

# Helping Schools Succeed

Lessons from Abroad



Cheryl Lim and Chris Davies  
edited by Sam Freedman

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## About the authors

### **Cheryl Lim**

*Research Fellow, specialising in education, Policy Exchange.* A former Rhodes Scholar, she graduated with an MSc in Comparative Social Policy from Oxford University in 2006. Prior to that, she studied psychology and sociology at Wesleyan University in America. Cheryl also has a background in gender advocacy work

### **Chris Davies**

*Independent Consultant.* Graduated from Exeter University with an Upper Second in Classics and holds a PGSE and an MSc in Education Management. He has 30 years experience in the state education sector including 12 years as a Head teacher in two London primary schools as well as nine years experience in a Local Authority

both as an adviser and, until recently, Assistant Director. He is currently working on a range of educational projects and research. Chris founded and now manages, part-time, the Lambeth e-Learning Foundation.

### **Sam Freedman**

*Head of the Education Unit, Policy Exchange.* He achieved a first class degree in History from Magdalen College, Oxford. After completing a Masters degree in International History in 2004, Sam joined the Independent Schools Council as a researcher. He left three years later as Head of Research, having also completed a second Masters degree in Public Policy and Management at Birkbeck. Sam joined Policy Exchange in September 2007.

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The views expressed in the report are those of the authors, and not necessarily of the people we interviewed.

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## Executive Summary

In recent years, the expansion of international comparative studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS has significantly changed the way we assess the success of any given education system. Strong internal progress is no longer sufficient to merit a positive evaluation. In a world where education is viewed as the means by which nations achieve and maintain an edge over their competitors, success is increasingly defined vis-à-vis the performance of other systems.

Admittedly, the way in which the results of these studies are reported – without reference to measurement errors or explanations of methodological differences – often gives rise to crude, meaningless ‘rankings’. Nonetheless, careful analysis of each successive study yields the same underlying message: some systems seem to do a better job than others at achieving both educational excellence and equity.

The latter dimension is one England has struggled with for decades. Despite countless initiatives, socio-economic class remains the strongest predictor of future educational attainment, and our ‘long tail of underachievement’ lives on. Moreover, the latest 2006 PISA and PIRLS studies suggest that England’s comfortable position in the cluster of countries performing above the OECD average might be slipping.

In order to understand what England might do differently, we turned to five systems – New Zealand, Canada (Ontario and Alberta), Hong Kong and Sweden – which have relatively successful education systems, and which have been steadily working on improving their outcomes through extensive reform strategies. The systems were spread across four continents and encompassed a wide range of organisational structures, philosophies, reform histories and socio-economic idiosyncrasies.

In **New Zealand**, school-based management reforms eliminated the middle-level governing bodies between individual schools and the Ministry of Education. This highly atomised framework is both the system’s greatest strength and weakness. On one hand, the autonomy given to schools and teachers has generated exciting innovations at the local level. On the other hand, institutional accountability remains weak, and the central government struggles to systemically replicate change on a larger scale.

In **Canada**, education is the responsibility of each province and territory, thereby creating considerable internal diversity. Both **Ontario** and **Alberta** have deliberately sought to develop an accountability framework – predicated on collective responsibility and targeted support structures – that is, in their own view, the antithesis of England’s big stick. Both also share similar governance structures, operating at least four different categories of public schools, which automatically generates competition within the public sector. **Alberta** has taken the principle of competition one step further by introducing charter schools and making school choice a central feature of its education reforms. **Ontario** on the other hand, is focusing its reform efforts on developing collaborative networks – an approach that perhaps springs from the province’s fractious history of education reform.

Falling school rolls in **Hong Kong**, not to mention its small geographical size, have helped create a highly marketised system of education. In some districts, up to 60 per cent of schools have had to be closed. Correspondingly, competition for pupils is fierce, and networks of schools engage in branding activities in an effort to carve out distinct niches for themselves. It is particularly interesting that this competition tar-

gets students of all abilities and interests, rather than just those with high academic ability.

Finally, **Sweden** has garnered considerable attention in recent years for the apparent success of its school-choice reforms, supposedly demonstrated by the rapid growth of the independent sector. Internally, however, it is perceived to be a system in crisis, and comprehensive reforms are anticipated across the compulsory and non-compulsory education phases. Unsurprisingly, the scale of the reforms proposed is generating a public debate on the future of the education system, not the least Sweden's historic commitment to providing an equivalent education for all children.

Despite these differences, the challenges faced by each of these systems were remarkably similar. Even where there were significant differences in approach, a closer examination of the internal logic of each system revealed common underlying principles. These tenets have been drawn together in our conclusion to create a proposal of what we believe a coherently aligned system should look like.

Specifically, we suggest that an ideal system can be characterised by the analogy of 'tight, loose, tight': clearly delineated objectives, responsibilities and standards; the freedom and autonomy to innovate at the school and classroom level; and comprehensive mechanisms for evaluating school performance and ensuring institutional and professional accountability.

First 'tight':

- **Clarity and consistency** of vision is essential to ensure that large-scale, system-wide reforms are kept on track, and that there is an alignment of goals and incentives across multiple levels of

governance. This would include: bringing all stakeholders on board as partners in the policy-development process; setting minimum standards; and creating an expectation of constant improvement and growth.

Mediating the 'loose':

- **Balancing school autonomy with central oversight** enables innovation and individualisation at the school level, while at the same time maximising economies of scale and transference of best practice.
- **Tempering competition and collaboration.** Systems are most effective when there is a balance of competitive pressure and collaborative relationships within the system. Some models of school organisation do a better job of achieving this synergy than others.
- **Creating a new deal for teachers,** wherein teachers are promised more autonomy, better remuneration and higher esteem, in return for rigorous expectations of professional accountability, is essential.
- **Guaranteeing a basic level of equity and excellence.** Safeguards such as fair admissions policies and differentiated funding schemes need to be built into the system to ensure that the benefits of education reach all students.

Second 'tight':

- **Rethinking the 'what' and 'how' of measurement** to ensure that the processes by which schools and practitioners are held accountable are fit for purpose and do not create perverse incentives within the system. This would include developing a system of reporting to the government, schools, parents and the public which is accessible to all stakeholders, particularly parents.

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## Introduction

This report is part of a two-stage research study that draws on best practice from abroad in order to inform England's understanding of how the building blocks of any given system – accountability frameworks; governing bodies; teaching workforce etc. – should be aligned to produce high standards for all students. Here, the phrase 'high standards for all students' is used to refer to the twin goals of educational excellence, (as measured by academic standards), and equity (the extent to which high outcomes are spread equitably across all demographic groups).

The first stage of our research consisted of case studies of five systems – New Zealand, Canada (Ontario and Alberta), Hong Kong and Sweden – which have produced, by comparative standards, relatively successful educational outcomes. The les-

sons from these systems were used to develop a framework of an ideal system, which was then tested out during interviews and focus groups with practitioners and stakeholders in England.

This report presents the findings from the comparative phase of our study. Inevitably, the coverage of each system has had to be truncated to highlight the elements that we believed were of most relevance to the English experience. In doing so, the report is intended to serve as a compendium to the main report, illustrating the rationale and good practices which informed our policy proposals. The report can also be read as a stand-alone document and we hope that interested readers will find in each narrative a useful starting base for learning more about each of the systems covered.

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# 1

## Framework and Methodology

Answering the question ‘What constitutes a good education?’ is a task at once both straightforward and complex. On one level, many of us have an intuitive sense of what we value in education. A short list of broad educational goals could include anything from the utilitarian objective of ‘the skills and knowledge necessary for participation in a workforce’, to the philosophical ideal of ‘the development of a strong sense of self and civic responsibility’.

Complications inevitably arise, however, when we begin to consider how these aims might play out in a national education system. Given finite resources, how do we prioritise the goals we think an education system should accomplish? If conflicting visions and objectives exist, how should we reconcile them? And even if we succeed in achieving a satisfactory consensus in these debates, we are still left with what is perhaps the most contentious question of all: how do we know that our education system is actually achieving its stated purposes?

This study represents our attempt to answer these questions by comparing the education system in England with that in four other countries. In this introductory chapter we establish the parameters of our study: what we were looking for; why we focused on New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong and Sweden; the limitations of international comparatives in education; and how we went about our analysis.

The following chapters focus on each country in turn, and the report ends with a thematic review which presents the key

challenges for any education system and lays out the background for our companion report on the English school system. Our conclusions by no means represent a Grand Unified Theory of Education. Our analysis does, nonetheless, begin from a committed standpoint: that successful education is an indispensable feature of a healthy society, and that its positive impact should be felt by all individuals, regardless of background.

### 1.1 What constitutes a successful school system?

The sociologist Daniel Yankelovich coined the phrase ‘the McNamara Fallacy’<sup>1</sup> to illustrate the pitfalls often confronted in the practice of evaluation:

*The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say that what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.*

Despite everyone’s best efforts, policymakers and researchers are often susceptible to the McNamara Fallacy. We know that we want systems that produce adults with high levels of educational attainment.

1 Named after Robert S. McNamara, former United States Secretary of Defense (1961–8) and former President of the World Bank (1968–81).

We know, too, that we want school systems that foster social cohesion, civic-minded individuals, physically and emotionally healthy societies and so forth. Unfortunately, we do not always know how to accurately measure the latter category of ‘softer’ goals. It should come as no surprise, then, that the educational indicators of most countries centre on resource inputs<sup>2</sup> and student attainment.

At the same time, it would be unreasonable to admonish governments for their continued reliance on easily measured educational goals. While there are pressing needs to develop better mechanisms for evaluating less tangible goals, the existing performance indicators are still of considerable value. It is arguable that a system which cannot ensure a minimum standard of learning for all students would be hard-pressed to achieve more complex goals. More crucially, literacy and numeracy remain the keys to successful integration into modern society; a system that fails to enable mastery of these skills amongst all students not only runs the risk of condemning some to a life on the margins, but also squanders valuable human capital.

We believe that high attainment standards<sup>3</sup> are the sine qua non of any successful school system. High average standards alone, though, are by no means sufficient. The greater, and more pressing, challenge is to ensure that these high standards are spread equitably across all demographic groups. Unfortunately, this is where England, with its long tail of underachievement, falters.

*Given the status quo, we believe that a successful education system can, and should, be measured by the extent to which a country is capable of meeting the twin objectives of excellence and equity.*

In this study, we have chosen to define educational excellence as high average performance standards. As noted earlier, we recognise that achievement scores alone

can by no means be taken as a definitive statement of quality. Wherever possible we have, therefore, used other indicators, such as the educational attainment of the adult population, and employment rates by level of educational attainment, to flesh out our understanding of each country’s education sector.

Educational equity, on the other hand, has been analysed through three main dimensions:

- The impact of students’ socio-economic status on performance
- The degree of ‘between-student variation’, that is, the extent of the attainment gap between a system’s high and low performers
- The degree of ‘between-school variation’, that is, the extent to which there are consistent standards of attainment across schools

Other considerations that were taken into account include the degree of social segregation in schools, as well as the existence of attainment gaps based on gender, ethnicity and immigrant status.

In sum, then, this study defines a successful school system as one that produces high standards for all.

## 1.2 Is there a trade-off between excellence and equity?

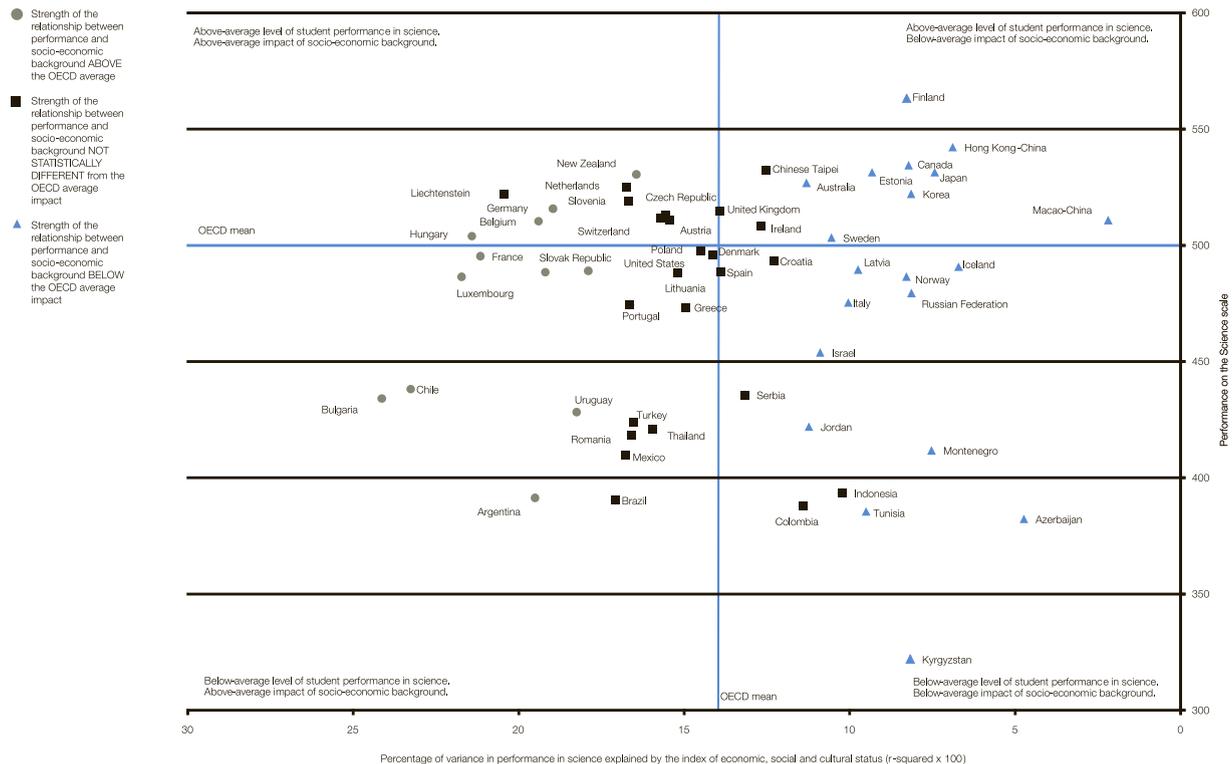
Many educational debates seem to be conducted on the assumption that it is impossible to achieve both high performance standards and an equitable distribution of learning outcomes. Consider, for example, the yearly row over whether improvements in average student performance during key-stage assessments are due to lower standards. This debate is further fuelled by recent research illustrating that socio-economic background remains the strongest predictor of future student success in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> This predicament is, of

<sup>2</sup> An arguably fallible indicator, as international research has found that there is no clear correlation between educational expenditure and learning outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> For those not familiar with the English educational context, the term ‘standards’ is generally used in reference to achievement outcomes.

<sup>4</sup> J. Blanden and S. Machin, ‘Recent Changes in Intergenerational Mobility in Britain’, Sutton Trust, December 2007.

**Figure 1.1. Average performance of countries on the PISA 2006 science scale and the relationship between performance and the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status**



course, not unique; in all countries, students from more advantaged family backgrounds tend to perform better.

International evidence, however, suggests that despite these well-known challenges, it is possible to produce both equity and excellence. Figure 1.1 compares the average performance of countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 science scale and the relationship between performance and the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS).<sup>5</sup> Australia, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong-China, Japan, Korea, Macao-China and Sweden all have above-average science scores, while the impact of their students' socio-economic backgrounds on performance is below average. England also has an above-average performance level in science, yet the gap between the performance of its stu-

dents and their socio-economic background is comparable to the average OECD country.

