



SUBMISSION

REVIEW OF TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS

Submission 091/18

Prepared on behalf of COMET Auckland, August 2018

[COMET Auckland - Te Hononga Akoranga](#) is an independent charitable trust and Auckland Council's CCO focused on education, skills and lifelong learning across Auckland and, increasingly, other parts of the country. Our latest Statement of Intent is [here](#).

Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi
ki te raranga i te whāriki
kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.
Mā te mahi tahi ō ngā whenu,
mā te mahi tahi ō ngā kairaranga,
ka oti tēnei whāriki.
I te otinga me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.
Ā tana wā, me titiro hoki ki ngā raranga i makere
nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

- Kūkupa Tirikatene

The tapestry of understanding
cannot be woven by one strand alone.
Only by the working together of strands
and the working together of weavers
will such a tapestry be completed.
With its completion
let us look at the good that comes from it
And, in time we should also look
at those stitches which have been dropped,
because they also have a message.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment as COMET Auckland to the review of Tomorrow's Schools.

This submission has been assembled by COMET Auckland based on our own knowledge and experience, and our ongoing engagement with education stakeholders, including educators, community leaders, employers, parents and students.

Contact for communications:

Susan Warren, chief executive, COMET Auckland

Email susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz

Ph 09 307 2101, Mobile 021 757 048, Fax 09 379 5053

PO Box 3430, Shortland Street, Auckland 1140

www.cometauckland.org.nz

Question 1: What is working well?

Some of the original goals of Tomorrow's Schools have been at least partly realised. For example, in many schools, the board is genuinely representative of the community and provides a voice for parents and families to inform school directions. Communities feel more ownership of their local school, which in turn strengthens the relationship between parents and school.

The education system has benefitted from the labour and expertise of thousands of school board members, many of whom give their time entirely voluntarily, and all of whom provide their expertise at a significantly lower rate than an equivalent contractor.

School boards also provide a valuable skill-building opportunity for community members, with positive results for board members' individual careers and for their communities. In this way, schools act as a platform for learning for the adults in a community, alongside the core role of providing learning for children.

Tomorrow's Schools transfers most decision-making to the local level, which allows schools to tailor teaching and learning to the needs and opportunities in the community. It also potentially allows more local innovation, which is a positive where schools have the capacity to track the effectiveness of innovations and modify them accordingly.

Question 2: What is not working well?

1. Exacerbating disparities

Because it depends on local capacity and capability, and on the relationship between school professionals and voluntary board members, the potential benefits of Tomorrow's Schools have not always been realised. In small communities and in low socio-economic areas, schools often struggle to find enough candidates to require an election, meaning the community does not have the opportunity to choose the most suitable candidates.

The disparities in the skills and experience of board members between high and low decile schools exacerbate the challenges low-decile schools face – a negative effect of Tomorrow's Schools.

2. Principal control

As professionals themselves, principals often unconsciously perceive other professionals as more knowledgeable than non-professionals. Where a board has few or no members who are professionals, this subtle attitude can lead to principals taking a more controlling approach to dealing with their board. In my previous work with schools I frequently saw principals talking over board members, discounting their views and controlling meetings with the result that only changes supported by the principal got approved.

This issue is exacerbated because of the unusual role of the principal on school boards. In most not-for-profit and corporate boards, the CEO is present at board meetings to report to the board but is not a member. They do not have a vote, and boards commonly hold some meetings or parts of meetings without the CEO. In contrast, a school principal is a full voting member of a school board. In effect, this means they employ themselves. It also puts them in a strong position to control the

board's decision-making, which is counter-productive to the core goal of Tomorrow's Schools of giving local communities greater influence over education.

This is especially risky when the principal is ineffective. Boards made up of community members often do not have the skills to recognise when a principal is not doing their job well, and even if they are aware of it, they find it almost impossible to address. There are many reasons for this, including cultural attitudes of respect towards educators and a reluctance to challenge someone they have been working closely with, but the principal's role on the board adds another layer of complexity to addressing principal under-performance.

3. Principal appointments

Selecting a new principal is one of the most far-reaching and impactful decisions that boards have to make. A poor principal appointment can cause a rapid decline in the quality of a school, whole-sale loss of staff, and major disruption for students, teachers, parents and board, affecting a school for many years. The staff representative may be the only educationally qualified person on the board, yet the board is charged with evaluating the educational leadership skills of potential new principals. Although expert help is available, many boards choose not to use it and even if they have an advisor for a principal appointment, boards do not necessarily listen to them.

4. Competition

Tomorrow's Schools destroyed many of the earlier connections between schools and simultaneously set them up in competition with one another for students, with the philosophy that effective schools would grow and ineffective schools would get the message from reducing student numbers and thereby be forced to improve. This theory assumed that failing schools were just not trying hard enough and that they needed an incentive to do better for their students. The reality is often that some schools face much greater challenges than others and that school leaders are doing their best to address those challenges but don't always have the knowledge or resources to do so. Falling student numbers just makes that worse because it affects the school's funding, creating a vicious cycle.

Interventions such as schooling improvement and more recently Kāhui Ako have strengthened connections among schools and supported greater collegial learning across schools. This is a very positive step but it only happens because of the determined efforts of the professionals involved, and in spite of the ongoing pressures towards competition from the self-managing school model.

Question 3: What you would change, and how?

There is great value in communities having significant input to their local schools. Despite the significant problems caused by the current governance model, we would not want to see community-based school boards entirely disappear.

However, we suggest four small but important changes to the model in order to reduce areas of significant risk, and to enhance potential benefits. Alternatively, we propose a more major change that would require further consultation were it to be pursued further.

1. Formalise board training

We recommend that a recognised governance qualification be set up within the tertiary system, with a series of courses covering key governance skills, some of which would be specifically aimed at governance of schools. We also recommend that the first level of the school-focused course should be compulsory for all school board members, and that additional courses would be voluntary but encouraged, with schools contributing towards the cost from their board PD budget.

Compulsory, credentialed learning for school board members would support school board functioning and would further enhance the role of school boards as a stepping-stone towards other governance roles, and/or towards senior management careers. The opportunity to study towards a recognised governance qualification would also attract quality candidates to school boards.

2. Change the role of the principal on the board

We recommend that the principal should not be a voting member of the board. Rather, they should report to the board in the same way as a CEO of a corporate. This clarifies the governance-management distinction and limits the principal's opportunity for undue control over the board.

3. Remove the task of appointing a new principal from a solely board role

We recommend that principal appointments be handled by a panel with representatives from the school board, the local MOE office, and an expert advisor. This would ensure balanced input from the local community and from the profession.

It would be important to ensure the MOE representative and the contractor knew the school, either from past work with the school or from a thorough process of connection during the first phase of the appointment process. This should include meetings with students, staff and parents to hear their vision for the school and what they would look for in a new principal.

4. Provide formal ways for schools to collaborate at the board level

We recommend that systems for deliberate board-level collaboration among schools be established. This could be done through greater board involvement in Kāhui Ako, or through community board forums (along the lines of the former Otara Boards Forum for example). This would bring school boards together across a town, region or suburb to shape their goals for education in their area, share what's working and plan for regional changes to support the learning of all children in their area. These forums would need to be resourced with a coordinator and data analyst to support region-wide change efforts that could then involve wider community resources such as employers, social services etc.

5. A possible larger change – local education boards

In many countries, schools are managed by a local education office that is responsible for the effectiveness of all the schools in its area. The role of this office is somewhere between our regional MOE office, an education consultant and a school manager, and there is often an elected education board providing governance.

In New Zealand, local education offices would be established to support schools in a town, suburb or rural area, with a small staff of professionals who work across the schools to support improvement, sharing of effective practice and connections with the community. They could also take on some of schools' procedural tasks such as building maintenance and bulk purchasing, and would have a role in selection and performance review of principals. The local education office and its schools would be governed by a local education board that is responsible for all the schools in the area.

This model has less opportunity for local input than the Tomorrow's Schools model, and also less autonomy for each school. However, it does have advantages in that it takes day-to-day management (e.g. building maintenance) away from principals so they can focus on teaching and learning, it provides a group of MOE-type experts who know the schools in their area intimately, and it reduces the need for small communities to find representatives for multiple individual school boards. There would also be opportunity for regional education boards to include iwi representation (appointed by the local iwi) and possibly also youth and employer representation.

Given these potential advantages we think it would be worth considering moving to a regional education board model. We do not think there is enough information on the viability of such a model in Aotearoa New Zealand to support a firm decision either way at this stage, so we recommend further investigation of this model and how it could work in our system.

A possible compromise position (or a possible transition phase towards the above model) could be to retain individual school boards while also putting in place scaled-down local education offices with associated boards. However this dual system would be cumbersome and could create uncertainty about which layer is responsible for what. Any investigation of the local education board model should include consideration of a dual-layered system as an alternative and/or as a transition phase.