monitoring, charter schools will be able to innovate. No evidence was ever provided either for the claim that public schools don't innovate or that New Zealand charter schools have provided any innovative practice whatsoever.

4.4.2 Successful innovations: small classes and extra pay

One notable practice that charter schools engage in, but which is hardly innovative, is smaller class sizes. This is the one real advantage they consistently advertise to parents as an edge over state schools and it is one which is denied to most state schools because the government has determined that they will not be funded at the level of charter schools.

Smaller class sizes don't just appeal to parents, they are also a useful recruitment tool to attract teachers (along with the prospect of higher pay). Surrounding schools resent the fact that charter schools use their funding advantages to poach their teachers.

4.5 Charter Schools and PPTA

4.5.1 Professional responsibilities

At PPTA Annual Conference in 2013, members took a brave and unequivocal stand against charter schools. Recognising that their existence was a very deliberate attack on the profession, they determined not to do anything to assist charter schools. This was not an easy decision, but in the end they accepted that membership of a profession implied a responsibility to care about the welfare and well-being of all students, not just the ones selected to be part of a political experiment.

4.5.2 Exploiting the expertise of trained and qualified teachers

Members in Northland were immediately tested when one of their local charter schools made the arrogant assumption that trained and qualified secondary teachers in public schools would step in to help a well-funded, unaccountable, profit-making charter school deliver the curriculum. Members in Northland soon disabused them of that notion.

4.5.3 Ministry micro-management

Problems resurfaced this year, when a Northland charter school once again assumed it could avail itself of public school teacher goodwill to support a teacher education student it had taken on. Disappointingly, the Ministry of Education became involved and tried to pressure the schools into accepting the student. The move was unsuccessful but confirmed a suspicion that the Ministry of Education is putting far more effort into helping charter schools than into supporting struggling public schools.

5. Charter school authorisation board

- 5.1 Whatever becomes of charter schools, there can be no doubt that the real winners from all this are the members of the authorisation board, who despite their limited educational competence, are being handsomely paid to recruit possible charter school applicants and then to distribute taxpayer money to the successful candidates. On more than one occasion, they have overridden ministry advice and given approval to a group to set up a school when there are serious concerns about the capacity of the applicants to deliver education safely and well. It beggars belief that the members of the authorisation board are not being held to account for these errors of judgement that are costly to the taxpayer and damaging to the interests of students.⁵

[Charter school authorisations and conflicts of interest](#)

6. Conclusion

6.1 Charter schools: good for something...

Unsurprisingly, the inflated claims made about the potential of charter schools to revolutionise New Zealand education have not been realised but they may have been good for one thing. They provide a practical example of the futility of trying to address issues of poverty, unemployment, poor housing, racism, dysfunctional families and drug and alcohol addiction by changing the administration and management arrangements of schools. The fact that this lesson has come at the expense of some of our most vulnerable communities and their children is unconscionable if politically predictable.

6.2 ...or good for nothing

By some standards, this unfortunate experiment has been wildly successful in that it has most certainly transferred significant sums of money to the politically-appointed and educationally-inept members of the authorisation board and has certainly enabled some individuals, who would otherwise have been regarded as incapable of running public school, to enrich themselves.

⁵ Members of the Partnership Schools | Kura Hourua Authorisation Board are:

Catherine Isaac, John Shewan, Terry Bates, Dr Margaret Southwick, Dame Iritana Tawhiwhirangi, John Morris, Sir Toby Curtis and John Taylor. (Private schools and members of the Act Party are clearly over-represented in this line-up)

6.3 This was always going to end badly

The most depressing part of this wasteful experiment is that it has been based on spin which implies that no-one knows how to improve educational outcome in poor communities. The minister of education regularly justifies this egregious experiment with the comment "...We can't keep doing all the same things we have always done".⁶

It's true! We do need to do something different but let's not pretend we don't already know what works. Extensive work has been done by Sir Peter Gluckman, the prime minister's science advisor, on the approach that New Zealand needs to take in addressing a range of social, educational and health issues. The 17 recommendations in the Gluckman report on [Improving the Transition Reducing Social and Psychological Morbidity During Adolescence](#) provide an excellent blueprint on the range of social and economic initiatives that need to be undertaken, especially in the first three years of a child's life, if we are to lift educational performance and community wellbeing.

None of the recommendations suggest charter schools as a progressive answer.

6.4 What's next?

So far charter schools have soaked up \$25 million dollars, (not counting the cost of the constant support provided by the Ministry of Education), for considerable harm and little gain. Public support for the concept was never very high and is not likely to be rising. Except for National and ACT, all the other parliamentary parties are committed to stopping the experiment and have a number of bills in the private members' ballot which, if selected and passed, will restore some of the regulations around charter schools⁷. PPTA members can feel proud that the principled position that they have taken has played some part in exposing this cynical push to profit from the nation's children.

⁶ <http://www.hekiaparata.co.nz/index.php?/archives/P43.html>

⁷ A bill requiring that charter schools teach the national curriculum has been drawn from the private member's ballot.