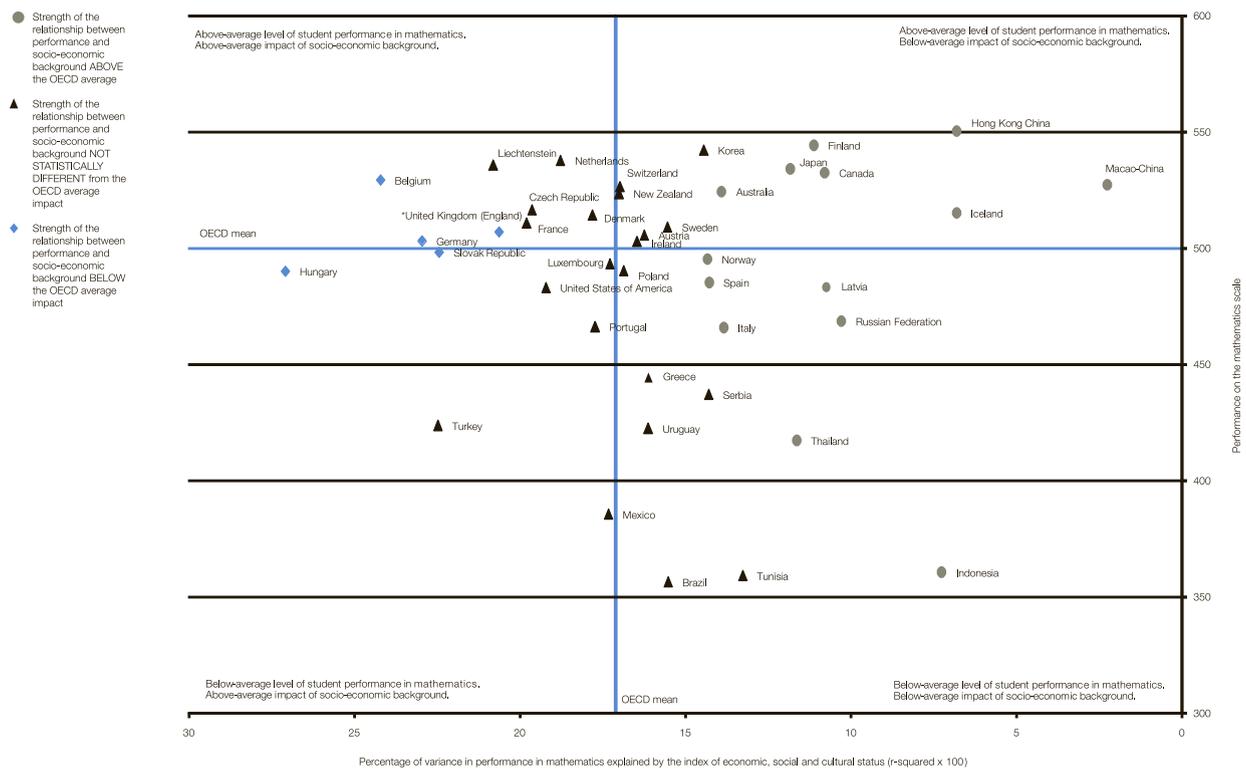
It is worth noting that there are slight differences in country outcomes between studies, depending on which scale is used for comparison. Figure 1.2, for example, uses the PISA 2003 mathematics scale to compare the relationship between performance and the PISA ESCS index. Using the 2003 data, we find that England's performance has changed – the gap between student performance and socio-economic background is wider here than in the average OECD country.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time there are systems, such as those in Canada and Hong Kong, which consistently do better than other countries in closing the performance gap between students of different socio-economic backgrounds. This suggests that excellence and

5 The PISA index of economic, social and cultural status takes into consideration the following factors: parental occupation; highest level of education of the student's parents; an index of family wealth; an index of cultural possessions (e.g. books) in the family home; and an index of home educational resources.

6 Due to low response rates, England's performance was not included in the official comparative analyses. However, the results are accurate for many within-country comparisons between subgroups and for relational analyses; hence its use here in the comparison of performance and the impact of student ESCS on performance. See *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results From PISA 2003* (Paris: OECD, 2004), Annex A3, p. 328, for a more detailed explanation.

**Figure 1.2. Average performance of countries on the PISA 2003 mathematics scale and the relationship between performance and the index of economic, social and cultural status.**



7 For a concise treatment of the range and growth of international assessment studies, see T. N. Postlethwaite, *Monitoring Educational Achievement* (UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 2004); as well as A. Grisay, and P. Griffin, 'What are the main cross-national studies?', in *Cross-national Studies of the Quality of Education: Planning their design and managing their impact*, ed. K. Ross and I. Genevois (UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 2006).

8 A growing number of studies focus exclusively on the experiences of developing countries, for instance SACMEQ (the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality) and LLECE (the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of the Quality of Education).

9 We also drew on the OECD's educational indicators series, *Education at a Glance*, and the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Internet Archive (INCA) managed by Eurydice.

10 PISA homepage: <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>.

equity do not need to sit at opposite ends of a spectrum of achievement.

### 1.3 What are these international studies?

In 1964 the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) published the results of their first cross-national initiative: *The First International Mathematics Study*. Encompassing 12 countries, this landmark study opened the policy world to systematic cross-national data collection through the use of common tests. Since then, more than 20 international assessments have been conducted by different agencies, each growing in methodological complexity and scope, in tandem with increased interest in and debate over the results of these assessments.<sup>7</sup>

Arguably, the three most prominent<sup>8</sup> cross-national studies (and indeed those

most relevant to the English context)<sup>9</sup> are:

- **The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)**, organised by the OECD, currently with the participation of 57 countries (30 OECD, 27 non-OECD).<sup>10</sup> PISA assesses the reading, mathematical and scientific literacies of 15-year-old students, as well as their problem-solving skills. There have been three cycles to date (2000, 2003 and 2006), and during each cycle there is one major domain of investigation. In the 2006 cycle, for example, science was the major domain and more questions were asked in this area than in the minor domains of reading, mathematics and problem-solving.

The United Kingdom has participated in PISA since its inception. In 2003, however, England was not included in the com-

parative analyses on the grounds that the response rate of its schools and pupils did not meet the programme's requirements.<sup>11</sup>

- **Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)**, organised by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), with the participation of 65 countries.<sup>12</sup> There have been four cycles to date (1995, 1999, 2003 and 2007). As with the PISA studies, England has been a participant since the study's inception.
- **The Programme for International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS)**, organised by the IEA, with the participation of 35 countries.<sup>13</sup> England has contributed to both study cycles (2001 and 2006).

While all three studies assess student competency through the use of standardised tests, there are fundamental methodological differences between these tests that can affect their specific results. There are three key differences:

- PISA aims to measure 'how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society'.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, PISA's assessment tools focus on the concept of 'literacy' – an individual's ability to utilise his or her knowledge of a particular subject in order to fully participate in society. In contrast, TIMSS assesses the extent to which students have mastered the core curriculum common in the majority of national education systems. Countries that have more overlap between the content of their national curricula and the test questions may thus be at an advantage. Some countries do appear to perform better with one testing body than another, for example New Zealand's performance in the OECD PISA studies.

- The demographics differ. PISA uses what is called a 'pure age' criterion, testing students who are 15 years old at the time of the study, regardless of their grade. TIMSS and PIRLS, on the other hand, assess students by grade (TIMSS tests students in US grades 4 and 8 and their international equivalents, whereas PIRLS tests students in the equivalents of US grade 4 only). In studies with a pure age criterion, it is likely that students tested at the same age from different countries may have completed a different number of years of formal schooling.
- There are no set criteria for determining which students can (or should) be excluded from participation in these tests. Each country is responsible for establishing its own criteria for inclusion and exclusion, therefore opening the possibility that countries wishing to see a rise in rankings may choose to exclude large numbers of students with disabilities, students judged unable to cope with the conditions of the test (for example, immigrant students who may not be fluent in the language of the test) and so forth.

While we acknowledge that international comparative assessments can be criticised on a number of counts,<sup>15</sup> we believe that PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS comprise the best comparative data currently available. Wherever possible, however, we have sought to balance and verify figures from these international assessments with pertinent national data.

#### 1.4 How does England compare internationally?

Considerable research has already been produced analysing England's comparative performance according to PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. Interested readers should consult Professor Alan Smithers' work in *England's Education* and more recently *Blair's Education: An International Perspective*,<sup>16</sup>

11 Professor Alan Smithers, from the Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, argues that this omission is difficult to understand as the response rates for the UK and USA in both 2000 and 2003 are remarkably similar. In his report referenced in this chapter, Professor Smithers has thus included the results of the PISA 2003 cycle in his analysis.

12 TIMSS homepage: <http://timss.bc.edu>.

13 PIRLS homepage: <http://timss.bc.edu>.

14 [http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en\\_32252351\\_32235918\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_32252351_32235918_1_1_1_1_1_1,00.html).

15 For a summary of the common critiques of these studies, see Ross and Genevois (2006), chapters 4,7 and 8.

16 A. Smithers, *England's Education* (London: Sutton Trust, 2004) and *Blair's Education: An International Perspective* (London: Sutton Trust, 2007).

**Table 1.1. England's performance in the most recent international assessment studies**

Rank	PISA 2000 <sup>17</sup>	PIRLS 2001 <sup>18</sup>	PISA 2003 <sup>19</sup>	TIMSS 2003 Maths (Grade 8) <sup>22</sup>	TIMSS 2003 Science (Grade 8) <sup>23</sup>	PISA 2006 <sup>20</sup>	PIRLS 2006 <sup>21</sup>
1	Finland	Sweden	HK-China	Singapore	Singapore	Finland	Russian Federation
2	Canada	Netherlands	Finland	Korea	Chinese Taipei	HK-China	HK-China
3	New Zealand	England	Korea	HK-China	Korea	Canada	Alberta (Canada)
4	Australia	Bulgaria	Netherlands	Chinese Taipei	HK-China	Chinese Taipei	Singapore
5	Ireland	Latvia	Liechtenstein	Japan	Estonia	Estonia	British Columbia (Canada)
6	Korea	Lithuania	Japan	Belgium (Flemish)	Japan	Japan	Luxembourg
7	United Kingdom	Hungary	Canada	Netherlands	England	New Zealand	Ontario (Canada)
8	Japan	United States	Belgium (Flemish)	Estonia	Hungary	Australia	Italy
9	Sweden	Italy	Macao-China	Hungary	Netherlands	Netherlands	Hungary
10	Austria	Germany	Switzerland	Malaysia	USA	Liechtenstein	Sweden
11	Belgium	Czech Republic	Australia	Latvia	Australia	Korea	Germany
12	Iceland	New Zealand	New Zealand	Russian Federation	Sweden	Slovenia	Netherlands
13	Norway	Scotland	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic	Slovenia	Germany	Belgium (Flemish)
14	France	Singapore	Ireland	Australia	New Zealand	United Kingdom	Bulgaria
15	USA	Russian Federation	Denmark	USA	Lithuania	Czech Republic	Denmark
16	Denmark	HK-China	France	Lithuania	Slovak Republic	Switzerland	Nova Scotia (Canada)
17	Switzerland	France	Sweden	Sweden	Russian Federation	Macao-China	Latvia
18	Spain	Greece	England	England	Latvia	Austria	United States
19	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic	Austria	Scotland	Scotland	Belgium	England
20	Italy	Iceland	Germany	Israel	Malaysia	Ireland	Austria

17 Multiple comparisons of mean performance based on the reading literacy scale. *Knowledge and Skills for Life: First Results from PISA 2000* (Paris: OECD, 2001), p. 53.

18 I. V. S. Mullis, M. O. Martin, E. J. Gonzalez & A. M. Kennedy, *PIRLS 2001 International Report: IEA's Study of Reading Literacy Achievement in Primary Schools* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 2003), p. 27.

19 England inserted into ranking based on its raw score. OECD (2004), p. 92.

20 Multiple comparisons of mean performance based on the science literacy scale. *PISA 2006 Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World* (Paris: OECD, 2006), p. 56.

21 I. V. S. Mullis, M. O. Martin, A. M. Kennedy and P. Foy, *PIRLS 2006: International Report* (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2007).

22 M. O. Martin, I. V. S. Mullis, E. J. Gonzalez & S. J. Chrostowski, *TIMSS 2003 International Mathematics Report: Findings From IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study at the Fourth and Eighth Grades* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 2004a), p.38.

23 M. O. Martin, I. V. S. Mullis, E. J. Gonzalez & S. J. Chrostowski, *TIMSS 2003 International Science Report: Findings From IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study at the Fourth and Eighth Grade* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 2004b), p. 8.

Average achievement significantly higher than England / UK
  Average achievement significantly lower than England/UK
  Average achievement not significantly different from England /UK

both of which examine trends in performance since England's first participation in an international study in 1964.

In brief, the good news is that England does relatively well in assessments of science; moreover, there is evidence that England's performance has improved over time, particularly since the introduction of the national curriculum. In assessments of mathematics performance, however, the evidence is less encouraging. Smithers' analyses suggest that England not only fares poorly in comparison with other OECD countries in mathematics, but also that there has been no significant change in performance over time.<sup>24</sup>

The evidence for reading literacy is also somewhat discouraging. England was one of the highest performing countries in the PIRLS 2001 study; in 2006, however, England's performance dropped significantly. While England's average attainment was still above the international mean, it performed significantly below some OECD countries, including Sweden, Italy and Germany. The fall in performance was notable across all ability levels, prompting questions about the value of the national literacy strategy.

### 1.5 Which countries did we choose?

Critics of comparative education research often question the validity of comparing apples with oranges. Their concern is not unfounded: national education systems, defined as they are by the idiosyncrasies of history, sociocultural norms and politics, are akin to fingerprints. Wholesale transportation of policy ideas from one country to another have often backfired, at times to disastrous consequences. So why look outward at all?

Our answer comes from a statement of intent, presented more than four decades ago by the group of researchers that developed the first comparative assessment study: 'Custom and law define what is educationally allowable within a nation, [where-

as]the educational systems beyond one's national borders suggest what is educationally possible.'<sup>25</sup>

We are interested in the possible. Put more specifically, we are interested in learning from the countries that are rising to the challenge of providing both educational equity and excellence. In analysing data from PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS, we found that countries that met our criteria could be divided into four broad categories:<sup>26</sup>

- The Nordic Countries: Finland and Sweden
- The Asia Pacific Rim Countries: Korea, Japan, Hong Kong-China, Macau-China and Singapore
- The Antipodean Countries: Australia and New Zealand
- Others: Canada and the Netherlands

We anticipated that countries belonging to the Nordic and Asian clusters, in particular, would have very similar educational contexts owing to their shared cultural norms. Correspondingly, we selected one country per cluster:

- **Sweden** At first glance, Sweden appears to be an unusual choice, considering Finland's unquestionable position at the top of the pack. However, the numerous case studies of the Finnish 'wonder story' that have arisen in recent years<sup>27</sup> mean that there was little we could add to the existing literature. Sweden was also of particular interest to us because of the attention that its school choice policies have received in international policy circles.
- **Hong Kong-China** Owing to linguistic barriers, Hong Kong and Singapore were the most feasible options. Hong Kong's market system for the provision of education, however, is especially relevant to recent policy debates in England on choice and competition.

<sup>24</sup> While England performed well in mathematics in the PISA 2000 study – a score that was deemed surprising as it was out of line with the TIMSS scores – mathematics was a minor component of the cycle. In PISA 2003, mathematics was the major area of analysis. As mentioned earlier, England's results were discounted on the grounds that the participation level was too low for the results to be meaningful. Smithers' analysis suggests, however, that there was a relative decline in England's performance in 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Forshay et al. (1962), p. 2, quoted in Ross and Genevois (2006), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> We excluded countries such as Iceland and Liechtenstein that had very small populations.

<sup>27</sup> For a particularly comprehensive and recent example, see J. Haahr, T. Nielsen, M. Hansen and S. Jakobsen, *Explaining student performance: Evidence from the international PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys* (Denmark: Danish Technological Institute, 2005).

- **New Zealand** While New Zealand’s average student attainment is strong, its performance on counts of equity is more comparable with that of England, and both countries struggle with a long tail of underachievement. At the same time, of all the countries under consideration, New Zealand’s cultural norms as well as governance structures exhibit the most similarities with those of England. We chose to proceed with the expectation that its educational policy frameworks might prove particularly instructive for ongoing debates in England.
- **Canada** As with Finland, Canada was an obvious contender as one of the highest performing countries on counts of equity and excellence. Since education in Canada is a provincial responsibility, we chose to focus on the provinces of Alberta and Ontario, as both have a reputation for cutting-edge reform.

Table 1.2 offers a snapshot of key characteristics of each country and province profiled in this study. The systems vary significantly from England’s both in terms of the size of the student population and the number of schools. Given these differences, how can fruitful comparisons be made?

First, the objective of this study was to learn from systems which evidence suggests are doing a better job than the system in England. Priority had to be placed on finding systems that worked, before determining which options were a better match with England. Furthermore, on closer scrutiny, there are dimensions of each country’s education system which are comparable and relevant to the English context: Alberta and Sweden’s choice frameworks; New Zealand’s governance structure; high rates of immigration in Ontario and Sweden; and the marketised system of provision in Hong Kong.

The challenge, then, was to examine these countries, firmly grounded in the knowledge that ‘custom and law’ will ren-

**Table 1.2: Key characteristics of case studies<sup>28</sup>**

	NZ	CAN: On	CAN: Alb	HK SAR	Sweden
Student Population	760,761	2,124,957	584,004	894,711	995,457
Number of schools	2,573	5,723	1,970	1,196	4,908
Governance System	National; high SBM <sup>29</sup>	Federal; tri-level governance; <sup>30</sup> varying degrees of SBM	Federal; tri-level governance; varying degrees of SBM	Federal; move to SBM	National; tri-level governance move to SBM
Expenditure on Educational Institutions	5% of GDP	2.59% of GDP	2.25% of GDP	3.5% of GDP	4.5% of GDP
Demographic Challenges	Maori & Pasifika population growth; rural/urban disparity	High immigration rate; rural/urban disparity	Declining student population; rural/urban disparity	Declining student population;	Intergration of immigrant students; declining student population

<sup>28</sup> See the chapters on each country for source of data.

<sup>29</sup> SBM: school-based management.

<sup>30</sup> Tri-level governance: governing power is shared between national, regional and local bodies.

der some of their policies unfeasible in England, and yet keenly attuned to the potential of informed change.

### 1.6 What methodology does this study use?

#### *One-on-one interviews*

The qualitative dimension of our study focuses on in-depth interviews with key informants from two broad categories: members of the policy community and practitioners. The former group encompasses individuals and organisations who are (or were) actively involved in the development and provision of national (or provincial) policy (e.g. government officials), as well as stakeholder organisations and academics who have influenced national policy. While we identified most of our key informants through desk-based research, we also sought recommendations from these informants regarding other individuals and organisations whose views would provide additional insight.

