

# Poor schools could lead to permanent underclass

*The system of targeting extra funds at poorer schools needs reviewing because it is now being applied to too many wealthier schools, writes*

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One problem seems quickly to displace one another in education. In Auckland we have recently had teacher shortages, rising rolls and the problem of providing for children whose first language is not English. To its credit, the Ministry of Education has responded to all three.

However, two new problems have emerged — one to do with education of boys and the other the increasing disparity between schools in poorer areas and those in wealthy places.

The increasing gap between wealthy schools and poorer schools is of enormous concern. Poorer schools are usually identified by ethnic as well as economic characteristics. There are major social as well as educational implications in the failure to tackle the flight from schools in less wealthy areas. The eventual cost to society will be enormous economically and arid socially.

The equity payments to poorer schools have billed. Equity funding was originally intended for economically disadvantaged areas (decile 1-4, in the Ministry of Education's terminology) to try to balance the advantages of schools in wealthier areas.

But greedy bleating now sees that funding extended to decile 9 schools. Only those in very wealthy suburbs such as Remuera (decile 10) receive no additional equity funding, now known as target funding.

Some years ago, our school was delighted to raise \$1300 from a raffle of donated goods and services. When proudly telling of our accomplishment I was staggered to hear of a wealthy inner-Auckland school that raised \$35,000 in one night at a goods and services auction. The ability of some schools to draw so lavishly on their local community, and the inability of others, creates worrying distortions of educational equity.

Time and again we read newspaper reports of schools in economically poor areas receiving poor reports from the Education Review Office. We read that they have to be de facto social welfare agencies, are unable to provide more than very basic resources and programmes and cannot ask for school fee donations because so few in their community can pay them. Their local communities cannot sustain large-

scale fundraising, however willing the people might be.

The provision of computers and information technology equipment is bringing the dilemma of low decile schools to a head. (The Government's suggestion of second-hand, cast-off computers from the business sector is not the answer).

Low decile schools cannot adequately provide the resources to meet this crucial new need. To set up a suite of 15 to 20 computers, cabled and networked, costs \$60,000 to \$70,000. Schools in poorer areas would be hard-pressed to even pay for a year's Internet connection.

A small consignment of 50 books can cost \$1000. To buy just one new library book for each pupil in an average-shed school of 300 will cost \$6000 (add \$600 for strengthening tape, book jackets, issuing slips and the like).

Schools in wealthy areas are likely to have music suites, specialist tuition and foreign language tutors. Their sports teams have uniforms that include track-suits and the school will be inundated with sports equipment.

They have easy access to sponsors. Since they are seen to be more successful, they will have retailers offering them special prices or opportunities to test new equipment within the school.

One large primary school is buy-

ing a baby grand piano to go with its electronic organ and synthesiser. Schools in poorer areas are content to buy guitars from The Warehouse.

We cannot continue to allow ~ this country the development of a two-tier system of education based on economic and racial characteristics. Political parties need to show integrity and moral courage in recognising the problem and doing something about it. The Ministry of Education and the teacher unions need to show vision and leadership. Low decile schools need extra compensatory funding of generous proportions. They need to have made available to their curriculum and management consultants and mentors long term. They urgently need social workers attached to clusters of schools and one-stop-shop clinics in central locations for health, career and welfare services.

To attract more good teachers to schools that are traditionally hard to staff, a realistic salary differential has to be paid — at least \$10,000 a year, based on performance if necessary. Incentives such as travel reimbursement and childcare subsidies should be part of the package. (Some schools are already offering them).

Where will the money come from? If we return to the original concept of extra funding only for those schools in poorer areas

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(decile 1-4) then some of the money can be found by redistributing the Government's allocation to education.

However the need is such that additional salary incentives, targeted funding, paid mentors and consultants, attached social workers and the establishment of "one-stop-shops," will require an increase of about \$80 to \$100 million.

Education did quite well financially while Wyatt Creech was minister and an extra \$100 million is not a lot on top of a \$5 billion allocation. It is certainly not a lot when compared to the cost of over-runs of the police computer system or the purchase of the most expensive naval frigate option of \$550 million. Indeed even the staff training money spent by Work and Income New Zealand could probably fund a pilot project in a poor school.

We are very close to the creation of a permanent underclass characterised by poor health, poor education and poor life prospects, including intergenerational welfare dependence, unless we can break the cycle with good and compensating education.

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