

# What is a Real Education?

Findings of Catherine Delahunty's  
Real Education Project

February 2011



**Green**  
Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand



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# Introduction

## What is a Real Education?

“Just another brick in the wall?”

This project developed out of my lifelong interest in the views of students undergoing the formal educational process. These views are central to the design of a good education system. Consultation usually involves experts, parents and teachers; it very rarely includes the student view of their experiences around the content and process of school.

When I was elected to Parliament in November 2008 I was eager to be the Green Party Education Spokesperson to support Green-orientated initiatives like EnviroSchools but also to raise more fundamental issues from a student-centred perspective. As a member of the Education and Science Select Committee I felt from the outset I needed guidance from young people about how their schools work or do not work for them.

As a former high school student activist, former youth worker and a participatory educator working outside the formal system for more than a decade, I believe Parliamentarians need to hear the voices of young people if school is to be a relevant and vibrant experience for the diversity of students. The public school system generally offers a great deal to students but if it is to develop and improve, the voices of students who have experienced problems are incredibly valuable in designing improvement.

In order to hear the student voice I worked with a young person who had experienced school and home schooling to develop some questions that might resonate with young people.

We decided we would workshop these questions with groups of students aged 9 to 18 years old in seventeen school-related environments. We chose a mix of alternative schools - where many young people had been placed because school wasn't working for them - and public schools. We also met with some self-selected groups of students from a range of high schools and attended a youth conference on schools and violence to run a workshop with a small group of students.

*“Parliamentarians need to hear the voices of young people if school is to be a relevant and vibrant experience for the diversity of students.”*

The project is not comprehensive nor is it making any statistical claims. We did not set out to create a representative survey. It is instead a snapshot of responses to the public school system. The students involved were both outside it and inside it but were willing to share a critical voice.

We did not set out to specifically address questions around Te Tiriti o Waitangi and issues of cultural discrimination. We asked broad questions, and unsurprisingly these themes emerged repeatedly along with some other highly challenging issues.

We did not visit kura kaupapa or private schools as our focus was on the main public system. (We did visit one State Integrated Steiner School). Research is needed and is no doubt underway comparing the experience

of kura kaupapa with public Pakeha schools, hopefully from a student perspective as well as an academic results perspective.

We asked the same four broad questions of all the groups. They then brainstormed responses in small groups or if the group was less than 10 people, they worked collectively. Some teachers remained in the room during the process but most did not.

All schools participating gave permission for student involvement but we did not seek permission to name the schools involved. The geographical areas we visited were Te Tairāwhiti (Gisborne), Wellington, Porirua, Hutt Valley, Auckland, Nelson, Christchurch, and Whangarei .

The three main ethnic backgrounds involved in the project were Māori, Pakeha and Pasifika students.

We meet with students aged under 12 years at three schools. Five schools were alternative education centres for students who had either left or been excluded from the public schools. One was a high school class at a Steiner school. The other eight groups were high school aged students currently attending public schools. We did not record school deciles but all the high schools were deliberately chosen as co-educational.

## The Themes/Questions

1. What did/do you love about school?
2. What did/do you hate about school?
3. What do you need to know?
- 4 a. What would a real education look like?  
b. What would a real education feel like?  
c. What would a real education do?

The Green Party hopes that the collated responses below will be a useful and thought-provoking contribution to educational debates. We hope the students will be listened to and their views respected by the people who have power over their educational experiences. I intend to circulate this report to teachers' organisations, alternative education networks, education academics and politicians, along with media outlets.

In the context of the debate over National Standards and the adult focus on learning solely for market-place opportunity, these young people are saying something very clear to us about our priorities and methods and their needs. If we want their respect and engagement we need to respond to these challenges.

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**Catherine Delahunty**  
Green Party  
Education Spokesperson  
February 2011



**What works  
and what doesn't?**



## Question one:

### what do/did you love about school?

Students love **learning** that is related to their reality and interests, and relevant to their lives. The **expression** of opinions, discussions, being able to bounce ideas off peers, debating (“not structured ones; ones that develop from discussions”), religious debates and figuring things out are highly valued. They love being able to be an **individual**.