#### *School visits and focus groups*

Visits to effective schools in each country were organised. Here, 'effective schools' were defined as schools 'performing against the odds', that is, performing above expectations despite the challenges of their student demographic (e.g. a high percentage of students from low socio-economic backgrounds). With the exception of Hong Kong, we identified these schools with the assistance of the respective governments. In Hong Kong, school visits were arranged with the assistance of two key informants (one principal, one board member of a

sponsoring body). To supplement the one-on-one interviews, focus groups with head teachers were also held during research tours of New Zealand and Ontario. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, similar sessions were not feasible in Alberta, Hong Kong and Sweden.

#### *Issues*

Throughout our research, we have attempted to ensure the representation of a broad range of viewpoints. However, owing to the fact that participation in this study was on a voluntary basis, the size and composition of our samples has depended on the interest and goodwill of the local education communities. Where gaps in our understanding have been perceived, we have sought to rectify them through further desk-based research and follow-up interviews.

We acknowledge that since we worked with a small sample of interviewees in each country, our findings are not statistically significant. However, we successfully gained access to the ministries of each country, as well as to high-ranking officials of key stakeholder organisations. As such, we are confident that, while not statistically significant, our findings provide insight into the education debate in each country.

These case studies are not, of course, intended to serve as a comprehensive review of every aspect of each country's or province's policies. In what follows, we highlight the most pertinent elements (from an English perspective) of each system. Thus, for example, while the availability of effective teachers is of significant concern in all countries profiled, it is considered in detail in only two out of the four following chapters.

# 2

## New Zealand

Point England Primary School is a 450-student, decile 1 school. This designation indicates that it is in the 10 per cent of New Zealand schools with the highest proportion of students from disadvantaged socio-economic communities.<sup>31</sup> Ninety-five per cent of its students are Māori and Pasifika<sup>32</sup> – groups consistently over-represented in New Zealand’s lower achievement bands, and that historically have been under-served.

Fifteen years ago, Point England was a struggling school: its students were reading two to three years behind their chronolog-

ical age; mathematical scores were 20 per cent behind the national average; and student rolls were falling due to ‘brain flight’<sup>33</sup> Despite the best intentions of teachers and families, the school community was paralysed by low expectations. Student performance, it seemed, was as good as it was going to get.

Concerted strategic planning, however – driven by a motivated team and informed by cycles of goal-setting, evaluation and innovative curriculum development – is turning things around. Point England now collects extensive assessment data for each

31 All state schools are given a decile rating. Decile 1 refers to the 10 per cent of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 represents the 10 per cent of schools with the lowest proportion of such students.

32 Refers to students (commonly, first- or second-generation immigrants) from the small Pacific Island nations of Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Niue and the Cook Islands.

33 [http://www.tki.org.nz/r/student\\_outcomes/casestudy\\_ptengland\\_e.php](http://www.tki.org.nz/r/student_outcomes/casestudy_ptengland_e.php).

34 *Education at a Glance* (Paris: OECD, 2007), Table A1.2a, p. 37

35 *Ibid.*, Table A1.3a, p. 38.

36 *Ibid.*, Table B1.1b, p. 187; expenditure is reported in equivalent US dollars using purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates; for primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

37 For primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

38 *Ibid.*, Table B2.1, p. 205.

39 *Ibid.*, Table B4.1, p. 230.

**Table 2.1. Comparison of selected indicators**

Indicator	New Zealand	OECD average	United Kingdom
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained at least upper secondary education (2005) <sup>34</sup>	79	68	67
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained a tertiary qualification (2005) <sup>35</sup>	27	26	30
Annual expenditure per student on core services, ancillary services and research and development (2004) <sup>36</sup>	\$5,815	\$6,608	\$6,656
Expenditure on educational institutions <sup>37</sup> as a percentage of GDP (2004) <sup>38</sup>	5.0	3.8	4.4
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure (2004) <sup>39</sup>	15.1	9.2	8.7

student and analyses these data on multiple levels (by class, age group, ethnic group, gender, English-as-a-Second-Language learners, etc). School leaders have also committed themselves to tracking the value-added performance of each student, with the explicit goal of ensuring that all students operate at their chronological age within three years of studying at Point England.

In 2001, student achievement entered the lower band of the national average in literacy and numeracy, a remarkable accomplishment which continues to galvanize further efforts towards change. In the process, the school has blazed an international trail in the use of digital technologies to foster learning. Four days a week, students produce a sophisticated news bulletin showcasing student work from every class. Weekly highlights are pulled together to create a 15-minute programme (*schoolTV*) that is broadcast throughout Auckland every Wednesday evening. Since 1995, the school has also published a weekly podcast on New Zealand authors (the first regular international podcast from a primary school). The podcast spent four months on the iTunes Top 20 Download List and, to the glee of the school community, was at number 19 for a while, one rank ahead of President George Bush at number 20.<sup>40</sup>

Point England now collaborates with other schools in the Tamaki area on schooling improvement initiatives aimed at raising achievement. While the cluster works in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Principal Russell Burt was quick to note that ‘our cluster was the first in New Zealand to put our hand up and say, we want to cluster. We were the first non-government, non-top-down driven schooling improvement initiative.’ Local ownership of reform, spurred by high professional motivation, is seen as an essential factor in the school’s success.

Despite the large gains that Point England has made over the past decade, Russell expresses serious concern over a fundamental tension between the desire to move towards a ‘21st century’ digital education and the education system’s conventional focus on ‘paper and pencil’ literacies. Thus, while the school is committed to students achieving in the foundational domains of literacy and numeracy (‘because they have to’), Russell remains frustrated by the continued use of a narrow set of indicators for student success:

*There are no standardised assessments for the new education paradigm. So the stuff we do well at we can’t prove that we excel at nationally because we’re not given the opportunity to do so ... the kids need to know that they can celebrate and that it’s genuine, as genuine as the test that they didn’t do well at.<sup>41</sup>*

These concerns are by no means novel to observers of any post-industrial education system. The ability to strike a balance between the demand for high academic achievement and the development of other skill sets continues to elude most systems. Nevertheless, Point England’s story does illustrate several notable features of the New Zealand education system: its clear focus on student outcomes through the collection and analysis of student performance data; a real capacity to innovate at the school and classroom level; and the bottom-up nature of reform that characterises the education scene.<sup>42</sup>

## 2.1 Setting the scene

There are approximately 2,600 schools in New Zealand. In absolute terms, that’s a fairly small number, particularly when one considers that England alone administers approximately 24,000 schools.

40 Point England’s podcasts and vodcasts can be found on this page: <http://www.ptengland.school.nz/index.php?family=1,871>

41 Interview with Russell Burt

42 This representation was challenged by one of the chapter’s reviewers, who argued that New Zealand has a mix of both top-down and bottom-up drivers for reform. While not disputing the fact that Ministry initiatives and legislation have shaped reform trajectories, the high level of devolution to individual schools, combined with the government’s deliberate decision to limit the use of heavy-handed, top-down mandates, has created an environment wherein the pace of reform is significantly impacted by the buy-in of individual school boards.

**Table 2.2. Number of schools, pupils and teachers in the primary and secondary sector for 2006<sup>43</sup>**

Authority	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of teachers
State	2,141	647,443	50,125
State Integrated	327	83,423	
Private Sector	105	29,895	2,423
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,573</b>	<b>760,761</b>	<b>52,548</b>

Relative to the size of its school-going population, however, 2,600 is a large figure and one that is inflated by the logistics of providing education in sparsely populated rural areas.

Compulsory education in New Zealand lasts ten years, and is divided into three phases: primary (Years 1 to 6), intermediate (Years 7 to 8) and secondary (Years 9 to 13).<sup>44</sup> Most schools cater for a specific phase, although it is increasingly common to merge the intermediate years with primary or secondary education. In some rural areas, a single school, known as an area school, will provide all-through education.

The majority of students in New Zealand attend one of several types of schools in the public sector: ‘regular’ state schools; *Kura kaupapa Māori*, where teaching is in the Māori language (*te reo Māori*) and based on Māori culture and values; ‘integrated schools’ (former private schools that have been brought into the state system); ‘special schools’ for students with special education needs; and designated ‘character schools’, which espouse a particular ethos that is typically religious or philosophical in nature. The private sector is relatively small, with just 3.93 per cent of the student population (29,895 students) studying in independent schools.<sup>45</sup>

As noted, all state and state-integrated schools are given a decile rating based on the extent to which the school draws its stu-

dents from disadvantaged socio-economic communities. While the decile ranking was initially created to assist with the allocation of school funds, parents frequently use it as a short-hand indicator for school quality, leading to the stigmatisation of lower-decile schools (generally, deciles 1 to 3). The prevailing stereotype is that students at such institutions are less academically able, and that the schools are less effective owing to a lack of first-rate personnel. Perhaps due to this stigma, researchers have found that students tend to gravitate from low-decile schools towards high-decile schools whenever possible.<sup>46</sup>

In general, however, New Zealand parents report relatively high levels of satisfaction with the public school system. In 2006, a national survey of schools by the New Zealand Council for Education Research reported that 79 per cent of parents are generally happy with their children’s schools and a similar level was found in 2003; only 9 per cent of parents were critical of the quality of their children’s education.<sup>47</sup>

Further information on the operational and governance processes of the system can be found in the appendices.

## 2.2 History of reform

In August 1988, New Zealand launched the Tomorrow’s Schools agenda – a sweeping set of reforms which markedly reorgan-

43 ‘Education Statistics of New Zealand (2006)’: <http://www.educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/homepages/education-statistics/ed-stats-2006.html>.

44 Compulsory education ends at Year 10.

45 ‘New Zealand School Roll 2006’: [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/themes/national\\_school\\_roll\\_projections](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/themes/national_school_roll_projections).

46 E. Fiske and B. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A cautionary tale* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2000).

47 C. Wylie, ‘School Governance in New Zealand – How is it working?’ (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2007).

ised the system of education governance in a move to devolve power from a central and regional bureaucracy to each individual school and its community. The speed with which the New Zealand government dismantled and rebuilt its education system was unprecedented. The timeline for implementation was set at 14 months,<sup>48</sup> a period which for any large-scale bureaucracy constitutes an overnight change. What made the remarkable scale and pace of New Zealand's reforms possible?<sup>49</sup>

In 1984, amidst considerable economic uncertainty, a new Labour government under David Lange was elected to power with a broad mandate for reform. In the ensuing months, the government adopted the mantra of efficiency and equity, and no sector of public administration or service was spared its scrutiny. The Department of Education came under attack from marginalised parents and students, high-level bureaucrats and ministers from the powerful Department of Labour, and the Treasury, and from the media. In July 1987, Prime Minister Lange established a 'Task Force to Review Education Administration', with businessman Brian Picot as its chair.<sup>50</sup>

In May 1988, the Picot task force published its recommendations, the most significant of which was the elimination of all regional administrative bodies (i.e. the district education boards) as well as the Department of Education. The latter would be replaced by a notably smaller Ministry of Education whose primary responsibility would be to set national policy guidelines. All other management or administrative decisions would be devolved to a school-based level on the grounds that 'This is where there will be the strongest direct interest in the educational outcomes and the best information about local circumstances.'<sup>51</sup> The report's recommendations were readily adopted by Parliament, and work on implementation began immediately.

The months following these momentous reforms were politically tumultuous, as over twenty working groups scurried to translate the Tomorrow's Schools agenda into reality. Historians Graham and Susan Butterworth have noted that this rapid pace of change was made possible by an extraordinary confluence of political will among stakeholders, not to mention Prime Minister Lange's explicit support for the proposal. Strong public support for the idea of parent trustees at the school level also derailed critics' ability to mount an effective counter-campaign.

The initial post-reform period was deeply challenging for the education community. Despite the many barriers to successful implementation, research by government and independent bodies (for example, the New Zealand Council for Education Research) indicates that the education community has fully embraced the new governance system and has no desire to turn back. Although decentralisation policies are not uncommon among national educational systems (England itself underwent a similar policy trajectory in the late 1980s), New Zealand is one of the few, perhaps the only, nation that has steadfastly resisted reversing its devolved model of governance. While the Ministry of Education has reinstated some measure of operational function in recent years (for example, it has taken back responsibility for the provision of special education services), the locus of administration remains firmly with individual schools.

As a final note, the ambitious scope of the Tomorrow's Schools agenda often overshadows a second and equally important wave of reform in the 1990s. Lyall Perris, former Acting Education Secretary for New Zealand (1995–6), argues that this second wave was prompted by the recognition that the Tomorrow's Schools agenda had less to do with actually improving student learning than with

48 From the date the *Tomorrow's Schools'* white paper was published (August 1988), to the deadline for the closure of the existing Department of Education (30 September 1989).

49 What follows is necessarily a brief, and thus incomplete, summary of the events that led to the development and implementation of the Tomorrow's Schools agenda. For a more complete discussion of the complex (and serendipitous) interplay between stakeholders, see G. Butterworth & S. Butterworth, *Reforming Education: The New Zealand experience 1984–1996* (Palmerstone North: Dunmore Press, 1998); Fiske and Ladd (2000); and L. Perris, 1998. *Implementing Education Reforms in New Zealand: 1987–1997*, Education Reform and Management Series, Vol.1, No. 2 (1998).

50 G. Hawke, *Education reform: the New Zealand experience* (Auckland: New Zealand Trade Consortium Working Paper No. 20, 2002), p.5 points out that Picot was no novice to the public sector, 'having had experience in public policy debates through the New Zealand Planning Council and who had experience in the education sector through school level governance including contact with education of Māori'. Nonetheless, Picot's appointment was seen by some analysts (such as Perris (1998)) as a clear signal of the the government's intention to deliver education from a standpoint of efficiency.

51 B. Picot, *Administering for Excellence: Effective administration in education* (Wellington: The Task Force, 1988).

improving the efficiency of the education system's management structure. Consequently, from 1991 to 1994, the government introduced a national qualifications framework which aimed to close the division between vocational and academic education and overhauled the national curriculum.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, the past decade has been a relatively quiet period for education reform. While the Ministry of Education has adjusted some policies (for instance, rewriting student admission policies to ensure greater equity in its choice system), the dominant framework has remained the same. Currently, the most notable reform concerns the introduction of a new national qualification for secondary students, the National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA).

### 2.3 New Zealand in the literature

In the international literature, New Zealand is used to argue for and against the creation of a marketised system of choice and competition. Advocates argue that market reforms within the education sector substantially improved education performance, expanded cost-efficiency and increased parental voice.<sup>53</sup> Critics, on the other hand, claim that unchecked competition between schools has produced higher rates of racial and economic segregation, and correspondingly increased polarisation between schools.<sup>54</sup>

A review of existing evidence reveals, however, that there is no conclusive evidence that choice policies have either raised educational standards or increased school segregation in New Zealand.<sup>55</sup> At worst, research suggests some increase in segregation, although government steps to address this issue (through increased control over school enrolment policies) may curb or reverse this trend. At best, the Tomorrow's Schools agenda has certainly given parents a greater voice within the sys-

tem, although the extent to which this has occurred is debatable.<sup>56</sup>

New Zealand generally performs well in international studies, achieving scores significantly above the international (PIRLS, TIMSS) and OECD (PISA) mean. Examples of particularly strong performances include:

- The results from PISA 2006, in which only two countries outperform New Zealand in science, three countries in reading and five countries in mathematics. New Zealand's performance was similar in each of these domains to that of countries such as Canada and Australia and was significantly better than that of the United Kingdom.
- The PISA 2003 reading tests, in which 16.3 per cent of New Zealand students performed at the top proficiency level – the highest level of all participating countries. Similarly, in 2006 both New Zealand and Finland had a larger proportion of students performing at the highest proficiency level in science than the other 55 countries in the study.

Extended analysis of international and national data, however, reveals serious achievement gaps. New Zealand has a high proportion of students in the lowest levels of proficiency when compared to countries with similar average student performance. More pointedly, as Figure 2.1 illustrates, students from Māori and Pasifika backgrounds are consistently over-represented in the lower achievement bands of schools, *regardless of the school's socio-economic composition*. Additionally, Figure 2.2 illustrates that while the percentage of school-leavers with no formal attainment has been steadily decreasing for all ethnic groups, Māori and Pasifika students still underperform.

The performance of the Māori and Pasifika populations is of particular concern as population growth projections

52 Note that these reforms built on a major consultative curriculum review that was carried out by the Department of Education in 1986–7. The Tomorrow's Schools reform agenda, however, delayed the completion of the curriculum redevelopment.

53 See, for example, M. Harrison, *Education Matters: Governments, markets and New Zealand schools* (Wellington: Education Forum, 2004).

54 See, for example, Fiske and Ladd (2000). Note, though, that this particular publication has itself been heavily criticised.

