

## Secondary schools after the Picot report

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### ABSTRACT

Even before its publication, the Picot Report seemed to have captured sufficient high ground to ensure its survival. When 'Administering for Excellence' arrived, it was ready to challenge and change the administration of education in New Zealand. Criticism of the report seemed futile, since the Minister of Education had already advised his intention of making its implementation the pivotal activity of the administration of his portfolio. Instead, it seemed more productive to envisage its implementation, and reflect upon its impact in relation to the functioning of a secondary school.

Even before its publication, the Picot Report seemed to have captured sufficient high ground to ensure its survival. Unlike the many other reports on aspects of education in New Zealand, from working parties in recent years, the Taskforce to Review Education Administration, chaired by Brian Picot, was seen as producing the definitive statement to which the government was committed. Waiting for this report to emerge put many decisions about the direction of education on hold. It was as if all that had happened in education hitherto awaited vigorous reappraisal according to the rubric of consumer-oriented thinking.

With considerable pre-arranged media exposure, the report was finally released. The graphics and format of the report, whilst not fully glossy, were eye-catching enough to make it a marketable product. The only question was whether its instant bestseller status was due to the buildup of revolutionary expectation, or reflected the popular appeal of its clearly defined espousal of system where accountability, responsiveness and efficiency were the yardstick. Whatever, 'Administering for Excellence' had arrived and was ready to challenge and change the administration of education in New Zealand.

Criticism of the report seemed futile, since the Minister of Education had already advised his intention of making its implementation the pivotal activity of the administration of his portfolio. Instead, it seemed more productive to envisage its implementation, and reflect upon its impact in relation to the functioning of a secondary school.

It begins with an assertion with which few, if any, secondary schools would cavil:

Individual learning institutions will be the basic unit of education administration.<sup>1</sup>

Secondary schools have always held strongly to the view that they are independent, autonomous institutions. This is apparent, not as any expression of individual character, so much as in their detachment and, indeed, privileged position of being very selective institutions. Despite attempts to melt the barriers which set aside the secondary school from its contributory primary and intermediate schools, this has never become obvious. There was a time when their exclusivity was

reason enough to voice, with vociferous outrage, the shortcomings and lack of basic skills possessed by students entering secondary schools. At secondary level, no longer was education to be the prolongation of playway techniques. It was a more serious enterprise. Secondary schools were the bastions of standards and conferred upon those who enrolled, and were found worthy, some credential in recognition of achievement. It was all part of a mystique, masquerading as education, to which conformity was expected. Under the influence of the Picot model, this position of institutional independence has been consolidated. But there are provisos which need to be looked at carefully, particularly whether the Picot recommendations are able to curb that inertia which, within secondary schools, still operates strongly to resist change. Picot spells out a clear expectation. Autonomy is guaranteed, but concomitant with it there must be an administrative system which is:

... flexible and responsive to individual and community Educational requirements, and able to adapt to changing needs.<sup>2</sup>

That the school does, in fact, evolve policies and practices which give effect to these new administrative expectations is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees. For most secondary schools this replaces the traditionally titled board of governors. Boards of governors have always had statutory authority for their power to control schools. Although the notion of governing sounded grandiose, the powers of governance were quite restrictively circumscribed. Picot recognises this:

In theory, the board of governors has considerable powers and responsibilities: it hires, fires and disciplines teachers, including the principal; it controls the buildings but all maintenance and capital works are under the control of the regional office of the department. A survey done in 1985 showed that boards of governors frequently sought the department's advice - most often on equipment, buildings, regulations, assistance with training and the curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

Now these limitations have been toppled. The boards of trustees are fully 'responsible for the broad policy objectives and the efficient and effective running of the school.'<sup>4</sup> For instance, the trustees can now have discretionary authority for up to 94.5% of school expenditure. Until now, probably only about 10% has been within the jurisdiction of the board of governors.

Within the administrative structure of a school, the Board of Trustees is obviously the paramount authority, accountable to the community it serves and also, at two yearly intervals, to a central Review and Audit agency. The Picot report implies that such an influential body will not only be truly representative of the community but also that the community itself will take a lively interest in its school board of trustees. This would be a change from previous school experience. Elections for membership of school boards are, traditionally, very lack-lustre affairs.

Community interest has often been minimal, unless some deeply felt local issue or antagonism arouses a spirited contest. The results from two of the most recent secondary school board elections in Auckland, seem to confirm this. In both schools there was no need for an election. The results were declared, by the respective returning officers, on the basis that the number of nominations received equalled the number of vacancies. Thus, in each case, were eight parent representatives 'elected'. Both of the schools had an electoral roll of about 800 from which, if an election had been held, it was anticipated that only 200-300 voters would have responded.

It will be interesting to see whether the entitlement offered by the Picot report, namely monthly attendance fees for those board members who need to be compensated for lost income, childcare, and exceptional travel costs ... awarded at the discretion of the board itself<sup>5</sup>

and the vesture of power which membership carries, will be sufficient to enliven community interest. The new Board of Trustees is shaped so that it can become a dynamic, executive, decision making authority with majority voting power held by 'five members elected by the parents of students - these members must themselves be parents of students.'<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, the former governing boards seemed, by and large, to be rather staid, benign authorities whose principal role was to satisfy the personal aspirations of the individual members,

often without specific reference to the needs of the school itself. Unquestionably, there were always some members whose commitment and energy was dedicated to the educational advancement of the school. They were the participant innovators, always keen to explore and evaluate possibilities. It was these members who gave impetus and vitality to administrative decision making. The others, and these could be a majority, functioned more as guardians of the status quo. This managerial potpourri would be inadequate to serve the role of trustees envisaged by the Picot report. But the question remains, will the Boards of Trustees be any different in character? The structural impedance of change is a powerful element of the New Zealand secondary school system.

Into the hands of the trustees is thrust responsibility for the appointment of a principal. No other decision which the boards of trustees is called upon to make will be of more far-reaching consequence for the institution. It is at this point that there arises ground for considerable conflict. On the one hand, is the Picot definition of the principal:

A successful principal is a professional and an instructional leader who has a coherent vision of the purposes of the institution, who is able to articulate that vision to the staff, and who is able to gain their commitment to it ... the most successful principals are those who develop team management strategies ... The successful principal develops a common language of discussion in which all staff members are able to contribute to a continuing examination of what the institution is for, what it is achieving, and where it is not succeeding. In this way, the teachers and the principal participate regularly in reviewing the quality of the institution's performance. The process is a collaborative one which almost invariably generates high levels of enthusiasm and commitment - and high levels of learner success.<sup>7</sup>

For a board appointing a principal, that is quite an impressive shopping list of human qualities to be seeking. There is the need for coherent vision (presumably of the theory and function of education and the place of schools in it), communication skills, management leadership abilities, and talent for the critical analysis of educational policy.

Then there is the appointing board itself. The question to be asked is whether the members are likely to perceive these qualities as essential ones for the successful running of their school. Recourse to precedent strongly suggests that, in general, appointing boards do not. Indeed, the system has operated to exclude from appointment virtually any applicant whose record suggests a penchant to ask questions, challenge or upset existing structures. The result, almost predictably, is that schools are run 'by conservative, safe, middle-of-the-road practitioners with a predisposition for the status quo ... who function within their own cautiously defined leadership role to perpetuate a system which ensured their preferment in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Given the nature of secondary schools, their controlling boards and community expectations any different verdict would be too unsettling. Yet a different verdict is virtually a sine qua non for any adequate implementation of the Picot report.

Relevant to this point, the report only says that:

Principals themselves will require training, information and support to do the job well. This should be part of the preparation of teachers intending to become principals. It would encompass voluntary pre-appointment training undertaken in the teacher's own time: and, after appointment, entitlements to training which focus on the role and functions of the principal, which research suggests are necessary to perform that role effectively.

Such training would cover communication skills, the identifying and solving of problems, staff management and development, setting objectives and evaluating outcomes. Training could be provided at tertiary institutions either by attendance or by correspondence.<sup>9</sup>

This is a very austere list of functional skills which omits any mention of a philosophical underpinning for these practical aspects of management. I believe that this is a noteworthy omission. The Picot report has allowed itself to be overawed by management systems and styles appropriate to business theory.

Educational administration, as much as anything else in education, is about people and their quest for personal significance. Persons suffer if educational administration becomes merely an

exercise in bureaucratic efficiency, and the development of 'systems' to which people must conform. This consideration becomes much more crucial when it is realised that schools are the first institutional organisation most people encounter in their lives. It is here that they learn to function within an organisation. The edicts and expectations of the school, particularly at secondary level, often fall most heavily at the very time young people are seeking to enhance the control they have over their own lives. There is a precious balance between developing a caring environment in which people are assisted to develop the ability to resolve their own problems, and programming people to become dependent upon authority; stifling initiative, individuality and innovation, those very qualities which might be most significant for contributive involvement in the community after leaving school.

In school administration, adequate consideration has never been given to the effects of administrative processes upon the lives of people. In its analysis, the Picot taskforce only makes a somewhat oblique reference to the existence of some such relationship, in the statement that:

... the way (the) decisions are arrived at is just as important in the life of an institution as the decisions themselves.<sup>10</sup>

This is not the sort of comment likely to stimulate much change. The hidden agenda which exists within a school exerts an influence in need of critical scrutiny.

All the professional prowess a principal can muster will be needed to discharge the overriding responsibility required by the Picot report:

Principals are responsible for the initial preparation, within the nationally set objectives and in consultation with staff and community, of an institution's charter.<sup>11</sup>

No other recommendation has greater importance and revolutionary impact for New Zealand education than the statement in the Picot report that:

Each institution requires clear and explicit objectives, drawn up locally within national objectives. These objectives would reflect both national requirements and local needs, and would be set out in a charter. The charter is the "lynchpin" of the structure and would act as a contract between the community and the institution, and the institution and the state.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that this is a refreshingly innovative development for secondary education. Furthermore, it is claimed to be the "lynchpin" upon which all else will flourish or fail.

By and large, secondary schools in New Zealand have never functioned within a carefully thought-out and operative set of objectives. They have lacked reference points which give coherence to all that happens. School administrators and controlling boards have operated on an ad hoc 'how-do-we-solve-this-problem' basis, with predictably indifferent results. Most noticeable has been the texture of sameness which permeates the system. Of course, nothing much more was ever expected of the secondary system. Both administrators and clients seemed to accept, as part of the scheme of things, that schools function to sort out, file, and categorise the 'winners' from the 'losers'. It was the ethos of a selective system. Efforts to change this perspective were attempted as far back as 1945, when a move was made to free secondary schools from the dominance of university - imposed curricula. In support of this attempt, the Thomas report noted: 'The question that remains to be answered is whether or not the new opportunities will be seized with boldness and imagination.' The brief answer was that they were not. Adherence to an academic tradition of scholarship and disciplined order was paramount. A similar attempt in 1968, this time by a group of teachers themselves, likewise sought to broaden the objectives for secondary education. It failed too, as did yet another attempt in 1974, when a secondary education review was inaugurated. Its purpose was made clear by the then Minister of Education, Mr P. A. Amos. In a speech to the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association he said: 'The intention of this review is not to preach any predetermined type of change or even that change is necessary. Rather it is to encourage self-appraisal and to create a climate in which teachers and schools can identify difficulties or problems and suggest their own solutions ... I see the secondary education review as one of the most

significant and exciting events that has occurred in our educational history. I see it also as a unique opportunity for self-determination and self-realisation educationally.' It too, was frustrated, this time by a change of government.

Now, in 1988, we have Picot charting a new path for schools to become more self-directed and responsive to the needs of students and the community. This pattern is to be achieved through charters' which:

will require institutions to be clearer about their purposes, and our proposals to give them control over their resources will enable them to pursue those purposes in more singleminded imaginative ways.<sup>13</sup>

The direction of school administration and practice is now clearly analogous to that of a market oriented model. The shareholders are the 'parents' who elect a board of directors as the 'trustees', to determine the policy and goals of the prospectus (to be called the 'charter') for capital investment in the 'school'. The dividends from this enterprise will be measured by how the 'students' shape up. The elegance of the concept is nowhere better stated than in the Picot report.

An open system is one in which there are good information flows, and in which information on which to base decisions is available to everyone - consumers and providers alike. For those working in the system, good information flows are a prerequisite to efficient and effective performance. Information is needed to provide managers and decision makers with the true costs of using resources, so that they can decide between different courses of action. They also need to know the results of those actions. For consumers, good information flows provide a way of checking on the exercise of power and responsibility within the system, and provide a basis for choice. So funding formulae, grant calculations, national objectives, and reports on performance should be publicly available, debatable, and subject to scrutiny. As well, effective feedback of information can help those working in the system to adapt it to the changing needs of those they serve.<sup>14</sup>

Making this system effective requires the conjugation of the community and parents, fully committed to participation and informed consultation; a board of trustees which is resolute and courageous; and a principal with acumen and a vision for education. Without this blend, even this attempt to give some systematic sense of purpose to secondary education could fail. The outcome will probably have more to do with the way power is exercised and expressed than with any determination by means of a charter or anything else. The secondary education system already has a long-established hegemony through which privilege, prestige and patronage is institutionalised to the advantage of some and to the disadvantage of others. In more ways than are obvious, the network and code through which this operates could easily subvert the effectiveness of a school charter. Indeed, the preparation of this could become the perfunctory exercise of manipulative strategies to reinforce traditional assumptions, practices and ploys.

Obviously, the Picot report assumes that the liberal devolution of decision making, both fiscal and educational, will intervene to ensure that:

Parents, learners and the community will have greater opportunity to influence the kind and quality of education offered. They will also have greater responsibility for helping reach their community's - and the nation's - education objectives.<sup>15</sup>

The whole exercise will sharply focus ideological differences in viewpoint, and inequalities of power. Principals will have to determine the degree to which their role, in assessing community aspirations for the school, is to reflect or to shape opinion. I have often heard principals describing their schools as reflecting what the community wants. Without elaborating how this has been determined, the objectives sought invariably include items such as firm discipline, examinations, homework, tidy appearance of the students ... the things that pertain to order, authority, routine. It is obvious that, in any community, a large number of people will think this way and want the school to replicate their viewpoint. But what of the ideas and possibilities the community have not thought about, but which might have greater relevance in education? In this situation, are principals to court conflict by suggesting alternatives? Maybe interpersonal relationships, or social maturity and self-esteem,

or new approaches to learning are worth considering too, before community aspirations are incorporated into the school charter.

The principal is under contractual tenure to the board of trustees and might think twice before acting to prejudice that appointment. For their part, the trustees have accountability to the community. Within the community, which interests are going to predominate? The school institution itself is poised at the intersection of a power struggle which could throw up some quite bizarre attitudes and practices. The choice of the epithet "lynchpin" by the Picot taskforce, to describe its control mechanism, might have more meaning than was anticipated.

It is unfortunate that the Picot Report failed to recognise that the secondary school system is considerably involved in social expectations and processes which make it difficult for any but orthodox views, ideas, perceptions and practices to flourish. Schools operate within an ideological context. This needs to be challenged, but with a more powerful statement than that of the guidelines for a school charter:

The board of trustees will identify and state the ways the school will:

- ensure the board of trustees reflects, in its own membership, the characteristics of the community it serves
- state how the school intends to ensure that its programmes and organisation promote non-sexist and non-racist education
- state how the curriculum will take account of the needs and experiences of all students (including their background knowledge and ideas) and how it will take account of the diverse character of the community.<sup>16</sup>

A reading of the report makes it clear that the taskforce was not unaware of the problems created by inequality and powerlessness. Indeed, there was quite anguished and forceful denunciation of what they saw as happening:

Another kind of expression of consumer disaffection is underlined by the 26 per cent of pupils who leave school with no qualification of any kind to offer to an increasingly discerning labour market. We are told these students leave thoroughly disenchanting with learning and with a school environment they have merely endured, rather than enjoyed.

The effects are that they lack confidence; they are denied the respect of the wider community: and they are shut out by those who control employment and the opportunity for a fulfilling life. The differences among communities are worse than the overall statistics. Taking metropolitan Auckland as an example, we were told that in Southern Auckland half of the 26 secondary schools had more than 25 per cent of their pupils leave with no qualification. On the North Shore, however, only one school out of fifteen was in that position. Worse, in Southern Auckland seven of the 26 schools had more than 50 per cent of their pupils leave with no qualifications. There was no North Shore school in that position. In the worst case of all, one South Auckland school had more than 80 per cent of its pupils leave with no qualification. This kind of clustering of failure is certain to lead to personal, social and economic catastrophe. It cannot be allowed to continue.<sup>17</sup>

The need for change, and the direction it should take, is stated quite unequivocally. Unfortunately, the report, despite its intention, could just as easily exacerbate what it seeks to cure. The taskforce appears to have made a diagnosis which attributes the problem more to the administrative system within education, without acknowledging that schools themselves are part of, and influenced by, a wider social structure. Schools are not immune from those pressures which make them a vehicle for social reproduction. It is very easy to see that schools located in geographic areas where affluence and privilege abound have institutional expectations in accord with their milieu. Even the most crudely sampled survey reveals how these selfsame areas, with primacy of economic power, attract other advantages. For example, taking the same communities as those cited in the Picot report, the North Shore has a doctor ratio of one for every 940 people, whereas in Southern Auckland there is only one doctor for 1690 people. There are much broader social processes at work than can be explained by the performances of schools alone. The social reality in which a school operates needs

a much more penetrating analysis than that afforded by the Picot Report. It is for this reason that, in the decade ahead, despite the mechanisms of access to financial resources, the definition of purposes, and accountability to locally elected trustees, there is no certainty that the result will greatly disturb the institutionalised hegemony of power which already exists.

All this is not intended to disvalue the work and conclusions of the taskforce. Empowerment is an objective which must be pursued. It is in the democratic tradition that people should have power to influence and control those processes which shape the quality of their life. For this reason, any way in which schools can become more responsive to the needs of a community deserves support. I do not dispute the Picot report when it says that:

Tinkering with the system will not be sufficient to achieve the improvements now required. In our view the time has come for quite radical change, particularly to reduce the number of decision points between the central provision of policy, funding, and services and the education delivered by the school or institution.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, I would argue that the “lynchpin” of the proposals is not really to be found in the charter, but in the qualities possessed by the principal appointed by the school trustees. It is the school principal’s personality, attitude and style which is the on-going and pervasive influence in making a school whatever it becomes as a learning institution. I believe it is the social conscience, courage and insight of a principal, backed by informed awareness of social reality, educational philosophy and principles, which will determine whether the changes brought about by the Picot report, are ‘positive, beneficial and exciting’.<sup>19</sup>

Of its recommendations some 40 years ago, for change in secondary education, the Thomas report noted: ‘There is an easy road and a hard one. A school that takes the easy road will continue to accept uncritically the standards and objectives, and the curricula and methods largely imposed from without, and will be content with minor adjustments ... A school that takes the hard road will re-examine its whole theory and practice, make up its mind about the, real needs of its pupils and the means by which they can best be met, and then act courageously in accordance with its findings.’

That same observation is apposite: and retains final comment upon the Picot recommendations flexible and diverse education system?<sup>20</sup>

## References

1. Picot Report, xi
2. *op. cit.*, 41
3. *op. cit.*, 17
4. *op. cit.*, 45
5. *op. cit.*, 50
6. *ibid.*
7. *op. cit.*, 51
8. Des Mann Correspondences. Dunmore Press 1987. p. 17
9. *op. cit.*, 53
10. *op. cit.*, 52
11. *op. cit.*, 51
12. *op. cit.*, xi
13. *op. cit.*, 98

14. op. cit., 43
15. op. cit., 98
16. op. cit., 111
17. op. cit., 36
18. *ibid.*
19. op. cit., 98
20. op. cit., 99