**Subjects and activities** which students love include reading, writing, maths, art, PE, tech, languages, drama, music, topic, horticulture, te reo, science, cooking, computers, singing, research, fitness, English, history, dance, woodwork, metalwork, textiles, graphics, creative writing, classical studies and philosophy. (Some may have been recorded simply because students value that they are offered, e.g. philosophy is not offered across all schools).

Different **learning models** are appreciated. Some students love learning that is fun and uses primary school strategies – hands on, individual, slow, with educational games. They like learning that is creative, artistic, and also structured. “If you’re totally free, you don’t make an effort to learn.” Steiner, Montessori, Māori bilingual, and Gateway are valued by some of the students. Students also like **individual learning**, personal tutoring and mentors.

Some students at a school based on the principles of “student-led” learning like “to be taught” and having a “lack of involvement in classes.” Students in other schools

like lessons that are well thought out and planned, providing in-depth learning, but with room for flexibility.

**Relationships with staff** are important: principals, deans, teacher aides, student teachers, counsellors and librarians. “Knowing people, including teachers, really well.”

Students like **teachers** who are enthusiastic and passionate, have a sense of humour, go out of their way to help and explain material, are down to earth and honest, can listen and relate to students, and are open about themselves. They like teachers who push them but not over the limit, challenge them to get better at what they like, and help them to achieve their goals. Teachers who encourage students to think and form their own views, and who let them express their opinions are valued, as are teachers who are effective, knowledgeable, and make their subjects interesting. “It’s more than being passionate, and more than being good at a subject.” Some students like teachers who are Pasifika and Māori, or those who are new to teaching. “New teachers – they are always more organised and fun.” Some students like teachers who are caring and promote a whanau feeling.

**Sports and recreation activities** are enjoyed, sport especially. Swimming, games, playing outside, sports, water sports, athletics, cross country, playing in class, basketball and other extracurricular activities are mentioned. Students also enjoy opportunities for camps, retreats, and trips away.

**Friends** are very important – they like to have time to socialise and make friends of both sexes. Girlfriends and boyfriends are important.

Students at some schools like it that there is **not much bullying**. “No enemies in our

school,” “no bullies – well, not many,” “not much bullying” and “friendly people.”

“Bros have your back if teachers are eggs” and “our own gang” were aspects of **solidarity** at school. A more general **collective identity** and **sense of belonging** is also valued, e.g. house groups, peer support, school spirit/ pride, being part of a group, brotherhood and sisterhood and community, school identity, special character, “we’re a community,” “we come together.”

*“Bros have your back if teachers are eggs.”*

**Food**, especially **shared food**, is valued: lunch, canteen, shared lunches, big feasts, shared munchies, treats at school. They value easy access to shops/the dairy and long breaks, **lunch and interval**.

Students love **participation and opportunity**. Examples include having a student representative on the board of trustees, schools that allow groups (e.g. gay groups, theatre sports, chess, European culture); having options to choose from; the chance to do tech, choir, kapahaka and ukulele; the division of courses (e.g. having a construction option); and having a turn in assembly. They mention opportunities for student leadership, more **responsibility** as they move into college, road patrol, and free periods. Some like limiting or avoiding hierarchy – for example, by not having prefects or head boys/girls, and by having four equal student leaders/captains.

**School size** is valued both by those in smaller schools (“we can do things in a little school that kids in a big school may not get to do”)

and those in larger schools (“always someone different to talk to,” “when you get angry and need to cool off it’s a big school so you can hide.”). Class size matters to some: “Smaller classes so you get more attention from teachers.” “Size can depend on dynamic – 1:1 also too much sometimes.”

Students love good **resources and facilities**. These include computer games, computer maths, a “full of knowledge” library, a good medical room, a big, spacious play area, 4-square courts, arts departments, paper towels, new libraries and classrooms, the mature playground, lots of digital equipment/ technology. Some students appreciated their schools being cleaned by “great cleaners.”

**The environment** is important. Students at one school enjoy being in the centre of town. Some students like the **green** things implemented at their school, such as enviro group, recycling, composting, and gardening. They value the environment around their school: bush, space, lots of birds.