55 See N. LaRocque, 'School Choice: Lessons from New Zealand', Briefing Paper No. 12, Education Forum (2005).

56 Ibid

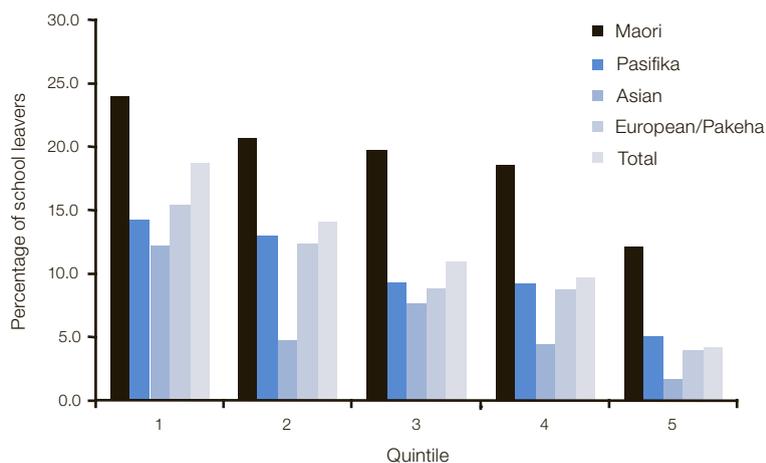
### How do the socio-economic profiles of the different school deciles compare?

A 2001 comparison of the socio-economic profiles of schools at different deciles reveals significant variation: 'On average, over half of parents in decile 1 school catchments are without a school qualification, compared to less than a fifth of parents in decile 10 school catchment areas. Forty-two per cent of parents in decile 1 school catchments received income support in the year preceding the Census, compared to 7 per cent for decile 10 school catchment areas. Eighty-four per cent of students in decile 1 schools are Māori or Pacific Islands students, compared with just 5 per cent in decile 10 schools.'<sup>57</sup>

### Is there a correlation between deciles and academic performance?

Given that socio-economic status is one of the strongest indicators of prior attainment, and that decile ratings reflect the school's average socio-economic composition, there is a strong correlation between school deciles and academic achievement. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, students from the lowest quintile (quintile 1 = decile 1 and 2) schools are four times as likely to leave school with little or no formal attainment as compared to students from the top quintile (quintile 5 = decile 9 and 10) schools.

**Figure 2.1 Percentage of school leavers with little or no formal attainment, by ethnic group and school quintile (2006)**



indicate that these groups are growing at a significantly higher rate than the Pākehā (European New Zealanders) population (29 per cent and 59 per cent respectively, compared to the Pākehā growth rate of 5 per cent). These groups also have significantly younger age structures than the Pākehā population, which

will have an impact on the ethnic composition of New Zealand's school-age population.<sup>58</sup>

These ethnic disparities extend to student engagement as well. The recent 2006 State of Education official document reported that Māori students are at least three times as likely to be stood down, sus-

<sup>57</sup> Cited in J. Hattie, *Schools like Mine: Cluster analysis of New Zealand schools*, Technical Report 14, Project asTTile (University of Auckland, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> Statistics New Zealand, *National Ethnic Population Projections: 2001 (base) – 2021 update (2005)*: [http://www.stats.govt.nz/store/2006/07/national-ethnic-population-projections-01\(base\)%E2%80%93update-hotp.htm](http://www.stats.govt.nz/store/2006/07/national-ethnic-population-projections-01(base)%E2%80%93update-hotp.htm)

pendent, excluded or expelled<sup>59</sup> as their Pākehā counterparts, and four times as likely to be frequent truants. Māori students are also 2.8 times more likely to leave school early.<sup>60</sup>

Accordingly, New Zealand has made the achievement of equity a fundamental cornerstone of the education system. The Ministry of Education's statement of intent for 2007–12 reflects this priority: 'The Ministry of Education's overall mission is to raise educational achievement and reduce disparity.'<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the significant majority of our interviewees identified equity as the most pressing challenge facing the system.

To address the equity challenges faced by the Māori and Pasifika community, the Ministry of Education has developed a dedicated education strategy for each community. Both the Māori and Pasifika strategies explicitly recognise the needs and aspirations of each community. For instance, the overarching strategic outcome for the Māori education strategy is 'Māori students enjoying educational success as Māori',<sup>62</sup> which includes the expectation that the education system should support Māori learners to contribute as Māori to *Tē Ao Māori* (the

Māori world) as well as to wider society and the world.

What is particularly unique about both strategies is the way in which each community's culture has been integrated into the learning process and curriculum. Thus, the Māori education strategy is built around the Māori concept of 'ako'.

*Ako* means teaching and learning where the educator is also learning and where educators' practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. It is grounded in the principle of reciprocity where both the teacher and the learner give and receive.<sup>63</sup>

Two central dimensions of *ako* are that culture counts ('knowing where students come from and building on what students bring with them') and that each stakeholder brings to the table valuable knowledge and expertise that can be used to build productive partnerships. Consequently, considerable effort has been made to engage not just Māori students and their parents, but also other Māori *whānau*<sup>64</sup> and *iwi*<sup>65</sup> organisations. The Ministry has also sought to improve the capacity and capability of all staff in working with Māori so as to ensure that the goals and values of the Māori education strategy are embedded

59 'Students on stand-down are not allowed to attend school for a period of up to five days. Following stand-downs, students return automatically to school. Students who are suspended are not allowed to attend school until the board of trustees decides the outcome at a suspension meeting. Students who are excluded are not allowed to return to the school and must enrol elsewhere. Only students under the age of 16 can be excluded. If they are over the age of 16, they would receive similar treatment but it would be classified as an expulsion' (Ministry of Education, New Zealand State of Education: 2006, pp. 92–4).

60 In New Zealand, 15-year-olds are granted early exemption if i) it is judged that the student is unlikely to gain further benefit from the available schools; and ii) students are moving on to a training programme or to employment. While early exemption is intended to facilitate the student's progression to a different pathway, it can represent a 'Get out of jail free' card for disengaged youth and, presumably, hard-pressed schools.

61 Ministry of Education, Statement of Intent: 2007–2012, p. 13.

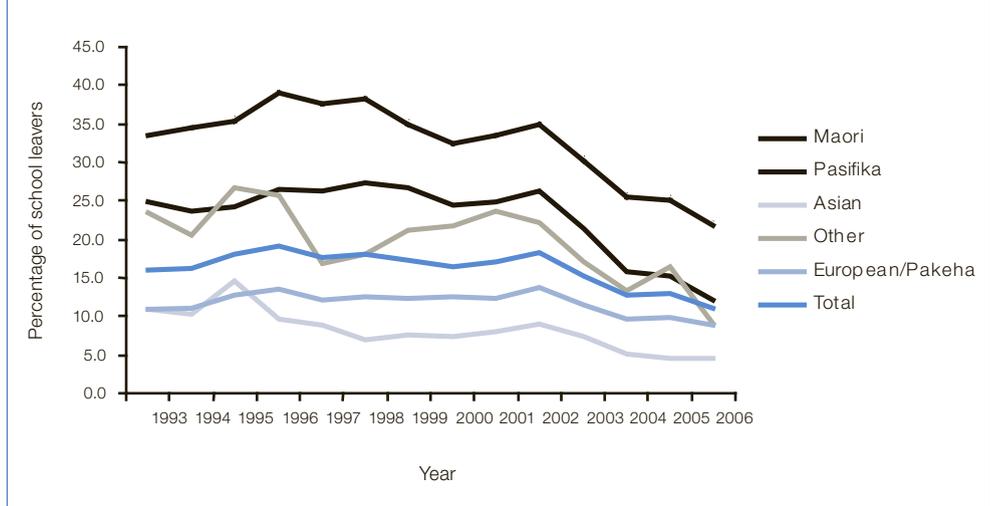
62 Ministry of Education, Ka Hikitia: Managing for Success: The Draft Māori Education Strategy for 2008–2012 (2007).

63 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

64 Defined by the Ministry as: 'Those related by close kinship ties or united by close relationships akin to the bonds of family. As used here it includes *whakapapa whānau* (family by lineage) but does not exclude *kaupapa whānau* (family through association, such as work colleagues).' <http://kahikitia.minedu.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/C0CCCCBB-6C4C-4D38-8EB2-E972DOCE1325/0/FinalKaHikitiaGlossaryandReferences.pdf>

65 Tribe.

Figure 2.2: Percentage of school-leavers with little or no formal attainment by ethnic group (1993–2006)



within the larger planning framework and operational culture.

## 2.4 Findings

### 2.4.1 Focusing on student outcomes

Recent reforms have focused heavily on the importance of data in informing practice. The Education Standards Act of 2001, for instance, required every school board to collect and analyse individual and aggregate student performance data, to set improvement targets and goals, and to report on progress towards achieving those goals. This focus on detailed, comprehensive assessment data was unanimously embraced by our interviewees, although they acknowledged that analytical sophistication had yet to be achieved.

Part of the problem, interviewees noted, was that New Zealand has no external, system-wide assessment of student learning (i.e. summative assessment) until Year 11 (age 16) when students take the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), the national qualification for senior secondary students.<sup>66</sup> Prior to the NCEA, schools are not required to share the results of their internal assessments of student learning with the Ministry.

The closest thing New Zealand has to a system of national assessment for primary and intermediate students is the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP), which assesses Year 4 and Year 8 students. Using random samples of students, NEMP measures achievement across all curriculum areas (including reading, writing and mathematics) in four-year cycles to give a picture of progress across time. Information on student motivation and attitudes is also collected. As the focus of NEMP is on growth in students' educational achievement *across time and at a national level*, information on individual students and schools are not reported and information on teachers is not collected. Thus, while NEMP is capable of

producing extremely rich snapshots of overall student performance at a particular point of time in the education system, it can only provide broad demographic information<sup>67</sup> on who is underperforming, where, and under what circumstances.

Another major assessment tool in use is the Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle).<sup>68</sup> AsTTle allows teachers to create tests to gauge individual students' achievement against curriculum levels, objectives and population norms, and was developed with the concept of evidence-based practice in mind. After tests are scored, analyses can be conducted on the individual, class and school level to enable both teachers and students to identify gaps between current and targeted performance, so that teachers can gauge the extent of student learning at each step.

Nevertheless, as with much of the New Zealand system, the use of asTTle remains voluntary. The Ministry acknowledged that they were keen to see further adoption (at the time of writing it was estimated that only 30 per cent of schools currently use this tool). At the same time, however, the Ministry firmly believes that individual schools are best placed to identify the tools needed to raise their students' achievement. An official argued: 'Increasingly, we give schools more sophisticated tools to use, but we are not going to tell them which to use or how they should use them . . . unlike in the UK, we have chosen to use different tools for different purposes rather than making one assessment serve different purposes.'

School flexibility to conduct their own assessments and to choose their own tools appears to have created mixed outcomes. On the one hand, autonomy has fostered extensive curricular and pedagogical innovation. One principal, for instance, referred to his teachers as 'curriculum developers', a term that would hardly ever be used to describe English teachers. This autonomy has also provided the impetus

<sup>66</sup> Even then, not all students enter for NCEA as it is not a compulsory qualification.

<sup>67</sup> Demographic subgroups are defined by ethnicity, gender, language used at home, school type, school size, school socio-economic status, community size and zone.

<sup>68</sup> asTTle is one of several assessment tools being developed by the Ministry that provide national benchmarks against which schools can measure themselves.

for developing strong expert-practitioner collaborations in various schooling improvement initiatives. These collaborations typically bring external researchers (generally from the local university) alongside individual school leaders to formulate evidence-informed practices and to build capacity within the school community to work with data.

“ Respondents stressed that the objective of assessment should always be to inform student learning; testing, they argued, should never be a tool for simplistic national judgements of local school conditions ”

On the other hand, the lack of a national reporting system means that there is no guarantee that schools are collecting, analysing and utilising information in the most effective manner. Indeed, our respondents frequently expressed frustration that schools excelled at collecting data but failed – sometimes dismally – at interpreting the information collected. Furthermore, the absence of system-wide assessment prior to the NCEA (and the subsequent public release of school and national data) removes the potential for comparative analysis to catalyse educational improvement. Practitioners interviewed from the primary sector were therefore far less likely to identify national standards as a force for reform than practitioners working in the secondary sector. Ministry officials also reported that minimal data collection on a national level made it difficult for the government to effectively track student progress and develop interventions.

Our interviewees varied significantly in what they thought needed to be done to address these weaknesses. Responses ranged from those desiring some form of national assessment from the very start of primary school to those adamantly

opposed to any kind of testing during the primary phases. One primary school principal, for example, vehemently asserted that ‘I have a problem with the word standards ... the phrases “High standards for all” [and] “No child left behind” send a shiver up my spine.’

Despite these differences, interviewees uniformly expressed strong opposition to the development of a high-stakes testing system. Interestingly enough, many interviewees were well briefed on the perverse incentives England’s high-stakes assessment and reporting framework have created, and were not hesitant to use this as an example of what they wished to avoid. Respondents stressed that the objective of assessment should always be to inform student learning; testing, they argued, should never be a tool for simplistic national judgements of local school conditions. There was a broad-based reluctance to see education reduced to a narrow set of easily testable measures and to sacrifice the considerable curriculum autonomy enjoyed by individual schools.

#### 2.4.2 Increasing transparency and accountability

Research by NZCER (New Zealand Council for Educational Research) suggests that the planning and reporting framework introduced in the Education Standards Act 2001 has generated ‘positive shifts in awareness of the intended outcomes for the planning and reporting process ... schools are all now setting goals with the learning needs of their students in mind.’<sup>69</sup> Despite these gains, interviews with a broad cross-section of stakeholders suggest that these changes have yet to be fully embedded within the system, and that New Zealand may still have a way to go before the accountability levers are operating evenly across the system.

It was therefore not uncommon to hear conflicting assessments of New Zealand’s progress in increasing accountability. For

69 R. Hipkins, C. Joyce and C. Wylie, ‘School Planning and Reporting in Action: The Early Years of the New Framework’ (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2007).

instance, one education official mused: 'We're meant to be a tight, loose, tight system. Tight goals, loose means, tight ends. The problem is, we're really operating more on a tight, loose, loose level ... We haven't quite come to terms with the task of holding schools accountable.' Other officials, however, strongly disagreed with this representation, drawing on the promising changes being engendered by the planning and reporting framework.

Within the current accountability framework, school principals and staff are held accountable to their board of trustees, who are in turn accountable to the Ministry and subject to regular review by the Education Review Office (ERO) as well as to parents and local communities. Each of these elements will be examined in turn.

#### *Trustee boards*

Studies indicate that there are often significant disparities in capability among school boards, with especially small and lower-decile schools confronted with challenges in recruiting suitable board candidates. For instance, the 2006 NZCER survey of secondary school principals found that respondents at lower-decile schools were half as likely as their mid- to high-decile counterparts to believe that their board of trustees had the expertise and skills necessary to fulfil their governing role.<sup>70</sup> Another study revealed that boards experience particular difficulty in monitoring curriculum delivery and student achievement, as well as in developing coherent policies for reporting to parents.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, despite high ambitions, a lack of expertise may render boards reliant on the guidance of school principals, diminishing their ability to provide checks on the performance of professional staff. Several of our interviewees pressed this point. One former principal noted: 'As a principal it was my job to do the work and make it look as if the trustees had done it ... I had some great boards, but a lot of them had no idea, and yet they were very interested

and very keen. They brought a new perspective into the school, but they don't have the time to commit to it.'

Nonetheless, where highly capable boards are able to exert pressure they can be important levers for accountability and change. Another principal, referring to his school's schooling improvement initiative, remarked more positively: 'The reason we've done what we've done is that a group of us on the board had the passion to do it, so we[']ve done it ... they may not be driving the bus, but they're close to the front of it.'

Despite lingering concerns over capacity and capability, a recent report on school governance concluded that few if any problems with boards are 'so deep, widespread, intransigent or costly to student learning that one would want to either move to another form of school governance or ditch the governance layer completely'.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, officials at the New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) expressed confidence that boards of trustees are enhancing their ability to exercise accountability, and that concerns with the ability of school boards to analyse and use data was board-specific rather than nationwide.

#### *The Education Review Office*

The ERO inspects individual schools on average once every three years. While there is a baseline of key indicators that the ERO consistently investigates, the focus of each review differs according both to ERO-identified national interests and to the schools' self-identified areas for improvement.<sup>73</sup> Where performance has been deemed poor, post-review assistance is made available and supplementary reviews are conducted within a year. Currently, about 15 per cent of schools reviewed in each cycle undergo supplementary reviews, and within this subset only 3 to 4 per cent of schools are truly struggling.<sup>74</sup>

To date, there is no hard evidence as to whether or not inspections work. In gener-

70 Wylie (2007).

71 V. Robinson and H. Timperley, 'Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara: Final Evaluation Report' (Auckland: University of Auckland, School of Education, 2004).

72 Wylie (2007).

73 For an in-depth explanation of the ERO review process, see the following ERO documents: 'Framework for Reviews' and 'Evaluation Indicators for Education Reviews in Schools', available at <http://ero.govt.nz/ero/publishing.nsf/Content/Review%20Process%20-%20Schools>.

