

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Education or Social Engineering?

This week, in an unusual move, the Ministry of Education agreed that some Northland parents would not be forced to send their children to a poorly performing high school. The parents of 38 children who were pupils of the Moerewa and Kawakawa Primary Schools have been fighting to prevent their children from having to attend the Bay of Islands College. This high school, which is under limited statutory management, has a track record of students leaving before they complete their education, and lower NCEA passes than other similar schools (in 2004 only 10 percent of students passed level one, rising to 42 percent last year).

Unhappy about the standard of education at the College, parents have been seeking alternative options. The new plan will see temporary Year 9 classes established at each of the schools for the children to attend. They will be officially enrolled at BOI College and integrated into the College for Year 10.

While early reports indicated that the Ministry of Education granted the exemption to save the children from the damaging effects of poor schooling, the reality is their primary concern was for the poorly performing school, not the students.

They did not want to lose 38 children to secondary schools outside the district, knowing that they were unlikely to ever return and the future viability of the BOI College would be threatened. This saga exposes a fundamental gulf that exists within our education system. The focus of parents is on the quality of education and the success of their children, while the focus of the Ministry of Education is on roll sizes and school viability.

Falling education standards is now a significant issue for New Zealand. It has been identified as a major factor constraining economic growth. It also leads to increased welfare dependency and crime. If living standards are to be raised we must improve educational outcomes.

That is why it is so important that the incentives that operate in the education sector are changed so that the driving force is student success. That means that at primary and secondary school level, the funding should follow the child to the education provider of choice – whether a state or

independent school - just as it does at the pre-school and tertiary level.

If the funding did follow the child then the likes of the Moerewa and Kawakawa Primary schools could consider establishing their own small secondary school, giving parents and children an alternative that they do not presently have.

Interestingly, if the experience of other countries is anything to go by, changing the system so the funding follows the child would have little impact on the majority of schools and parents, because most families are happy with their local school. But where it would make an enormous difference is in those families that the education system is failing, but who are unable to buy their way out of the problem by moving to better school zone.

While reflecting on education, I was reminded about frequent comments that young people today think so differently from their parents' generation. As a result, I decided to check out the school curriculum to see what our youngsters are now being taught and how it has changed since the fifties and sixties when I was at school and the seventies and eighties when my children were there. I have to say that I was surprised at what I found. The school curriculum is now divided into seven essential learning areas: Language, Maths, Science, Technology, Social Sciences, Arts, Health and Physical Well-being.

Even a cursory examination indicates that there has been a dramatic shift in curriculum content in some areas. Maori language, rights and beliefs (including "the spiritual dimension of hauora"), have been interwoven into the curriculum at every level and in every area, and significant amounts of material that would previously have been considered to be political can now be found. The question that needs to be answered though, is whether or not this constitutes indoctrination and social engineering?

Firstly, to the Social Sciences learning area and Social Studies where our five year olds (Year 1) are being taught about the benefits of central planning and environmental advocacy, through talks from planning staff and building inspectors, resource materials supplied by

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Greenpeace, and farming discussions about issues such as “concern from anglers that dairying effluent is harming fish (and tourism) in South Island rivers”.

In Science, seven year olds are asked to discuss not only recycling, but also global warming and environmental activism, eight year olds must write “a letter to the local council justifying why a mangrove swamp ...should be conserved”, and twelve year olds are expected to research “the ethical implications of a current biotechnological issue: genetic engineering, reproductive technology, cancer research, HIV/AIDS”.

But the most dramatic curriculum change is in relation to those deeply personal issues that used to be regarded as family matters that have now been incorporated into the Health and Physical Wellbeing learning areas.

This curriculum teaches five year olds to name all “sexual parts” of the body. By age seven, the children are taught about “gender equity”, “cultural equity”, “abuse” and “harassment”, and at eight, they are learning about “pubertal change”, the “differences in gender and in sexual orientation”, and recognising “discrimination on the basis of chronic illness, mental illness, or cultural difference”.

At age nine, they are taught to manage risks in “sexual decisions, drug use, rape, harassment, racism, sexism, and homophobia”, and at ten, they are learning about harm minimisation in relation to “rape, harassment, the use of drugs, discrimination, and sexual activity”, as well as being introduced to the Privacy Act and the Human Rights Act.

By age eleven, the children are taught “safe

sexual practices and drug use”, and in one teaching unit, “Positive Puberty”, they are expected to carry out ‘group’ research on “menstrual periods, wet dreams and erections”. At age twelve, students should be able to analyse “euthanasia, reproductive technology, abortion, racial conflict, politics and sport, poverty and unemployment, unresolved grief, child-rearing practices, and violence in sport, gangs, and families”.

To explore the curriculum yourself, go to the NZ Centre for Political Debate website(www.nzcpd.com) where all the learning area links have been provided.

If you are surprised at what our children are being taught, then be reassured - you are not alone! If you have family, friends or colleagues who are also concerned, then please suggest that they visit the website and read the column. If enough people agree that it has all gone too far, then a process of change can begin.

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Curriculum links for further research can found on www.nzcpd.com.

Dr Muriel Newman is a director and founder of the NZCPD.

This weeks poll. Do you believe the education system is being used by the Labour Government to advance its social agenda?

To take part in our online poll go to www.nzcpd.com.

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