The **school structure and rules** can have a positive impact. Flexibility and leniency are valued. They like late starts, 5 minute grace periods, late trains, “relaxed attitude to wagging,” “no severe punishments,” “not confined to space,” “being able to listen to music in art.” Having **uniforms** is valued by some because it “makes everyone equal and no-one gets judged on what they’re wearing,” others like having **no uniform**. Some students like **NCEA** / the credit system. “Achievement / merit / excellence are useful distinctions.” “Unit standards are practical.”

They like the **right and access to a free education**.

## Question two:

### *what do/did you hate about school?*

Students dislike particular **subjects and activities**, including PE, writing, story writing, homework, art, handwriting, drawing, computer, maths, swimming, singing, sex and drug education, health, class presentations, algebra, chemistry, economics, physics, science, class presentations, reading, running around the field.

Some students dislike the **compulsory nature of schooling** and school altogether – they see it as a “waste of time” and don’t want to be there.

**Lack of choice** of subjects is an issue for some students. They would like more choice of languages, or a greater range of extra-curricular options for people who are not sporty. Some subjects are cut because of low enrolments. There is a need for further education in Māori beyond NCEA level 3. Students at one school say there is not enough focus on science or maths. Some would like the choice to go deeper within a given subject. A lack of career support is noted by some students.

Some **learning models/teaching methods** used in schools are disliked, including learning for assessment rather than for the sake of learning; classes that are too long or boring; doing the same topic every year; teaching out of books; class tests and exams. Having to change classrooms for each class and seating plans are not enjoyed by some students. Students dislike teachers who favour teaching some students to the expense of others – for example, teaching to the “front row” of scholarship students only.

Lack of an individualised curriculum and the tendency to teach to the middle means people are not able to work at their own level. Some students feel there is a **lack of support** for advanced learners, with the focus on underachievers, and that some teachers set low expectations for the whole class. Others say there they would like more learning help to be available for people with learning difficulties.

**Homework** is an issue. Some wanted less or no homework. **In general, workloads are too high**, with too many assignments due at the same time and too much homework. The **NCEA assessment** system can undermine strengths with one bad mark.

Students want to be able to see **applications to real life** but the teaching they receive does not achieve this. They see a focus on standards and assessments “rather than the realness of people.”

The **behaviour of other students** can be a negative aspect, with language, bullying, violence, vandalism, petty texting, smoking, racism between students, theft of lunch, uniforms, and gang colours all mentioned.

**Relationships** are fundamental – some students feel they are not trusted and that there is a lack of connectedness. Some staff don’t listen to individuals and treat everyone the same.

“Māori wasn’t as important at school. Make it more important. Cultural values aren’t seen as important.” At one school, students expressed concern at the introduction of a special assembly for Māori and Pasifika students because it excluded others and made Māori and Pasifika students feel different.

## THEME ONE: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

Students identify a **lack of autonomy and self-expression**. Examples of this are not being allowed to debate what a teacher says, having no voice, and feeling unable to express themselves. Homophobia, racism, prejudice, not being allowed to have dyed hair or piercings, no smoking, and fear of difference are also identified.

*“Students dislike teachers who favour teaching some students to the expense of others.”*

**Teachers** “have all the power, e.g. to ask you to leave.” They can demand respect from students but don’t show students respect. Students in some schools have to call teachers by their surname, but the teacher knows the student’s name and personal file. Teachers are disliked if they are seen as unsupportive or unfair, racist, sexist, use favouritism and have teachers’ pets, pick on or yell at students, are scary/too harsh, sarcastic and arrogant. “I hate teachers who think they know everything.” Some don’t listen to students’ complaints or take them seriously. Some teachers expect students to be smart all the time and don’t allow room for weakness or individuality – they don’t understand where students are coming from. Some teachers impose their (biased) views on students rather than allowing them to form their own opinions.

Some students say there are not enough **Māori and Pasifika** teachers.

**Food** is an issue for some students - not being allowed to go to the dairy; canteen/tuck shop too expensive; having to wait in

the canteen line; not being allowed to eat in class; not enough variety available for lunch orders.

**Lack of equipment/resources/funding** are mentioned. These include resources for art, music, sports, PE, gear for road patrol, lockers, common rooms, microwaves and toasters. Limited internet access and printing are also noted.

