

## How can education make the biggest difference to Auckland?

### *Reflections on discussions with Professor Ben Levin*

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*The Cognition Institute invited some of Auckland's thought leaders in education to meet with Ben as part of the preparation for the Auckland Education Summit.*

*What follows are some reflections on how education can make a bigger difference to Auckland, drawn from that discussion. This is not provided to seek agreement - you are free to disagree with any or all of it - but to stimulate the sort of thinking frame that might be useful as you get ready for the day's discussions.*

#### **The situation**

**Challenge 1: Setting a higher level of ambition about young people's readiness for the world following school**

**Challenge 2: Shifting attitudes towards a coherent, open education system**

**Challenge 3: Involving a wide range of perspectives to push the vision forward**

## The situation:

All children and young people of Aotearoa New Zealand are compulsorily entitled to an education system that is *directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*, according to the United Nations Declaration of Rights of the Child.

New Zealand's education system produces some of the highest achievements in international studies. The percentage of New Zealand students excelling in literacy is more than twice the OECD average in reading. Our students perform 'significantly' above average in mathematics and in science.

But while international surveys show New Zealand students' performance in literacy, numeracy and scientific literacy is amongst the highest in the world, achievement disparities are second widest out of 30 countries participating in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. In New Zealand, the gap in student achievement is greater *within* schools than *between* schools.

Across OECD countries, a student from a more socio-economically advantaged background outperforms a student from an average background by 38 score points, or about one year's worth of education, in reading. In New Zealand, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students is more than 50 score points.

Last year, 65.7% of students achieved NCEA level 1; 67.3% of students achieved level 2.

Ethnic breakdown of those achieving NCEA by the end of Year 12, shows a large performance difference in favour of New Zealand European (63%), and Asian (67%) students relative to Māori (36%) and Pasifika (41%) students.

In 2010 there were encouraging increases in attainment of NCEA qualifications over 2009 across all NCEA levels. In particular, the attainment gaps between Māori and Pasifika candidates on the one hand, and European and Asian candidates on the other hand, reduced at all NCEA levels. The attainment gaps between Māori and Pasifika students and students of other ethnicities are now significantly smaller than they were in 2004, the first year NCEA was fully implemented at all levels.

Central government invests more than \$4billion annually in Auckland's education.

Three challenges are central to increasing the value of education to the Auckland community:

1. Setting a higher level of ambition about young people's readiness for the world following school
2. Shifting attitudes towards a coherent education system
3. Involving a wide range of perspectives to push the vision forward

## **Challenge 1: Setting a higher level of ambition about young people's readiness for the world following school**

The first challenge is to set a higher level of ambition and expectation of success for all students than has previously been tolerated. Students should exit secondary schooling with the ability to participate in and contribute to their respective communities, and to be comfortable as citizens of the world.

This does not mean starting on a blank page. It means building a sense of common ground so that everyone understands that the purpose of the system, of all schools, is to help all students succeed. It means expecting improvement everywhere. All New Zealand schools can do better than they currently do.

Globally, the expectations for young people are higher than they have been in previous decades. The changing nature of our technological world means that everyone needs a deeper, stronger, better education than they used to get.

In New Zealand, the need is even greater because we have significant achievement gaps, where a number of students are not getting the benefit of a good education. That is not only costly to them but to the country.

Western education systems have tended to underestimate what students can do. We also have to recognise and honour people's origins and identity. Māori and Pasifika parents want their children to be successful in the mainstream of society, as well as to be comfortable in their own identity. Children are quite capable of achieving both objectives if we provide the right level of support.

Unfortunately, education has traditionally been founded on a deeply seated belief that failure is part of success; that the proof of our standards of success includes evidence of failure. Our attitudes and incentives within the system are wrong. They produce outcomes we neither need nor desire.

What we need is a system where every child is provided with high quality, rich instruction in every setting. Every child is entitled to the best quality because schools are notoriously poor predictors of who will be successful in later life. We do not know who will become the high performers and achievers later so we must set the same high expectations for all students. We do know, however, that students often say they are bored in schools. In truth, every child is motivated – and our education system must tap into their intrinsic motivation to succeed.