74 From interview with Education Review Office representative.

al, however, respondents (and especially principals) were somewhat dismissive of the ERO's ability to hold schools to account and to bolster educational improvement. Common critiques (which will be familiar to English educators) include: (i) that review criteria rely too heavily on processes rather than outcomes; (ii) that review criteria act as a managerial checklist rather than as a constructive evaluation of school performance; and (iii) that changing foci of inspections detract schools from developing sustainable programmes for improvement. As one principal noted: 'There is a lot of game playing ... when you know you have an ERO visit coming, you ring the last five schools, ask them what they were looking at, what they found, and then you go and fix those things for a start.' Other concerns dealt with the consequences of an ERO review, with some respondents arguing that there was a lack of rigorous intervention if schools received a poor review.<sup>75</sup>

Some respondents did, however, acknowledge that the ERO's reports can serve as a wake-up call for poorly performing schools. In fact, Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO)<sup>76</sup> – a highly successful local improvement initiative – was developed as a response to a 1996 ERO review that heavily criticised the quality of school governance and student performance in that district. Furthermore, internal research by ERO suggests that 90 per cent of schools say that 'the impact of the ERO review and report was high or very high', with only 10 per cent of schools saying that the 'review provided little impetus for change and the recommendations did not appear to have any great significance for the school'.<sup>77</sup> It appears, therefore, that while some ERO reviews can galvanise low-attaining schools, the benefits from routine, three-year review cycles of all schools are more contested. It is questionable, for example, whether ERO's focus on a narrow band of

indicators can successfully provide schools *already* meeting national targets with the support they require in order to further raise the bar. Unsurprisingly, one principal of a rapidly improving school underscored this incapacity:

*ERO comes in and basically carries out a thing that is pretty much like an audit and gives you some summative information, but really refuses to hold with you any meaningful learning conversations. And you don't get the same people coming back to you next time, so that there's no ongoing relationship so you can have a learning relationship ... And they don't share information with you from other contexts so that you can learn ... it's a really frustrating process. It's not a learning method at all.*

#### *Reporting to parents*

Prior to the introduction of the planning and reporting framework, there were few guidelines on the precise form that reporting to students and their parents on the achievement of individual students should take. In 2000, for example, one study analysed school reports to parents from 156 schools in New Zealand. Of these schools, only 12 included information relating student performance to the official curriculum levels, and half included no information on achievement relative to any implicit or explicit standard. With few exceptions, the majority of students in these schools were above-average achievers.<sup>78</sup>

Two recent national surveys of practitioners and trustees suggest, however, that the situation has improved. For instance, two-thirds of primary schools now report the use of clear and measurable goals, and a quarter of primary schools have put processes in place for discussing planning with and reporting results to parents.<sup>79</sup> Yet interviews with stakeholders suggest that there are still barriers to transparent report-

<sup>75</sup> Under the Education Act, the Secretary of Education retains the powers to intervene and enforce and can act on the advice in the ERO's reports.

<sup>76</sup> SEMO's work will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>77</sup> ERO, Annual Report 2006.

<sup>78</sup> R. Peddie & J. A. Hattie, *Evaluation of the Assessment for Better Learning Professional Development Programs (ABel)* (Report #703) (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2000).

<sup>79</sup> Hipkins et al. (2007).

ing. The three most commonly identified barriers are: (i) lack of understanding of the type of information parents expected; (ii) teachers' unwillingness to provide information that could be used to criticise their performance; and (iii) reluctance to trust parents' responses to information about their children's underperformance.

Another recent study indicates that the problem of developing an appropriate policy for reporting to parents may be exacerbated by technical difficulties. Robinson and Timperley found that teachers were, in fact, committed to providing parents clear and honest reporting<sup>80</sup> but lacked the tools to assure full clarity and comprehensiveness. For example, some teachers regarded curriculum levels as too broad to serve as an efficacious guideline for student progress.<sup>81</sup> In the New Zealand curriculum, each level spans 18+ months of progress; there is therefore no straightforward correlation between attainment and age.

According to the ERO representative, the rationale for these broad levels (while not necessarily advocating them herself) is that it helps to 'emphasise that students within any class will legitimately be working across different levels'. Some argue, however, that the lack of a clear age-related standard makes accountability more contestable. As an official from the New Zealand School Trustees Association remarked: 'For the run-of-the-mill parent it is very confusing and you really don't know until your child sits NCEA (age 16) where they sit nationally unless the school is very, very good at using the data and pushing it down to parents and clearly defining what the data means.'

The need to generate comprehensive policies for reporting to parents is particularly crucial when one considers the fact that the move to school-based management in 1989 was largely motivated by parental dissatisfaction over the unresponsiveness of schools to their concerns and preferences.<sup>82</sup> If it is indeed desirable for

parents as well as local school communities to share responsibility for student (and school) achievement, then words like 'honesty' and 'clarity' need to move beyond discourse to practice.

As the 'Telling it how it is' case study overleaf illustrates,<sup>83</sup> when a strong framework for a free flow of information between parents and the school is developed, the results can be transformative.

#### 2.4.3 Building collaboration

As a result of New Zealand's radical approach to school-based management, each school can be said to operate as a mini fiefdom. Under such circumstances, collaboration between schools is not just about the transfer of good practice and the development of professional learning communities, popular as those goals are in current literature. Collaboration is also about the urgent need to build economies of scale (two rural schools sharing teaching staff, for example).

The issue of collaboration, however, appears to unsettle principals and boards of trustees, who remain apprehensive of any initiative that may result in an erosion of school autonomy. As early as 1998/1999, for instance, the government, in a review of school-based governance, proposed the development of 'learning clusters' to enhance teaching practice and facilitate professional development. But the response from school leaders was unenthusiastic, and the proposal was quietly shelved.

This defensiveness is even more apparent when the issue of school closures (particularly relevant now as New Zealand confronts falling rolls) is raised. As one NZSTA official explained, by making schools more responsive to their surrounding communities, local ownership has increased. As these new, strong ties between schools and community become sacrosanct, local stakeholders exhibit a readiness to fight tooth and nail to keep their schools open – even when it is not

<sup>80</sup> Defined here as referencing student achievement to national curriculum levels.

<sup>81</sup> Robinson and Timperley (2004).

<sup>82</sup> cf. Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988.

<sup>83</sup> We are grateful to Brian Annan of the Te Puna o te Mātauranga office in Manukau for the use of this excerpt

### Telling it how it is: widening and integrating responsibility for solving underachievement problems.

Several researchers were contracted to track and to help reform the SEMO schooling improvement initiative. During the first year of their review, these researchers maintained a low profile, watching the way the project unfolded. At the end of that year, however, they delivered some hard-hitting messages. School leaders, they insisted, were avoiding the difficult task of talking about underachievement problems with the targeted students and their families and teachers.

This team of researchers didn't do what most people typically think researchers do, which is to hand over their data to those confronting the problem and leave them to it. They were experts at linking research findings to specific development strategies. They sat down and talked with the school leaders about the findings until everyone understood what they meant. They then helped those people transfer the findings into practice.

One principal, for instance, returned to her school and persuaded its staff and board of trustees that they were hiding the truth about low reading levels from the targeted students and their families. They agreed with her view. At the next parent-teacher interviews, targeted students and their families were offered reports that compared the students' reading levels with national norms. That night, the school hall was full of upset and angry parents and targeted students who found out for the first time that they were two to three years behind where they should have been.

As difficult as that night was for everyone involved, the principal cleverly shifted ownership of the underachievement problem from the governors and managers of the school to students, teachers and parents. It was a master stroke in distributing responsibility for solving the problems. Parents, eager to reverse trends in their children's underachievement, flocked to the school to learn how they could help their children catch up in reading. The principal reported that there were more parents in the school over the next three weeks than ever before and that teachers were more willing to try new ways of doing things. Additionally, she reported that a lot of bravado among targeted students unable to read was replaced with a genuine desire to learn.

necessarily in the best interests of their students to do so.

Furthermore, at higher levels of national oversight and review, government policies do not always stimulate collaboration and the consolidation of resources. Under the current funding scheme, for instance, schools below a certain student size receive a block grant. If, however, two small schools were to merge and their numbers cross the designated threshold, then the unified school would cease to be funded by a block grant but by a per-pupil formula. The result would be an allocation of funds significantly lower than the amount received as two separate schools.

Even 'soft' collaboration on best practice is not as widespread as it could be. Members of a Ministry's schooling improvement team

expressed concern that voluntary collaboration between schools is rare. Currently, the Ministry relies on financial incentives to encourage schools to build learning networks for professional development, to partner on schooling improvement initiatives and to nurture other innovative collaborative frameworks. But once the funding stops, so too do most of the collaborative practices. Ad hoc collaboration, when nourished only by piecemeal funding schemes, does not become an established feature of educational practice – an important message for policy-makers in England.

At the same time, all stakeholders interviewed felt very strongly that a top-down approach (i.e. legislation) would create a backlash among practitioners. As a member of the Ministry's schooling improve-

ment team noted: ‘Several overseas countries have tried that approach [top-down mandating and monitoring] but it has only had a small positive impact over a few years and then leveled off. A better way to go in New Zealand where big sticks have been avoided is to build on some of the learning processes that have helped make some of the schooling improvement initiatives successful.’<sup>84</sup>

Additionally, independent researchers argue that practitioners need to take ownership of collaboration in order to achieve wide-ranging success. As Timperley et al. emphasise: ‘When professionals have high levels of operational autonomy, imposed solutions rarely work. Treating school leaders and teachers as passive recipients of others’ expertise, who will faithfully implement what is required, ignores the fact that their theories and emotions will shape how they perceive and utilize this knowledge.’<sup>85</sup>

The models of collaboration that the Ministry, supported by stakeholders, is therefore pushing are predicated on the buy-in of school leaders and the local community. The Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO), for instance, began as a Ministry of Education intervention aimed at raising student achievement within the designated district. Although SEMO was one of several initiatives coordinated under the Ministry’s national school support policy, it was unique in its commitment to a three-way partnership between Ministry officials, district schools and local communities, which was, in turn, supported by a group of researchers from the University of Auckland.

Since its inception in 1998, SEMO has gradually evolved and produced new partnerships among participating schools. One of the more successful new multi-school collaborations is the Analysis and Use of Student Achievement Data (AUSAD), which claims as its core philosophy ‘The

use of data to inform and improve teaching and learning’. SEMO has also yielded impressive gains in achievement over time, as reading assessment gaps vis-à-vis national norms have narrowed within just four school terms. In speaking with the leaders of the SEMO and AUSAD initiatives, it was clear that the collaborative network had been sustained primarily through the unrelenting dedication of each individual school partner.

The national problem, however, is one of replication; SEMO’s lifespan and achievements remain largely anomalous in New Zealand. How can the lessons and successes of SEMO be expanded across the national scene? Of central concern here is whether the Ministry-supported, bottom-up style of collaboration is capable of meeting this challenge. On the one hand, New Zealand’s small size certainly makes a bottom-up approach predicated on high levels of practitioner ownership possible. It might additionally be argued that the current system is well poised to nurture the best collaborative networks, which are often fluid and constantly evolving (as in the case of SEMO) to meet new targets and needs.

On the other hand, if consistency and speed are of utmost importance, then a more structured framework of collaboration might be desirable. As yet, however, stakeholders have been unable to reach a consensus on the terms and conditions of such a model. Our interviewees strongly resisted the idea of commercial involvement in the education system; the trusts and academies route that England has taken was anathema to them (it is, of course, also anathema to many in England, where the government has been less concerned about keeping all stakeholders on board).

2.4.4 Developing an effective workforce  
Research suggests that 30 per cent of variance in student performance can be attrib-

84 B. Annan, *Evaluation Framework for Schooling Improvement in New Zealand* (2007).

85 H. Timperley, B. Annan and V. Robinson, *Successful Approaches to Innovation That Have Impacted on Student Learning in New Zealand* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2006), p. 7.

uted to the quality of teaching that students receive – the second largest source of variance after student ability and prior achievement.<sup>86</sup> Since teacher quality can be measurably influenced, the New Zealand government has devoted significant resources to improving both initial training and continuing professional development. Despite these efforts, there was near-unanimous agreement among interviewees that the availability of effective teachers, both in terms of total supply and the actual quality of teaching provided, was the most pressing challenge within the education system. Teacher shortages are particularly acute in the secondary sector, where vacancies have increased by more than 10 per cent in the past five years.<sup>87</sup>

There is a panoply of contributing factors behind this dilemma. For pre-service training alone, respondents cited concerns about the lack of clear standards in training across institutions; the use of a one-year transformation course for students with other degrees; the failure of training institutions to recruit candidates with the appropriate qualities; and the focus on processes rather than on the candidates' actual performance in a classroom. As one interviewee pessimistically remarked: 'All one needs to do to qualify is show up for class for three years running, and that's it.' All of these concerns will be familiar to English head teachers.

Interviewees also noted that teaching had declined in social status as an occupation and was less attractive to bright graduates. Some attributed this decline to their belief that 'the remuneration structure and career pathway is out of kilter with other graduate careers'. Others pointed to the embryonic nature of the education sector's discourse on professionalism. The New Zealand Teachers Council Code of Ethics,<sup>88</sup> for example, was not developed until 2003. Consequently, most interviewees disputed whether teachers were living up to the ideal of a professional standard.

Our interviews revealed substantial support for the idea that teachers should negotiate better pay in return for broad assent to a more rigorous definition of professionalism centred on:

- Acting on evidence (the teacher as life-long learner)
- Accountability for student performance
- Accepting flexible remuneration more closely linked to performance

While the first item listed above is represented in the Code of Ethics, items two and three are not. Similarly, a review of the Professional Standards for Secondary Teachers<sup>89</sup> – the criteria for quality teaching, negotiated as part of the collective agreements between the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) and the Ministry of Education – does not mention anything about teachers being accountable for student learning.

Interviewees argued that it was illogical for boards and principals to be accountable for teaching standards when they have little authority over the teachers themselves. They expressed concern, however, that the main teaching unions would block the development of a stronger professional accountability framework within which schools would have more capacity to hire, discipline and reward. Firing a teacher on grounds of incompetence was considered next to impossible; poorly performing teachers were often shuffled around the system or shut out. Even a former president of the secondary teachers' union acknowledged that procedures for tackling underperforming teachers were 'arcane'.

Interestingly enough, we observed considerable consensus among stakeholders when they were discussing personal opinions rather than attempting to represent the public positions of their organisations. For example, an official at a key stakeholder organisation, when asked what were the

86 J. Hattie, 'Influences on Achievement' (1997): <http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/edu/staff/jhattie>.

87 In response to these shortages, the Ministry has been heavily recruiting from abroad. This status quo appears to have produced another problem: that of teachers whose grasp of English for the medium of instruction is inadequate. While acknowledging that the hiring of foreign teachers could be construed as a sensitive issue, interviewees expressed conviction that the mastery of the English language was crucial, particularly when interacting with an audience of young people who may be disinclined to learn.

88 The four tenets of the code are commitment to learners, commitment parents/guardians and family/whanau, commitment to society and commitment to the profession. <http://www.teacherscouncil.govt.nz/ethics/code.stm>.

89 <http://www.ppta.org.nz/internal.asp?CategoryID=100600&SubCatID=100601&SubCat1ID=100616>

challenges being faced by the New Zealand education system, remarked: ‘Technically, I should say funding, since that’s one of the things my organisation lobbies for. But funding really isn’t that much of an issue.’ This discrepancy between public dogma and personal belief could perhaps open the door to open, honest dialogue based on solutions that benefit the students, rather than individual stakeholders.

The need for effective teachers is, unsurprisingly, particularly acute among lower-decile schools, as other drivers for improvement (pressure from parents, boards of trustees) are often less likely to be present. Practitioners who worked with disadvantaged populations, principals and senior managers all emphasised the need to expand teachers’ abilities to develop and maintain relationships with children and their families. Teaching in these schools was seen to go beyond a neutral exchange of knowledge and to be rooted in an emotional context. As one principal explained: ‘At our level, our students aren’t just disengaged from school; they’re disengaged from the entire meaning of society.’

## 2.5 Reflections

Although the education system in New Zealand operates on a significantly smaller scale than that in England, there are considerable similarities between the challenges (structural, governance, equity, workforce). The clearest point of divergence lies in each central government’s approach to confronting these problems.

In New Zealand, the government has deliberately eschewed a top-down approach to reform. While there are national frameworks, schools and professionals are rarely required to adopt any one particular strategy. The highly voluntary nature of this ‘tight, loose, tight’ system is, in the words of a former official, ‘Our greatest strength and greatest weakness’. On one hand, the flexibility accorded

schools does appear to have yielded a high level of innovation and productive risk-taking at the local level – a far cry from the highly prescriptive, micro-managed initiatives that recent British governments have propounded. Professionals have also been accorded a fair degree of autonomy in the domains of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, which has in turn imbued in them a strong sense of ownership over the reform process. Where local knowledge and expertise have been successfully utilised, the outcomes (as demonstrated in the SEMO partnership) have been very promising

“ The need for effective teachers is, unsurprisingly, particularly acute among lower-decile schools, as other drivers for improvement (pressure from parents, boards of trustees) are often less likely to be present ”

On the other hand, the atomised nature of New Zealand’s school system means that system-wide change occurs at a slow pace. Collaborative frameworks have yet to be systematically built into daily practices, and efforts to develop such frameworks are likely to be hindered by the fierce protection of local autonomy. While students can technically vote with their feet, institutional accountability nonetheless remains weak in terms of the degree of information shared with parents, students and the government. The push towards using assessment data to drive student learning is extremely positive. The challenge now is to take the data-informed movement one step further by developing better mechanisms for reporting.

Certain components of reform also appear to stimulate positive change only within specific socio-economic contexts. Effective and informed pressure from parents and boards of trustees, for example, was a strong factor primarily in higher-

decile schools. (Parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds exert less pressure, in part because they do not have the cultural capital or information required to negotiate the system.) Change-inducing competition between schools also seemed prevalent only among higher-decile schools, as well as in select urban areas characterised by a shortage of pupils relative to the number of schools. This status quo has in turn raised concerns that high-decile competition may reinforce conservatism, in that fear of unnerving aspiring parents may stifle a school's potential for risk-taking and innovation.

Under such circumstances, lower-decile schools seeking innovation and increased achievement are often solely reliant on the intrinsic motivation of education professionals. This reliance places a heavy burden on teachers to perform above and beyond both expectations and structural capacities; what is more, even the most motivated teachers are vulnerable to burn-out. Our research suggests that principals face considerable challenges in recruiting and maintaining the kind

of workforce they feel they need. So, what happens when a school fails to recruit or sustain a motivated workforce?

**Principal:** *In a context like ours [working with a disengaged population], it's the intrinsic motivation of professionals that matters ...*

**Interviewer:** *So what happens when your professional team isn't—*

**Principal:** *[cuts in] Oh, then you're stuffed.*

This interviewee's colourful assertion highlights a key problem. Over-reliance on any single component, in this case the intrinsic motivation of education professionals, is risky. Instead, the various factors in the equation of educational transformation need to be carefully aligned, both in terms of objectives and execution, in order to ensure that all schools participate in the benefits of reform. New Zealand shows the value of 'loose' autonomy, but also why it needs to be held in check by the government and parents.

# 3

## Canada

In Canada, education is the responsibility of the ten provinces and three territories.<sup>90</sup> While there are numerous similarities between the different systems, it is not possible to speak of a single ‘Canadian’ education system. Each jurisdiction has its own patterns of practice which reflect their distinct socio-economic, cultural and political contexts.

The lone intergovernmental body on educational issues is the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Founded in 1967, CMEC is the ‘national voice of education for Canada’, serving as a forum for the discussion of policy issues and as a mecha-

nism for national and international collaboration on a broad range of initiatives. Since the early 1990s there has been an increased emphasis on intergovernmental alignment of priorities and policies. At present, CMEC has identified three main areas of focus: aboriginal education, literacy and post-secondary education. CMEC also runs a pan-Canadian assessment of student achievement in mathematics, literacy and science (the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program).

Canada has performed consistently well in international studies on counts of both excellence and equity. For instance, data

90 In one of the few exceptions of federal control, the federal government has direct responsibility for the education of Canada’s aboriginal people residing on reserves; prison inmates; and armed forces personnel. The federal government also provides provinces with financial support to guarantee the provision of education in both official languages (French and English).

91 *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table A1.2a, p. 37.

92 *Ibid.*, Table A1.3a, p.38

93 *Ibid.*, Table B1.1b, p. 187. Expenditure is reported in equivalent US dollars using purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates and is for primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

94 Year of reference 2002. Data from *Education at a Glance* (2006), Table B1.1c (Data was not available in the OECD 2007 version.)

95 For primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

96 *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table B2.1, p. 205.

97 Year of reference 2002. Data from *Education at a Glance* (2006), Table B2.1b, p. 206.

98 *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table B4.1, p.230

99 Year of reference 2002. *Education at a Glance* (2006), Table B4.1, p. 228

**Table 3.1. Comparison of selected indicators**

Indicator	Canada	OECD average	United Kingdom
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained at least upper secondary education (2005) <sup>91</sup>	85	68	67
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained a tertiary qualification (2005) <sup>92</sup>	46	26	30
Annual expenditure per student on core services, ancillary services and research and development (2004) <sup>93</sup>	\$6,482 <sup>94</sup>	\$6,608	\$6,656
Expenditure on educational institutions <sup>95</sup> as a percentage of GDP (2004) <sup>96</sup>	3.6 <sup>97</sup>	3.68	4.4
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure (2004) <sup>98</sup>	8.2 <sup>99</sup>	9.2	8.7

from the PISA 2006 studies show that of the 57 participating countries only Korea, Finland and Hong Kong outperformed Canada in reading and mathematics. In science, the main domain of the 2006 study, Canada was ranked third after Hong Kong and Finland. These results are comparable to earlier PISA studies, where Canada was one of the top five countries in all three domains.

The strength of the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and performance in Canada is also weaker than that of the OECD average: 10 per cent of the variance in student performance in Canada is attributed to SES factors, compared to 22 per cent in OECD countries in general.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the proportion of between school variation in Canada (15.1 per cent) is less than half that of the OECD average (33.6 per cent). This suggests that parents can be fairly confident of consistent attain-

ment standards across the education system, and that performance is less dependent on the particular school one attends.<sup>101</sup>

Within Canada, we have chosen to focus on the experiences of Ontario and Alberta. Ontario was chosen because of the unique demographic challenges it faces; it is both the most populated province in Canada (Toronto, the capital, is the largest city in Canada) and the most popular destination for immigrants. Alberta was a clear choice because of its outstanding performance in large-scale assessments. Both provinces have an international reputation for cutting-edge education reforms.

### 3.1 Setting the scene

Both Ontario and Alberta have several publicly funded education authorities: the English-language Public and Catholic

100 *Education at a Glance* (2006), Table A5.1, p.80

101 Minister of Industry, 'Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA study' (2004): <http://www.pisa.gc.ca/81-590-xie2004001.pdf>.

102 Unless otherwise stated, data for Ontario is taken from Statistics Canada for the Year 2006: <http://www.statcan.ca/>

103 Unless otherwise stated, data for Alberta is taken from the Government of Alberta's Strategic Business Plan 2007 for the year 2006.

104 *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table A1.2a, p.37).

105 From Alberta's Occupational Supply Model, 2006-2010, for the year 2006.

106 *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table A1.3a, p. 38.

107 From Alberta's Occupational Supply Model, 2006-2010, for the year 2006.

108 Expenditure is reported in equivalent US dollars converted using the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exchange rates and is for primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education. See *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table B1.1b, p. 187.

109 : Figures for Ontario and Alberta are for the school year 2004/2005 and taken from Y. Guillemette, *School Enrolment is Down; Spending is Up. What's Wrong with this Picture?* CD Howe Institute: E Brief (2005).

110 Primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

111 *Education at a Glance* (2006), Table B2.1b, p. 206.

112 *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table B4.1, p. 230.

**Table 3.2. Comparison of selected indicators for Ontario and Alberta**

Indicator	Ontario <sup>102</sup>	Alberta <sup>103</sup>	OECD average	United Kingdom
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained at least upper secondary education (2005) <sup>104</sup>	87	77 <sup>105</sup>	68	67
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained a tertiary qualification (2005) <sup>106</sup>	51	49 <sup>107</sup>	26	30
Annual expenditure per student on core services, ancillary services and research and development (2004) <sup>108</sup>	C\$7,904 <sup>109</sup>	C\$9,702	\$6,608	\$6,656
Expenditure on educational institutions <sup>110</sup> as a percentage of GDP (2004) <sup>111</sup>	2.59	2.25	3.8	4.4
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure (2004) <sup>112</sup>	19.3	18.9	9.2	8.7

**Table 3.3. Number of boards, schools, pupils and teachers in the primary and secondary sector in Alberta<sup>113</sup>**

Authority	No. of school boards	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of teachers
Public	41	1,410	413,453	24,364.91
Separate (Catholic & Protestant)	16	344	133,721	8,218.99
Francophone	5	30	4,916	353.04
Charter	13	18	6,634	397.06
Private sector	141	168	25,280	1,505.32
Total	216	1,970	584,004	3,4839.32

Schools, and the French-language Public and Catholic Schools. (In Alberta, Catholic and Protestant schools are sometimes referred to as 'separate' schools.) The different authorities have identical governance structures, although each authority (secular vs. non-secular; English vs. French) has developed a distinct ethos. Both provinces have a home-school and private-school sector, although only Alberta provides partial funding for students choosing these options. In addition, Alberta has publicly funded charter schools. (See Tables 3.3 and 3.4 for numbers of boards, schools, pupils and teachers.)

Compulsory education in Alberta spans ten years, from ages 6 to 16 (Grades 1 to 10). The system is comprehensive in nature, and progression is fairly automatic up to the upper secondary phase. In Grades 11 and 12, however, progression is dependent on student achievement; students who successfully accumulate the required credits graduate with the Alberta High School Diploma.

In Ontario, the school leaving age has recently been extended to 18 (or graduation) – incidentally inspiring the British government to follow suit.<sup>114</sup> As in Alberta, the system is comprehensive and progression from kindergarten to Grade 8 is fairly

**Table 3.4. Number of boards, schools, pupils and teachers in the primary and secondary sector (K-12) in Ontario (2004–5)<sup>115</sup>**

Authority	No. of school boards	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of teachers & administrators (FTE) <sup>116</sup>
English public	31	3,073	1,427,157	80,253.72
French public	4	116	20,866	1,468.88
English Catholic	29	1,348	604,590	34,760.44
French Catholic	8	280	68,725	4,655.84
School authorities	33	31	2,566	200.44
Independent	n/a	875	117,936	11,115.28
Total	105	5,723	2,241,840	132,454.60

113 Alberta Education Data for the School Year 2006/2007.

114 [http://ogov.newswire.ca/ontario/GPOE/2006/12/12/c6405.html?match=&lang=\\_e.html](http://ogov.newswire.ca/ontario/GPOE/2006/12/12/c6405.html?match=&lang=_e.html).

115 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/educationFacts.html>; <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/quickfacts/2004-05/quickFacts04-05.pdf>.

116 Full-time equivalent.

automatic. In Grades 9 to 12, however, progression is dependent on student achievement; students who successfully accumulate the required credits graduate at the end of Grade 12 with the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

As the richest province and fastest-growing economy in Canada, Alberta has invested a considerable amount of money in education. The province's current budget stands at about \$5.3 billion – a hefty sum when one considers the fact that their student population numbers around 600,000 students. In terms of per pupil expenditure, Alberta spends C\$9,702 per student, the highest of all Canadian provinces and territories; Ontario spends C\$7,904 per pupil.<sup>117</sup>

Both Alberta and Ontario's populations are changing rapidly. In Alberta, the school-aged population is projected to decline over the next ten years by approximately 3 to 4 per cent due to falling birth rates. Internal migration rates are, however, at a record high and account for more than half of Alberta's population growth, a factor that may have an impact on the projected population decline. Ontario, on the other hand, remains Canada's most populous province, with 38.9 per cent of the country's people. It is also the province of choice for the majority of new immigrants:

in 2006, 52 per cent of immigrants ended up in Ontario.<sup>118</sup>

Within Alberta and Ontario, the rural–urban divide is also increasing, although the problem is more acute in the former. More than 60 per cent of the province's 3 million people now live in the urban corridor from Edmonton to Calgary.<sup>119</sup> Correspondingly, population densities in rural areas have dropped. Like New Zealand, Ontario and Alberta are faced with the challenge of insufficient schools in urban centres and too many undersubscribed schools in rural areas.

According to PISA, both Alberta and Ontario (and Canada as a whole) have a below-average impact of student socio-economic status on student performance. As Table 3.5 illustrates, the difference between those in the top and bottom quarters in the average OECD country is 119 points; in Canada that drops to 68 points, with 65 points in Alberta and 61 points in Ontario.

That is not to say, however, that there are no disparities in education performance. In Ontario, the Ministry has found differences in performance by gender, native language and special needs students (see Table 3.6). Census data on the educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario has also revealed significant disparities.<sup>120</sup>

**Table 3.5: Students' performance on the PISA 2006 science scale, by national and provincial quarters of socio-economic status**

	Bottom quarter	Second quarter	Third quarter	Top quarter	Score-point difference between the top and bottom quarter
Alberta	519	541	560	584	65
Ontario	506	530	557	567	61
Canada	501	527	548	569	68
OECD average	430	481	512	549	119

117 Figures for per-pupil expenditure are for the school year 2004/2005 and are taken from Y. Guillemette, *School Enrolment is Down; Spending is Up. What's Wrong with this Picture?* CD Howe Institute: E Brief (2005).

118 Statistics Canada, 'Canada's Population', *The Daily*, 27 Sept. 2006.

119 Alberta's Commission on Learning, *Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds* (2002).

120 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/fnmiFramework.pdf>

**Table 3.6. Comparison of selected education indicators in Ontario by gender, ESL/ELD<sup>121</sup> learners and students with special needs (excluding gifted) (2006/2007)<sup>122</sup>**

Indicator	Provincial average	Gender		ESL/ELD	Special needs (excluding gifted)
		Female	Male		
Percentage of students meeting the provincial standard in Grade 3					
Reading	62	68	56	44	22
Writing	64	73	56	54	20
Mathematics	69	69	68	56	35
Percentage of students meeting the provincial standard in Grade 6					
Reading	64	70	59	39	24
Writing	61	72	50	42	17
Mathematics	59	60	58	47	21
Percentage of students meeting the provincial standard in Grade 9					
Academic Mathematics	71	69	72	61	57
Applied Mathematics	35	33	37	20	28

In Alberta, the Ministry does not specifically report equity indicators in its annual business plan. There is evidence to suggest, however, that significant attainment gaps do exist, at the very least among Aboriginal students. As an illustration, the 2003 Commission on Learning reported that only 50 per cent of the Aboriginal population has completed high school, and only 10 per cent go on to post-secondary education. This is compared to provincial averages of 77 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.<sup>123</sup>

Alberta's decision not to develop specific equity indicators is linked to a belief that 'equity is achieved through reporting results against standards and showing the percentages of students that meet these standards.'<sup>124</sup> Within the province's accountability framework, each school is presented with results for their respective school district and the province; five-year

results are also presented as an indicator of growth/ improvement. This focus on standards-based outcomes as a key lever for change (if not the lever) can also be seen in Ontario and will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Further information on operational and governance processes can be found in the appendices.

### 3.2 History of reform

The 1990s was a turbulent period for the Ontario and Alberta education systems. Large-scale reforms overhauled and reinvented every aspect of education. School boards were amalgamated, site-based management was introduced, funding schemes were redesigned, standardised province-wide curricula were developed, province-wide testing was stepped up and accountability measures put in place.

<sup>121</sup> English as a second language/English literacy development.

<sup>122</sup> Data from EQAO

<sup>123</sup> Alberta's Commission on Learning (2002).

<sup>124</sup> Email correspondence with Ministry official

Many of these reforms mirrored one another – in tone, if not in content – an unsurprising occurrence given the Conservative leadership in both provinces, the challenges of stagnating economies, and the prevailing political climate of the day.<sup>125</sup> In practice, however, the reform trajectories have subtly branched over time. In Ontario, the reforms were acrimoniously contested by the teacher unions, and the bitter public confrontations with the former Harris government have left an indelible mark on the education community, a shadow that continues to hang over them to this day. The Klein government in Alberta, on the other hand, appears to have emerged relatively unscathed from the rocky period of change, and Alberta has carved a niche as the leading province for school choice.

There are no clear explanations for this divergence. Nonetheless, a better understanding of the educational contexts of both provinces can be gained through a closer examination of the tenures of Premiers Ralph Klein in Alberta (1992–2006), and Mike Harris in Ontario (1995–2002).

### 3.2.1 *Klein and Alberta*

Ralph Klein was elected Premier of Alberta on 14 December 1992. At the time of his election, the Alberta economy was in a severe downturn; the province's debt was at an all-time high at around C\$20 billion. Klein's election platform centred on reducing the deficit; within the education system, reforms were designed to reduce public spending and to increase efficiency and accountability in the sector through the development of choice policies and privatisation.<sup>126</sup>

From 1993 to 1996, Klein's Progressive Conservative Party<sup>127</sup> introduced several pieces of legislation, most notably the Deficit Elimination Act and the Government Accountability Act, which radically changed the educational landscape:

- The number of school boards were reduced from 141 to 60.
- The government removed the ability of local school boards to levy local taxes for additional education funding in an effort to equalise funding between jurisdictions.
- School-based management was introduced. Among other initiatives, each school was required to establish parent councils that would act as an advisory board to the school principal.
- More province-wide testing was introduced and schools were required to report on parental and student satisfaction, in addition to student achievement results.
- Legislative provisions were created for the establishment of charter schools,<sup>128</sup> thereby paving the way for an institutionalisation of choice policy within the larger educational framework. Alberta remains the only province in Canada to integrate charter schools into the public education system.

It is worth noting that some of the reforms carried out by the Klein administration (such as those intended to increase public accountability) were born out of public roundtables on education reform during the early 1990s and thus had the education community's tacit approval. Others, such as the changes in tax laws, seemed to some commentators to come out of left field. Nonetheless, despite public and practitioner misgivings over some aspects of the Klein reforms, the changes were an important catalyst for a public debate over Alberta's educational goals, practices and achievements.<sup>129</sup>

More recently, Alberta has embarked on another wave of reform. In 2002, in response to public demands, the government established 'Alberta's Commission on Learning' to conduct a comprehensive review of the K-12 education system. The Commission's final report in 2003 proposed that Alberta adopt as its vision of

125 In the face of severe fiscal constraints, the political climate in both provinces was increasingly defined by the philosophy of new public management – an outlook that combined both fiscal conservatism and market liberalism, and emphasised the downsizing of bureaucracies, the promotion of private enterprise and (wherever possible) budget cuts.

126 These reforms were part of a larger 'Klein Revolution' that saw similar tenets of fiscal conservatism and market liberalism applied to all public services.

127 It's worth noting that the Progressive Conservative Association of Alberta has been in power since 1971.

128 In Alberta, charter schools must provide the provincial curriculum. Schools are given a three- to five-year contract by Alberta Education or the local school board. At the end of the contract, schools are evaluated to determine whether they have fulfilled the objectives of their charter and have parent and community support. Successful schools may have their charter renewed.

129 cf. B. Spencer and C. Webber, 'Education Reform in Alberta: Where do we go from here?' Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association (New Orleans, LA, 24–28 April 2000).

educational excellence the following vow: 'every child learns; every child succeeds.' Of the 95 recommendations proposed by the Commission, all but eight have been accepted by the Albertan legislature and are in the process of being implemented.<sup>130</sup>

As for Klein? He finally stepped down in December 2006 after 14 years as Alberta's Premier. The Progressive Conservative party, however, remains in power. At this stage, there is little reason to believe that the new Premier, Ed Stelmach, will significantly change the direction and content of existing education reforms.

### 3.2.2 Harris and Ontario

In contrast to the relative political stability of the Alberta reforms, Ontario's experience over the past two decades is marked by conflict. In June 1995, a new government was formed under the leadership of Mike Harris from the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario.<sup>131</sup> Harris swept to power on a platform tagged the 'Common Sense Revolution', promising to reduce Ontario's deficit (which was at an all-time high) and slash tax rates. The government was also keen to take on the faltering education system. Journalist and author John Ibbitson notes:

*[Harris and top advisors] were convinced Ontario's education system was rotten and regarded transforming education as a mission as important as cutting taxes or slaying the deficit. All agreed that any truly fundamental change to the education system required simplifying a jurisdiction where power and responsibility were hopelessly divided between local and provincial authorities. They were determined, not to reform the system, but to dismantle and recreate it.*<sup>132</sup>

The Harris government appears to have modelled much of their reforms on Alberta's experience. As in Alberta, the Harris government moved swiftly. Within the span of

their first two years alone (1995–7) three major education bills were passed:<sup>133</sup>

- The Savings and Restructuring Act, which produced funding cuts of about \$400 million.
- The Fewer School Boards Act (Bill 104), which cut the number of school boards from 129 to 72, with a ceiling on the remuneration of trustees.
- The Education Quality Improvement Act, which shifted budgetary control from school boards to the province, stripped unions of the right to negotiate certain working conditions, and produced further budgetary cuts amounting to approximately \$600 million. Also known as Bill 160, this was by far the most contentious of all the reforms and prompted the province-wide teacher walkout of 1997.

The Harris government reforms were, however, met with stiff resistance from educators and practitioners, who were dismayed not only by what they perceived to be crippling funding cuts, but also by the fact that teachers were being portrayed as the 'enemy' – a particularly ironic turn of events since Harris himself was a former teacher.

It is, perhaps, this difference in tone which sets the Harris and Klein reforms apart.<sup>134</sup> While there were certainly conflicts between the Klein administration and the teacher union,<sup>135</sup> including several strikes, the profession as a whole was not subject to the same level of ill will as in Ontario. One analyst described the Harris administration's interactions with the five teacher unions in Ontario as a 'strategy of total antagonism';<sup>136</sup> within such a climate, the potential for fruitful public dialogue was significantly undermined.

The Klein administration's success in riding out the turbulent period of reform may have also been aided by the political stability offered by Klein's and the

130 To download a copy of the report, see <http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/commission/default.asp>. For an update on Alberta Education's progress in implementing the recommendations, see <http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/commission/ACOLStat us2005.asp>.

131 The previous government had been led by the New Democratic Party of Ontario.

132 Cited in B. O'Sullivan, 'Global Change and Educational Reform in Ontario and Canada', *Canadian Journal of Education* 24:3 (1999), 311–25, p. 319.

133 M. Bégin, 'Conflicting Approaches to Education Reform: The Royal Learning Commission revisited', The Jackson Lecture, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), 13 May 1999.

134 For a more comprehensive review of the Harris reforms, see R. D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The reshaping of Ontario's schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

135 Unlike Ontario, Alberta has a single union and professional association: the Alberta Teachers Association.

136 Bégin (1999)

Progressive Conservatives Party's unbroken tenure. During Harris' second term in power, however, his Party was rocked by revelations of political and personal scandals. By 2002, in the face of declining support, Harris stepped down from the Premiership. Without Harris' driving leadership, the Progressive Conservative Party faltered. In October 2003, the Liberal Party under Dalton McGuinty took over the reins of power.

In Harris' defence, there is a strong case for the argument that some of his administration's structural reforms (for example, the amalgamation of school boards and the introduction of provincial testing) were both beneficial and necessary – a thesis supported by many interviewees. Some, such as the funding cuts, were considered to be poorly planned and disastrous for the health of the education system, however. Unfortunately for Harris and the education community, the ill will and conflict that dogged these reforms appears to have overshadowed all other considerations.

### 3.2.3 McGuinty and Ontario

The McGuinty administration inherited an education community that was demoralised, burnt out and wary of further government intervention. Acutely conscious of his predecessor's missteps, McGuinty made reconciliation with education stakeholders, particularly teachers, a top priority. (The process by which consensus and collaboration was built is discussed in greater detail in section 3.3.2.)

Fortuitously, around the same time as the 2003 elections, a working group at the Ontario Institute for Studies of Education (OISE) published their final proposal on a blueprint for education reform in Ontario. The report's proposals had elicited strong support from a broad range of stakeholders. In a savvy political move, McGuinty employed one of the authors of the report, Michael Fullan, to serve as his personal advisor.<sup>137</sup> By extension, the OISE blue-

print developed by educationalists became the centrepiece of the new administration.

In the four years since the McGuinty administration took power, they have sought to develop an overarching vision of educational excellence that ties together the myriad of initiatives and strategies. To that end, the government has distilled the mission of the education system into three main objectives: i) raising student achievement; ii) closing gaps in student achievement; and iii) raising public confidence in the publicly funded education system. These goals have been embedded in public discourse through the catchphrase: 'Raising the bar, closing the gap' (which has incidentally been adopted by the British Conservative Party as the title for their recent Green Paper). Morale is reportedly at an all-time high, and, as shall be discussed later, the education community appears determined to make up for lost ground. McGuinty was re-elected for another term in October 2007.

## 3.3 Findings

### 3.3.1 Examining Alberta's success story

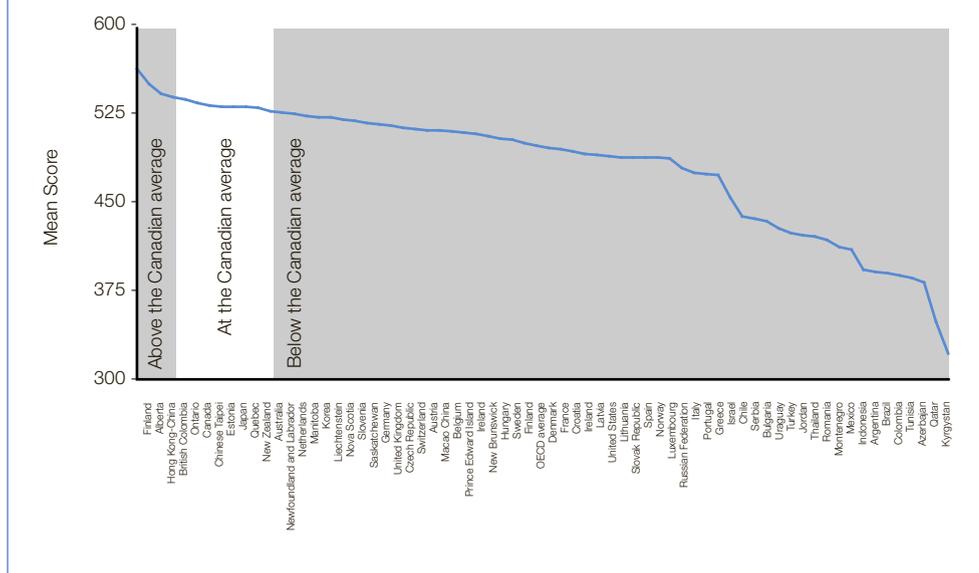
Alberta has gained international renown for the high performance of its students in large-scale studies such as PISA, TIMSS and Canada's own national Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP). It is the one province that consistently performs above the Canadian average, putting its performance on a par with Finland and Hong Kong (see Figure 3.1 for each Canadian province's performance in the recent PISA 2006 science domain). Large-scale surveys of public opinion also reveal very high levels of public satisfaction with the overall quality of basic education provision (74 per cent, rising to 91 per cent for parents of students). This is in contrast to Ontario, where public satisfaction with the public education system is just 56 per cent.<sup>138</sup>

What accounts for Alberta's high aver-

137 Fullan was also an advisor to the English government for the Blair reforms of the 1990s.

138 Source for Alberta: <http://education.alberta.ca/department/surveys/education2007.aspx>. Source for Ontario: D. W. Livingstone and D. Hart, 'Public Attitudes towards Education in Ontario: The 15th OISE/UT survey' (2004).

Figure 3.1: Average scores and confidence intervals for provinces and countries, PISA 2006 combined science scale



age standards? Thus far, no research aimed at explaining Alberta's extraordinary performance in the international assessment studies has been undertaken by or on behalf of Alberta Education. We know though from analyses of the PISA results that some of the differences in average performance between Canada and the OECD countries can be explained by the lower SES of students in OECD countries in general as compared to that of their Canadian counterparts. We know as well that Alberta is the richest province in Canada, with an average socio-economic index that is significantly higher than the national average (note that Ontario also has an SES index that is higher than the Canadian average.) Analysis conducted by CMEC suggests that Alberta's higher SES is associated with higher average performance. However, even when their relative socio-economic advantage is taken into account, students in Alberta *still* perform better on average than their counterparts in other provinces.<sup>139</sup>

The majority of our interviewees believe that the province's strong per-

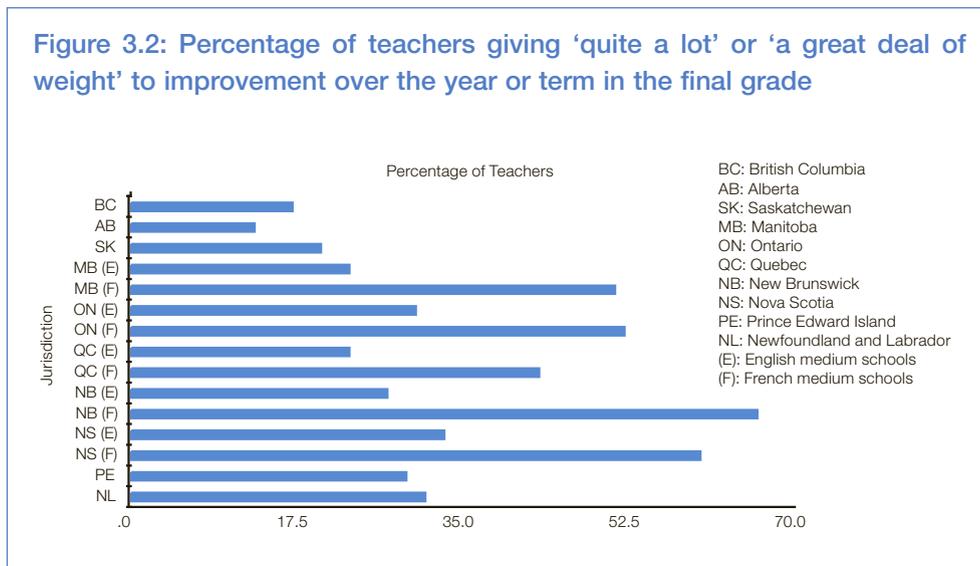
formance can be attributed to the combination of a centralised curriculum and clear provincial standards. 'We have a world-class curriculum,' one principal said. 'We are very clear about what students should achieve in each subject, what skills they need to come away with.' Another principal emphasised this point, noting: 'There are no surprises ... whichever district you're in, the expectations of learning are the same.'

This strong focus on standard-based outcomes may account for the fact that Alberta teachers are more likely to make absolute rather than relative assessments of student performance. As an illustration, during each Pan-Canadian cyclical assessment of student performance, surveys of teachers, students and schools are also carried out. According to the results of the Pan-Canadian studies, Alberta teachers are the least likely among all provinces to give students a final grade based on class attendance and on the extent of improvement they've made over the year (see, for example, Figure 3.2)

A senior Ministry official stressed that Alberta's rigorous standards-based appro-

139 P. Bussiere, F. Cartwright and T. Knighton, 'Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA Study' (Canada: Ministry of Industry, 2004), pp. 59-60.

**Figure 3.2: Percentage of teachers giving ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal of weight’ to improvement over the year or term in the final grade**



ach to assessment prevents grade inflation and ensures accuracy in teaching. The official noted that the percentage of students given an average mathematics or science mark of 70 per cent or more is lower than in the other provinces.

The Ministry also attributes Alberta’s performance to the overall quality of its teaching force. Alberta is the first (and, to date, only) province in Canada to adopt a teaching quality standard. This standard establishes guidelines for the professional knowledge, skills and attributes expected of all teachers. These guidelines apply to the preparation of teachers, ongoing professional development and teacher evaluation throughout the province. This clarity of expectation is believed to have helped develop a strong sense of professionalism among the workforce.

It is also worth noting that there are no overall teacher shortages in Alberta. Two demographic situations – a reduction in the population of 4- to 18-year-olds and an increase in the number of 19- to 25-year olds (and by extension the pool of graduate teachers) – have offset levels of teacher retirement and prevented the occurrence of excess demand.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, Alberta teachers are the highest paid, on average, across all Canadian provinces. This is true both for

new and experienced teachers; Alberta Education reports that in many cases teachers’ salaries are between 7 and 10 per cent higher (see Table 3.7).<sup>141</sup> It is perhaps no surprise then that Alberta Education reports that their teacher numbers are supplemented by new teachers moving to Alberta.

### 3.3.2 Ontario’s new vision of educational change

While Ontario is also recognised as a high performer in the international studies of PISA and TIMSS, it has been drawing attention in recent years for its data-driven reform strategies: i) capping primary class size; ii) the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy; and iii) the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy, which aims to increase high-school graduation rates in Ontario.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy aims to improve the literacy and numeracy abilities of kindergarten and primary-school students. Prior to 2003, student performance had remained stagnant for about five years at an achievement level of approximately 55 per cent of Grade 6 students meeting the provincial standard. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat aims to raise this percentage to 75 per cent by the year 2008, and additional funds

140 Nichols Applied Management, *Estimate of Aggregate Supply and Demand for Teachers in Alberta 2001–2010* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2002).

141 <http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/FactsStats/teacherpaid.asp>.

Table 3.7. Average teacher salaries by province

	Four years of education				Six years of education			
	Minimum	Rank	Maximum	Rank	Minimum	Rank	Maximum	Rank
Alberta	\$43,653	1	\$68,967	1	\$48,779	1	\$74,126	1
Ontario	\$37,043	5	\$62,625	2	\$42,258	7	\$73,472	2
Saskatchewan	\$38,700	2	\$59,500	3	\$43,570	5	\$66,103	5
Manitoba	\$37,948	3	\$58,737	4	\$42,887	6	\$65,310	6
Quebec	\$36,196	6	\$58,633	5	\$41,982	8	\$63,527	7
Nova Scotia	\$35,906	7	\$57,376	6	\$44,168	4	\$67,978	4
British Columbia	\$37,908	4	\$56,743	7	\$45,506	2	\$70,684	3
New Brunswick	\$33,776	9	\$52,231	8	\$40,482	9	\$62,292	8
Prince Edward Island	\$30,341	10	\$46,871	9	\$38,480	10	\$59,657	10
Newfoundland & Labrador	\$34,838	8	\$45,264	10	\$45,280	3	\$60,212	9

have been set aside for specialised professional development and to support targeted intervention programmes. This strategy is also supported by a push to cap primary class size.

The Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy, on the other hand, aims to increase high-school graduation rates in Ontario. In 2003/2004, only 68 per cent of students graduated with a high-school diploma. The province has set a target of at least 85 per cent of students graduating from high school by 2010/2011. The slew of initiatives developed to support this strategy includes: the introduction of specialised teaching positions (Student Success Teachers) in each high school to work with students; the extension of the number of compulsory schooling years from 10 to 12; and investment in multiple vocational and academic pathways.