The **environment** is negative for some students. They mention rubbish, graffiti, concrete, and lack of colour. Bathrooms in some schools are dirty or don’t have hand driers that work. Some classrooms are cold and lack adequate heating. Space is an issue with some students saying they would like a bigger hall, senior playground, or somewhere to sit at lunchtimes.

**School rules, discipline and routines** are unenjoyable for many students. They say the day starts too early and goes for too long. More time for morning tea and lunch would be appreciated, and more lunch time activities. Not being allowed to use cell phones or i-Pods at breaks is disliked. Some students disliked having to call teachers “sir”. Some students want no uniform; some say the focus is on uniforms rather than on education. Some dislike **separation by age**. They don’t like punishments, surveillance, detentions, and removal of privileges. “Schools are like jail.” Some dislike being under surveillance (with cameras in schools), roll calls, and having to sign in and out. Some dislike school security and grounds guards.

The school system is seen as **rigid and inflexible** – students are not able to opt out of things they hate. Students cannot always take the subjects they want because of timetable clashes. Funding is also inflexible – people should be entitled to free education

## THEME ONE: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

until they are 18 no matter where it is offered.

Many students dislike their **principal** and deputy principal for interrogating them, being racist, and other unspecified reasons.

The **government/Ministry of Education** are criticised for cutting funding to Enviroschools and closing schools against the wishes of the community.

The **Board of Trustees** is seen as biased by some students. Others would like more Pasifika parents as members.

*“People should be entitled to free education until they are 18 no matter where it is offered.”*

**What do you  
need to know?**



## what do you need to know?

Students want to **know about the world**: they want awareness and knowledge of other cultures, religions/spirituality and countries; they want to know about politics, current analysis, social structures, and how to challenge authority. “Current affairs in a non-boring way.” “Develop awareness through diverse experience (outside school) but not via imposed values.” Learning about the history of different cultures, tikanga, indigenous peoples and Te Tiriti is important. “We have to understand the past to understand the future.” They want to learn different languages, especially te reo. Some wanted a much wider variety of languages taught (“at least eight languages”). Knowing about disability and diversity – “celebrate not tolerate” – leads to acceptance of others.

**Relationship skills** are essential – how to be a good friend and support others, able to resolve conflict, and able to communicate. Students want to know how to talk to people and make friends. “Communication – learn from each other. First step to learning. Solve problems.” “How to accept that others are different.”

Students identify **personal characteristics and skills** they need to develop. These include maturity, awareness, being happy, and turning the other cheek. They want to live their dreams! Developing the ability to **work hard**, show determination, increase their organisational skills, and be reliable and punctual are seen as important.

**Self-management & life skills** students need to know are broad. They identify **practical skills** such as how to cook, clean, drive and

garden, look after babies, car maintenance, arts and crafts, make clothes, and build things. They want to know about healthy eating and lifestyle, finding a balance of culture/head/physical, sex education, alcohol and drug education, your rights with police and self-defence. Being able to handle stress, responsibilities, solve problems, and deal with difficult circumstances are important. “How to say no.”

*“There is an emphasis on thinking independently, questioning critically, being impartial, and developing logic.”*

Some students wanted to be taught about **work/jobs** – how to apply for jobs especially. Some wished they could study for specific jobs that they choose themselves.

Some students **valued subjects already taught** such as maths, English, social studies, drama, reading, sports, science and computers, although some wish for a **wider variety of subjects** being offered – for example, sports such as boxing, martial arts and Māori weaponry. Some students wished to have **university subjects** such as law at school.

There is an emphasis on **thinking independently** and questioning critically, student participation, being impartial, and developing logic. Students want to know about **youth rights** and how to find out what they need to know. “How to be yourself – know what makes you unique.”

## THEME TWO: WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW

**Managing money** is another area students need to know about. They want to understand student loans, how to budget and avoid getting into debt. Interest rates, mortgages, stocks and business skills are mentioned by some students. “Money is helpful but it shouldn’t rule your life.”

Some students want to know how to **live sustainably**. Environmental education about recycling, reducing rubbish, alternative fuels, and learning about climate change and global warming are important. They want to know how to grow food and provide for themselves, and how to create community.