There is a lot of evidence internationally that young people do want to be successful. No parent wants their child to be unsuccessful. We know that teachers in all parts of the education system like working in environments where their students are succeeding.

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We need to frame the debate in terms of what *students* need to get a good education. Along the way, we can ask what support teachers or others require to enable students to receive a good education, but we must never lose the focus on students.

The Auckland Education Summit is a chance to drive a radical shift in education, a shift based on zero tolerance for failure so that all students are successful.

What does it look like to be in a world where that is expected, and delivered?

## Challenge 2: Shifting attitudes towards a coherent education system

New Zealand has a lot of good things happening in a lot of schools. By world standards, it's a high quality system.

The problem is, it is not really a system at all. What we have is the absence of a coherent education system. Two thousand eight hundred schools, each with their own autonomous governing board, are potentially going in quite different directions. Each school can operate independently, regardless of whether they are using best practice or not.

It might not be possible, or even desirable, to overhaul the whole system but it is possible to do better with what we have. And the data shows us that *every* school must do better. We need to be honest about the fact that most failing students are not in low decile schools; they are in *all* schools. New Zealand's education system cannot be improved by focusing on outcomes in a few schools. The focus instead must be on all schools.

The first step in driving positive change is to identify the practices within our schools and communities today that stimulate success – and ask how these practices can be more widely implemented.

The evidence base for good teaching is much better than it was even two decades ago and has been widely shared amongst professionals. What is missing is the requirement for professionals to implement what is known to work. We need to give more thought to how we can ensure competent teachers aren't left to do incompetent things, things that we know don't work.

In any profession - architects, accountants, lawyers - the knowledge of best practice is owned by the profession itself. It's not owned by policy makers, or funders. How can our schools be encouraged to provide the right conditions, incentives and accountabilities for the profession to step up and say: "As professionals, we have the knowledge, the practice and the confidence to deliver what needs to be done. We can own responsibility for every school and for every child receiving the best learning opportunities."?

Today, our schooling 'system' is so decentralised that we lack the levers or mechanisms to drive improvement. A significant support infrastructure needs to be created that can:

- grow teachers' knowledge base, not just about their own practice, but about the changing world students are living in;
- provide ready access to data: education data, data about the communities they are working in, about national goals, trends and changes; and
- support accountability mechanisms that are aligned with widely understood goals and strategies.

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We need also to consider how our education system intersects with other systems across our community. Schools, teachers and students do not operate in a vacuum. They interact with other parts of the education system and with businesses, local government, sports, arts and religious groups. They rely on good urban design, access to effective health and justice services. They need prompt and regular access to parents, just as parents need prompt and regular access to their children and the professionals who work with them. There is huge social capital within neighbourhoods, yet there is no clear mechanism to make this useful for schools and other learning organisations.

How can we make shifts to these systems' routine ways of working so that there are better linkages across all the areas of life that students rely on for success?

## **Challenge 3: Involving a wide range of perspectives to push the vision forward**

People rarely have the chance to share their views about education in constructive ways. The Summit is a chance for genuine dialogue, and through that, for people in positions of influence to find a collective commitment to improving education for the benefit of all students, and for Auckland.

Lasting improvement to any system always needs thoughtful participation by people with different perspectives but a shared stake in that system. With 542 schools in Auckland all licensed to manage themselves, we barely have a 'system'. Nor do we have a consensus across society about the goal of having all students succeed, or what that looks like.

The Summit brings different knowledge bases together. The sort of disruption required for radical change - and it is radical change that our young people are owed - is going to come from outside the system, and will be achieved by working beside those in it.

Everyone has the chance to share their views and the Summit programme reflects this. Ultimately improvement relies on good ideas and another critical element: our shared commitment to identify and implement action.

At the conclusion of the Summit, we need to be able to say: "Here is what we are doing to make the biggest difference to education so that education can make the biggest difference to Auckland. "

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## **Material for this paper was drawn from sources including:**

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child

OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do

NZQA Annual Report on NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Data and Statistics, 2010 (May 2011)

Governments and Education Reform: some lessons from the last 50 years, by Ben Levin, 2010

[www.educationcounts.govt.nz](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz)