

Do Parents really want charter schools?

Thursday, 8 December 2011, 10:42 am

Press Release: Wellington Wairarapa School Trustees Association

Do Parents really want charter schools?

8 December 2011

The Wellington Wairarapa School Trustees Association (“WWSTA”) calls on the government to consult widely and to listen to the voices of trustees and parents before deciding whether to proceed with the controversial plan to introduce charter schools into the New Zealand school system.

WWSTA notes that the introduction of charter schools was not mentioned at all in the National Party’s 2011 election education policy and even the ACT Party, which campaigned on the concept of “school choice”, did not specifically mention the introduction of charter schools.

The concept of “choice” is promoted widely in the United States, where charter schools originated. The other hot topic is “accountability”, based on high stakes standardised testing results. Indeed, the Wall Street Journal published a major editorial last year with the strap line: “Why choice and accountability remain the key drivers of education reform.”

WWSTA recently released a statement on “National’s Education Policy and Accountability” when accountability appeared as a key plank in the party’s education policy. So the early addition of “choice” is not surprising, given the clear trend now emerging of the National Party adopting overseas approaches to education reform. The controversial introduction of National Standards, in National’s first term in government, was another example.

The full details of the charter school proposal are yet to be released, so it is difficult to comment in any real depth. But do parents really want “choice” and do they understand the potentially negative effects on the state school system, if charter schools were to be implemented?

The best indicator of parent views on “choice” comes from the “NZCER Survey 2010 Primary & Intermediate Schools National Survey”.

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research has conducted its survey of primary and intermediate schools every three years or so since the introduction of Tomorrow’s Schools in 1989. The 2010 survey went to a random sample of 350 schools and went additionally to parents at a cross-section sample of 35 of these schools. A total of 550 completed surveys were received from parents (an estimated response rate of 35%).

The survey found that 89% of the parents said their child was attending their first choice of school and 8% said they were not. Of the 89% response figure, 60% were

attending the school closest to them, which was their first choice, and 29% had chosen a school that was not their closest. NZCER reported that this pattern had stayed much the same since 2003.

So, based on this evidence, is there any indication that parents of New Zealand primary and intermediate school aged children are not happy with the school choices available to them?

Given that ACT, as the minor party supposedly promoting the concept of charter schools, polled only 1.1% of the party vote at the general election, where is the popular mandate for the introduction of these highly controversial schools?

An understanding of the background to charter schools throws some light on why so many people are concerned about their introduction.

The concept of charter schools was originally developed in the late 1980s and, ironically, one of its key supporters was Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, one of the large teachers' unions in the USA. Shanker envisaged charter schools as being a mechanism for teacher-led autonomous schools with greater freedom to tackle teaching and social problems that contributed to the school system not working well for some students.

However, Shanker withdrew his endorsement of charter schools in 1993 and became a vociferous critic. Shanker realised that the idea he had enthusiastically embraced was being taken over by corporations and entrepreneurs. He came to see charter schools as dangerous to public education, as the cutting edge of an effort to privatise the public schools.

The recent performance of charter schools is wide and varied. The most complete analysis of their performance is generally accepted to be the study by Margaret Raymond of Stanford University, published in 2009. She found that student achievement at only 17% of charter schools was superior to a matched traditional public school; 37% were worse than the public school; and the remaining 46% had academic gains no different from that of a similar public school.

So, given that there are now over 5,000 charter schools in America, it appears that, as the number of schools grows, their overall performance has settled down to more broadly resemble that of the wider education system.

Prominent American education researcher, Diane Ravitch, has argued strongly in her book, "The Death and Life of the American Public School System", that testing and "choice" are undermining the quality of American education.

WWSTA shares these concerns. The New Zealand public education system is under threat from recent moves such as the introduction of National Standards and the siren lure of "choice" and "accountability". The growing influence of business thought processes and "managing by numbers", with its fascination on data, detract schools from their primary purpose: delivering a quality education to every child in every school on every day. That is what parents really want.

There is much to be done to re-open the debate around education and develop policies that genuinely enhance an already well-regarded education system. WWSTA calls for a full, public enquiry into the education system and challenges our politicians to seek broad consensus, from educators, trustees and parents, as to what we really want from our education system.

It is time to put the public back into public education.

ENDS

-