Behaving **altruistically** is important to some students. They would like to find a cure for cancer, or to donate blood and/or organs.

Students want **opportunities** for a good education, to learn languages, and to prepare for university or plan for after school. Internships are suggested as an alternative to the current system – students would leave at the age of 14 and choose to return to school later when they know what they want to do. They would like more cross-school interactions.

**What would a  
real education  
be like?**



## Question one:

### *what would a real education look like?*

The **environment** would be light, spacious, homely, inviting and well-maintained. It would be clean and colourful, with furniture that fits and comfy chairs. There would be enough lockers for everyone, and the school would be wheelchair accessible. Students would like bush, trees, grass, flowers, gardens, a greenhouse, a dog and a cat. There would be places to be alone, to relax or to be upset, and quiet spaces to eat lunch. Students would be able to graffiti and put other forms of art on walls. There would be marae.

**Uniforms** would be more lenient, allowing for personal style (piercings, hair colour), or there would be **no uniform**.

**Food choices** would be cheap and healthy, and cater for all needs. There would be vegan and vegetarian friendly options.

*“The environment would be light, spacious, homely, inviting, and well-maintained.”*

Learning would use better methods and be **participatory** – students would learn faster that way. There would be an emphasis on **having fun**. There would be a balance of activities.

The **school structure** would work better for students. The lunch break would be longer and there would be more leisure time and free periods. Some students would like no classrooms. There would be a choice about how many classes and days of the week students attend. Big classes would have two teachers and there would be less people in each class. The **culture** of the school would be unintimidating and there would not be prefects.

Learning and teaching would integrate **technology** more effectively, with more one-on-one learning being possible.

## Question two:

### *what would a real education feel like?*

Real education would feel accepting, supportive, safe and stable. People would feel a sense of community and belonging, and be able to express their opinions freely. They would feel trusted, loved, wanted and looked after. It would be homely, comfortable, warm (“the heaters would work”), compassionate, and educational. It would be joyous, creative and encouraging. The school would have wairua and aroha. Students would be stimulated but relaxed, and want to succeed. Homophobia would not exist.

**Teachers** would understand that people learn in many different ways. They would let students disagree with them and care about what they have to say. Teachers would understand about disabilities.

*“Accepting, supportive, safe and stable.”*

### Question three:

## *what would a real education do?*

Real education would **relate to students' lives**. It would encourage creativity and support and celebrate diversity. It would inspire people and broaden their interests; minds would be expanded rather than shut down. It would teach students to challenge the ideas and stereotypes of everyday life.

There would be **greater choice and freedom for students**. Students would choose what they learn, where they learn it, and when they learn it. They would choose their own assessment topics.

Real education would prepare students for **real life**. They would learn what they need to know, and be given opportunities and support to decide on what to do for the future. Work experience would be offered in the field they are interested in.

All successes would be recognised. There would be support for special needs students, more support, and more support groups.

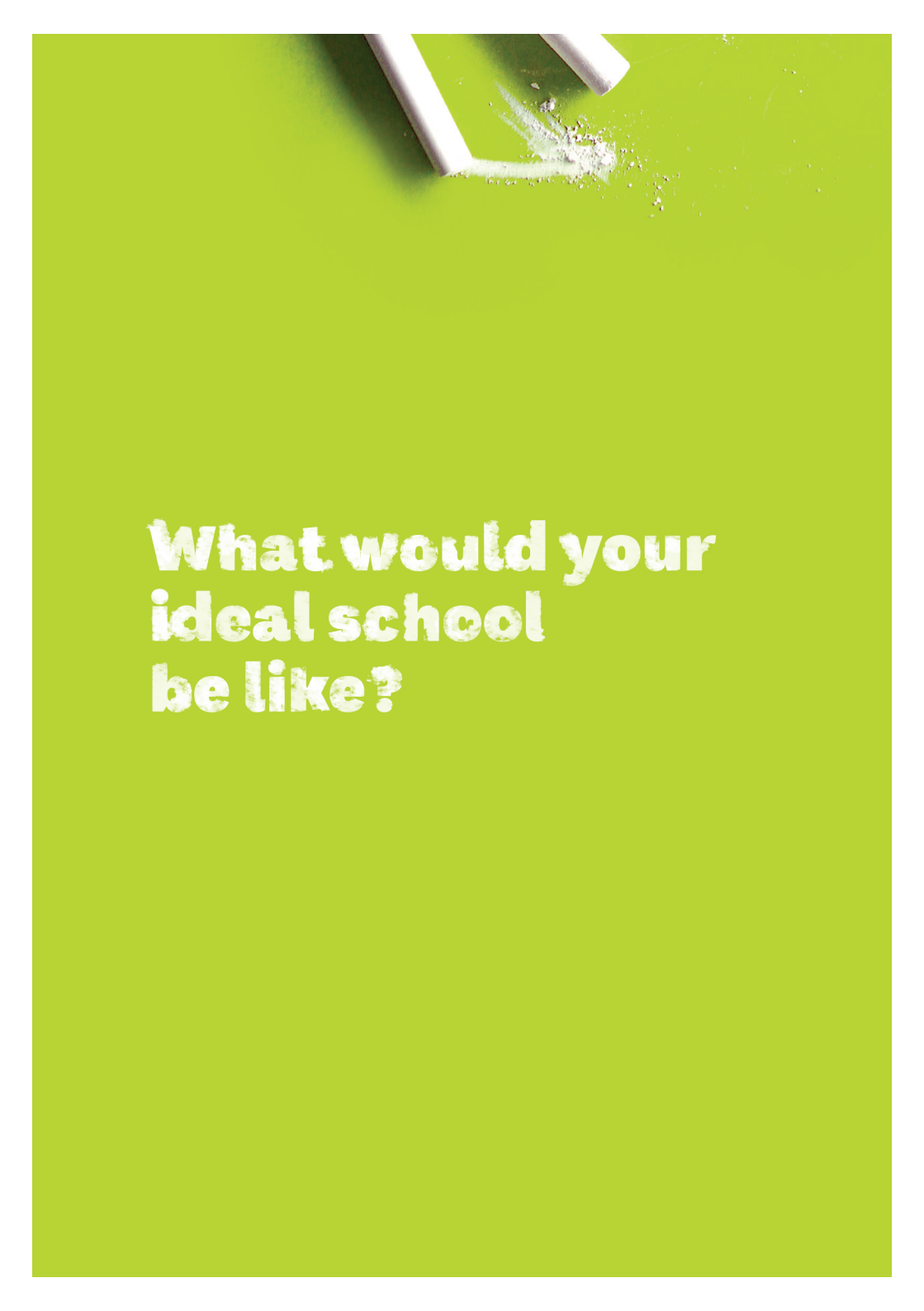
**Learning models/teaching methods** would recognise different learning styles and cater for all learners. Vocational/non-academic subjects would be available for non-academically inclined students. Subjects would be broader – including practical subjects, “not just book learning.” There would be specialised courses and a large range of courses on offer. Some students want streamed classes; others would like personal specialist tutors to be available. Māori specific learning would be offered.

**Teachers** would listen to what students have to say. They would want to teach, not just earn money.

**New activities** would be offered, including ones that happen outdoors, clubs, and cultural activities. Religious dialogue would occur.

*“Students would choose what they learn, where they learn it, and when they learn it.”*

**School structure/routines** would work for students. School would start at 11am, or go from 1 pm to 7 pm. They would spend less time in school, more on field trips. Students at one school suggested that teachers should move around from classroom to classroom, not students.



**What would your  
ideal school  
be like?**

## *what would your ideal school be like?*

It would have enough **resources** – computers, free internet, and playstation in the library. The library would be large with more books and an IT suite. There would be art studios. There would be PE and sports gear, and the space to play sports (gym, tennis/basketball/netball courts, soccer and rugby fields, golf course (with carts), cricket pitch) and relax/play (pool tables and TV games). Classrooms would have artworks, and there would be graffiti or bomb walls on school buildings. There would be lots of drinking fountains and cheap, nice food available at the canteen. All year levels would have common rooms, and all classrooms would have microwaves. There would be kitchens which students could use. There would be a marae.

There would be **no consequences for lateness** and no detentions. When you finish your work you can do what you want. Students would feel safe and at home. Hours would be shorter, there would be no fees for school or camps, and free breakfast would be provided.

Students would have a sense of **autonomy and individuality**. People would feel able to be themselves, have their hair how they want, and allowed to smoke.

Students would **feel supported and respected**. Teachers wouldn't give up on them and they'd understand about issues at home. **Teachers** would never be angry and they would be easy to talk to.

People would **teach each other** about what they know, and learn something new every day. Subjects would include art, maths, whakairo, rumble class, and getting your driving licence.

*“Students would feel supported and respected.”*

School would be like university with students having **greater freedom** and able to choose their own subjects, and having a wide variety of subjects to choose from. There would be a wider curriculum, and support offered for extra-curricular activities. Students would be able to go to the toilet whenever they wish. School would be **free** (both monetarily and in essence).

# Conclusions

## What is a Real Education?

Listening to the voices of a diverse group of young learners, some of whom have really struggled in school, has provided us with some great advice from youth. It was heartening to hear everyone express a desire to learn and interesting that no one was focused on assessment models. While adults are preoccupied with Cambridge versus NCEA and National Standards, students believe the key to their learning is a different set of three “R”s.

### The three “R”s

The students involved in this project consistently identified three R’s – Respect, Relationships, and Relevance.

They want **respect** for their perspective, their culture and role in school life. They want good **relationships** with teachers and other staff as the key to their learning. They want education that is **relevant** to them, both in terms of content and methods of learning. How a subject is taught is vital, and people have very different needs.

These themes are have been simply summarised through the highlighting of students comments in this short report.

I participated as a facilitator in all 17 of the workshops. Irrespective of their diverse interests they all wanted to be educated in a way that was positive and they all wanted a respectful relationship with their teachers as a pre-condition of learning.

I was also struck by the consistent statements from students at alternative learning centres about the need for respect for their cultures as fundamental, and the benefits of being in smaller groups in order to learn.

### The fourth “R”

**Resources** and a positive physical environment are fundamental to learning. Students experience very different levels of resource access. They call for access to free education in an environment free from bullying, racism, sexism, homophobia and discrimination against people with disabilities.

*“The students involved in this project consistently identified three R’s – respect, relationships and relevance.”*

Resources and the school environment are very important to students. They want to be studying in clean, warm and colourful environments, yet within the public system they are experiencing a wide range of environments. They would all like the access to resources that wealthy private schools offer. I was particularly struck by the disparity in school resources when a group of students at a public high school asked me if it was true that other schools had swimming pools.

Students care about the world and want to understand issues related to the environment, human rights and justice as well as how to gain practical skills like driving and budgeting.

It is clear from their loves and hates that fairness and equity and cultural respect in the classroom is very important to students.

Many forms of favouritism were noted and all were disliked. Students have high expectations of teachers.

They are concerned that the system promotes learning “for assessment” rather than for learning’s sake. They value self-expression and autonomy, not rigidity. They dislike authoritarian models. The old prefect system is not popular but they do want leaders to be identified.

More Māori and Pasifika teachers were identified as an important way to break the cycle of alienation for young Māori and Pasifika students. This is not news, but it’s a reinforcement that we need to prioritise attracting and supporting these teachers.

### **My personal conclusions**

We may not agree with some of the views of some young people but neither do we agree with each other. Education is a contested political space where the least we can do is listen to the voices of students.

Many teachers, especially in public schools and alternative learning centres, need to be acknowledged for doing a great job on respect, relationships and relevance. Young teachers and Māori and Pasifika teachers are particularly important to young people.

It seems clear that any teacher who is creative and not teaching to the front row will succeed with students to a greater degree than teachers who teach to the book and who have lost their passion.

If we want teachers to succeed we must resource them and support them and also encourage them listen to students views, which, as this project has taught us, can be challenging!

Equity in the education system is a core issue for students. They have opinions and want to be involved in their school environment beyond a tokenistic lobbying voice. They have ideas about what can make their school work better.

Our preoccupation with assessment and qualifications may be preventing us from hearing the message from young people about a quality learning environment available to all!

**[www.greens.org.nz/education](http://www.greens.org.nz/education)**

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