Underpinning these strategies is a determination to change the culture of the system and community, rather than focusing solely on structural reforms. Thus, embedded in the mission of every provincial, district and school authority are two tenets that Hill and Crevola term 'non-negotiable beliefs':<sup>142</sup>

- Every child can learn and achieve high standards, given adequate time and support.
- Every teacher can teach effectively, given adequate support and the right conditions.

Professional development programmes build on these tenets, using them to challenge long-held assumptions about the trade-offs between equity and excellence, and to reshape attitudes towards student achievement.

Why has the McGuinty administration chosen to emphasise cultural change? Readers familiar with the Blair reforms of the 1990s will have already recognised similarities between the English and Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. They will also no doubt be aware of the fact that the English strategy saw impressive gains initially, but reached a plateau within a few years.

The Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat believe that the solution to this problem lies in building a shared vision of change. Michael Fullan, in a speech launching the LNS,<sup>143</sup> expounded on the lessons that needed to be learned from

142 P. Hill and C. Crevola (1999) The role of standards in educational reform for the 21st century. In D.D. Marsh (ed.), *ASCD Yearbook 1999: Preparing our schools for the 21st century* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999), pp.117-142. Cited in M. Fullan, P. Hill and C. Crevola, (2006) *Breakthrough* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006).

143 Webcast, 7 June 2005: <https://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/june7.html>.

England's strategy of informed prescription:<sup>144</sup>

*But we said there's a problem there. This strategy is not getting enough at the hearts and minds of principals and teachers. It's not deep enough. The ownership is not strong enough and therefore it's going to have a relatively short shelf life from here on. And that's what you see as the plateau problem ... it goes up rather rapidly and it levels each year onwards from 2004.*

Building on that insight, the Ontario Ministry and the LNS made the decision to let changes in the structure of the system take a back seat to developing a shared vision of change. This line of argument was frequently raised during our interviews, as exemplified by the following assertions made by senior Ministry officials:

*We need to change the culture ... When you have large, large systems with traditional providers and traditional roles, and you're trying to change the system to split roles and split responsibilities, it's a major culture change ... The dilemma is that if you spend too much time on structure, you lose the focus on the actual agenda.*

*I think that stability and creating an environment where teachers can focus on teaching, and principals on leading, is more important [than structural change] ... I think if anything, people really want focus, and they want time to do their core business and they don't want the distractions of saying: 'Oh, what will happen if we arrange the deck chairs.'*

Changing the educational climate, however, would first require the government to deal with one of the more problematic legacies of the Harris era: the 'über-union environment'. In Ontario, the five teacher

federations wield significant political power and have previously deployed this strength to their advantage. (In a number of interviews, the teacher federations were explicitly characterised as militant in nature.) On a day-to-day basis, principals note that school management issues are affected by a wide array of regulations on working conditions. For example, under the collective bargaining agreement, teachers do not have to attend any meetings or professional development sessions during lunch hour or after school. This status quo renders it hard for principals to develop opportunities for collective dialogue and planning. Getting around these regulations is heavily dependent on the ability of principals to build positive working relationships and goodwill with their teachers.

Given this unionised environment and the de-professionalisation of the teaching community, how has the new administration initiated the turnaround described above? The majority of interviewees agreed that the tenor adopted by the new administration was key. From the start, the McGuinty government made a conscious effort to distinguish itself from its predecessor by adopting a clear stance of reconciliation – committing to change strategies that were respectful of the community and the community's professional knowledge. In discussing the journey Ontario has been on, a senior Ministry official reflected:

*I think the renaissance we've experienced in the last few years has come about because of leadership, focus, respect for teachers and a conscious decision at the provincial level that education is terribly, terribly important and that it had to start with happy teachers and ambitious goals.*

The administration moved to bring unions on board as partners and, where possible,

<sup>144</sup> 'They called their strategy informed prescription ... Informed meant they did their homework – good ideas about literacy and numeracy and good strategies ... prescription was a lot of heavy-handedness: you had to do it, backed up by a lot of hard evaluations.'

to eliminate existing bargaining disputes. A major breakthrough was the negotiation of a four-year contract-cycle which put an end to the wage disputes that were occurring almost every year. 'When the issue of salaries is constantly on the table,' one district official noted, 'there's really no energy, no space, for principals and teachers to plan for other things.' The administration has abolished some of the more controversial elements of the Harris era's policies, for example the Ontario Teacher Qualification Test. In its place are strategies such as mentoring for new teachers and the aggressive development of professional learning communities aimed at enhancing teachers' professional capacity and collegiality.<sup>145</sup>

At the same time, Ministry officials appear to have adopted a fairly pragmatic stance towards the nature of union-government relations. One senior official commented: 'You're always going to have tensions between the government and the federations, so it's really a non-starter to talk about eliminating union power.' Accepting that existing contractual regulations are unlikely to be rescinded, the administration has chosen instead to build trust and goodwill between the parties, with the hope that flexibility in negotiation will arise from a more positive relationship. The teacher unions have also made a point to reach back; a senior Ministry official noted: 'I think that it's [the fallout from the Harris era] still recent enough that teachers remember first hand how bad it can get ... They may have been more ready to align their vision and goals with that of the current government.'

While Ontario is not unique in aspiring to transform the culture surrounding student achievement, it does appear as though most, if not all, stakeholders have bought into the Ontario vision of excellence. In interviewing representatives from various stakeholder organisations, we were struck by the fact that interviewees

almost unanimously identified the system's clarity of vision as a key driver in raising student and school standards. We were struck as well by how articulate the interviewees were when describing their educational vision and goals, and how consistent the message of 'raising the bar, closing the gap' was across different levels and groups.

Indeed, a number of interviewees who had worked in the education system for several decades (in various capacities: teacher, principal, district official and/or Ministry official) expressed their belief that goal alignment among all stakeholders was at an all-time high and that there was a very positive can-do climate within the system. A prominent academic and education consultant asserted that 'the turnaround in teacher morale and attitudes within the last four years is nothing short of amazing.' A board member of the Ontario Public School Board Association concurred, noting with satisfaction that 'we're in a better place now than we've ever been before.'

The enthusiasm among our interviewees was almost palpable. The million-dollar question, however, is whether this excitement actually translates into better outcomes.

Since the inception of the LNS, student performance has been on an upward trend (see Figure 3.3) although the latest figures for 2006/2007 suggest that the province may be hard-pressed to meet the target of 75 per cent by 2008. While the percentage of Grade 3 and Grade 6 students who are performing at or above the provincial average has increased by anywhere between five to 14 percentage points over the past five years, the gains in the past two years (2005/2006 and 2006/2007) have been less promising. Some critics believe that the gains are artificial, the result of changes in the testing system that have made the tests easier,<sup>146</sup> and pressure from the McGuinty administration. There is, however, no

145 Some argue that the McGuinty administration has 'gone soft' on teachers, trading in harder accountability measures for processes of dubious merit. At this stage, however, there is no research to suggest that this concern is either true or false.

146 For example, time limits were eliminated for the Grade 3 and Grade 6 tests; students are now allowed to use calculators in every section of the maths test; and the length of written responses required in the Grade 3 and Grade 6 tests has been reduced.

empirical research to date on changes (if any) in standards.

On a more positive note, public confidence, while still low, is showing signs of improvement. During the Conservative government's tenure, public satisfaction with public schools declined from the mid 50s and circled around the low 40s. Since 2002, satisfaction levels have increased from 43 to 56 per cent. The proportion of the population that believe that the quality of schooling is improving has also increased – from 27 to 34 per cent with regard to elementary schooling, and from 24 to 28 per cent<sup>147</sup> for high-school education. The numbers are still, by any measure, rather low, and the Ontario government still has some way to go before the McGuinty administration's policies can be fully vindicated.

### 3.3.3 Visions of accountability

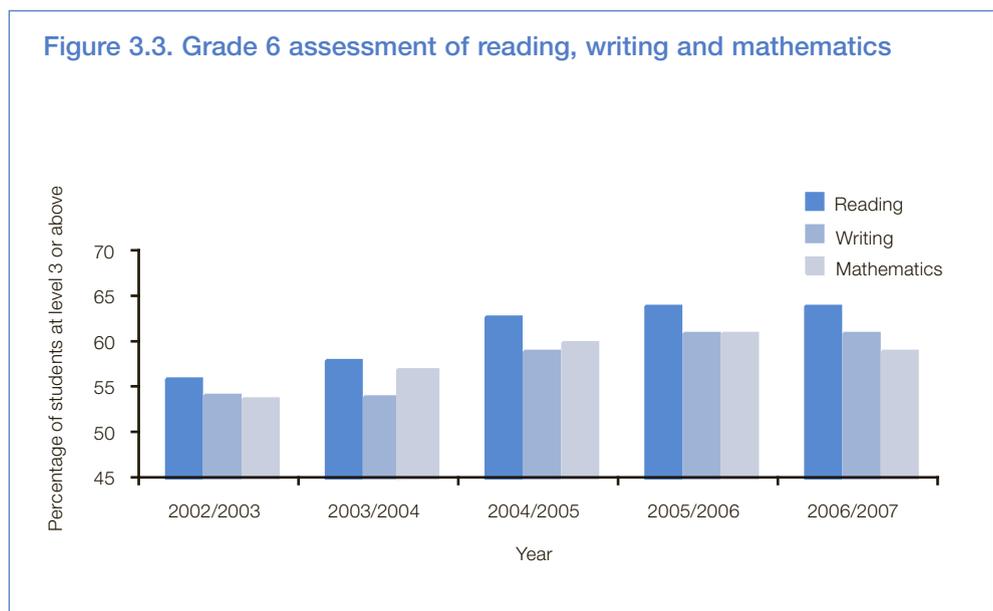
As with other countries, accountability has become a central part of the discourse on educational excellence in Canada. In Ontario and Alberta, however, the model of accountability that is being developed is considerably different in tone and content from that practised in England. Specifi-

cally, both provinces are philosophically opposed to strategies that 'use a big stick' and both advocate a vision of collective, rather than individual, accountability. In addition, neither province has a system of regular inspection; instead the expectation is that local government officials will, through their existing relationships with schools, monitor performance and intervene when necessary.

### Ontario

A key part of the new climate of educational excellence is the belief that there is shared accountability – at a school, district and province level – for student achievement. A senior Ministry official described the government's strategy as follows: 'It's a partnership ... we cannot and will not ask schools or districts to do anything that we [the Ministry] are not capable of supporting ... we would have no credibility if we did so ... it's all about joint ownership.'

That commitment to joint ownership and accountability appears to have filtered down to other levels within the system. A former superintendent succinctly argued: 'We're only as good as our lowest-performing school.' Similarly, at a school level, while all interviewees agreed that teachers



147 Livingstone and Hart (2004)

should take responsibility for student learning, they were strongly opposed to the idea that *individual* teachers should be held accountable. Instead, interviewees unanimously agreed that the burden of accountability needed to be shouldered by the school as an entire unit.

The rationale here is that every teacher builds on the work of another. Consequently, it is (in the words of interviewees) ‘unjust’ to place the burden of responsibility for student achievement on any single individual. The principal of a primary school that has been performing highly ‘against the odds’ explained: ‘The challenge is in convincing every teacher that they have a responsibility in raising the literacy and numeracy skills of our students. It’s not just the work of the individual subject teachers or the literacy specialist. Every teacher has to make an effort to learn and utilise the proper teaching techniques, otherwise nothing significant is going to change.’

Those familiar with the parable of ‘Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody’<sup>148</sup> might wonder whether Ontario’s concept of shared accountability is inadvertently creating a situation where in no one is really accountable for anything. Our interviewees emphasised, however, that individual teachers were still expected to be responsible for raising student performance. The important point was not to develop a practice of ‘naming and shaming’ individuals, as it was perceived that ‘singling out individual teachers for blame is counterproductive. They’ll get resentful, or they’ll start cheating to get better student scores.’<sup>149</sup>

Principals also noted that a vision of joint accountability was more likely to promote the development of professional learning communities and encourage the growth of distributive leadership – key elements of the McGuinty administration’s development strategy. As an illustration, when asked to discuss their understanding

of the phrase ‘high standards for all’, the majority of interviewees, particularly the principals, included expectations of their own performance in their explanation: ‘If we expect our students to perform their very best,’ one principal argued, ‘it’s only fair to expect that our teachers and our principals, all of us, are also held to high standards and expectations.’ Another principal pressed this point: ‘There’s a lot going on right now [in terms of education reforms], and if we’re not on top of the game, if we, as leaders, aren’t making sure that we’re continuously learning and improving, well, we wouldn’t be able to cope.’ Interestingly enough, in no other system we studied did practitioners include themselves in the equation when asked to define what they meant by ‘high standards for all’.

The Ministry is proud of the fact that they have developed an accountability framework that is not based on ‘wielding a big stick’.<sup>150</sup> Instead, bearing in mind Fullan’s discussion of accountability systems as encompassing twin elements of pressure and support, the Ontario system has chosen to focus on the provision of support structures. Where pressure is applied, positive rather than negative incentives are used.

As an illustration, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (the body charged with implementing the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy) has developed a typology of school performance. The programme Statistical Neighbours integrates demographic data from the national bureau of statistics with performance measures from the provincial assessment tests. It utilises a three-year model, and trends in performance are identified by measuring changes in performance between the first and third year.

Based on the information gathered, schools are provided with targeted, needs-appropriate interventions. For instance, the Secretariat currently runs two different

148 “This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done, and Everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realised that Everybody wouldn’t do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.”

149 Interview with school principal.

150 Interview with senior official, Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat.

**Table 3.8: Typology of School Performance.**<sup>151</sup>

Category	Definition
Always Highest	The school's results are at least 75% for each of the three years
Always Lowest	The school's results are less than or equal to 33% for each of the three years
Declining Higher Ranges	The school has declined by at least 10 percentage points (Y1–Y3). Pertains to schools within the range of 65–100% inclusive.
Declining Lower Ranges	The school has declined by at least 10 percentage points (Y1–Y3). Pertains to schools within the range of 0–64% inclusive
Improving Higher Ranges	The school has improved by at least 10 percentage points (Y1–Y3). Pertains to schools within the range of 65–100% inclusive
Improving Lower Ranges	The school has improved by at least 10 percentage points (Y1–Y3). Pertains to schools within the range of 0–64% inclusive
Static Higher Ranges	The school has improved by a maximum of 9 percentage points (Y1–Y3). Pertains to schools within the range of 65–100% inclusive
Static Lower Ranges	The school has improved by a maximum of 9 percentage points (Y1–Y3). Pertains to schools within the range of 0–64% inclusive

schooling improvement programmes for schools:

- Schools on the Move: targeted at schools showing improvement trends (i.e. schools that fall into the categories of improving lower and higher ranges).
- The Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership: targeted at schools that fall into the 'Always Lowest' category and the static categories.

The message here is that there is always room for improvement, and that schools will never be left to flounder alone.

Ontario's emphasis on data-informed analysis also appears to be increasing transparency within the system. As one

literacy specialist noted: 'When the results come out, we sit down with schools ... it's an extraordinarily powerful tool to be able to illustrate where schools are doing well, or not so well ... you can't argue with data.'

The Ministry also clearly believes that an emphasis on capacity-building offers a more sustainable way of addressing the problem of struggling schools than England's 'takeover' model. The Ministry's chief research officer noted:

*We've chosen to focus on capacity building and partnerships. We think it's important that every teacher and principal has the tools to focus on student achievement, so that if and*

<sup>151</sup> The Indicator used is percentage of students at or above the provincial standard.

*when someone leaves, the successor is not left floundering. It's more sustainable that way ... the takeover model of the UK system is not sustainable.*

Arguably, the most important measure of the success of any accountability framework is its effectiveness in driving school improvement. The principals and district officials interviewed were unanimous in the belief that the accountability framework (alongside the development of provincial standards) was the most significant driver behind school improvement. Principals also held a fairly positive perspective on the accountability framework, including the role of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

There are two reasons for this. First, EQAO is perceived to be a credible voice within the system, having consistently sought to present its work on province-wide testing as one part of a larger story on school performance. EQAO has, for example, been fairly critical of instances where data from the provincial tests has been used for the creation of league tables.<sup>152</sup> Secondly, EQAO's in-depth analyses of individual school and board performances are perceived to be very helpful, particularly among smaller school boards/authorities that do not have the capacity to perform such breakdowns themselves.

That is not to say, however, that the system is perfect. Critics, such as the Ontario Public School Board Association (OPSBA) and the Ontario Teachers Federation, express concern that there has been an overemphasis on literacy and numeracy test scores. An education consultant for OPSBA also noted that there is sometimes a real discrepancy between what school boards report to the Ministry and what they actually do in practice. He argued that more accountability to schools' local communities is needed.

In response to this criticism, a senior Ministry official pointed to the provincial requirement that each school district prepare an annual report on student progress. This report is publicly available on the Ministry website, and parents can compare school-board performance on a range of indicators (for example, assessment test scores, graduation rates, financial status).<sup>153</sup> Admittedly, the indicators are still biased towards test scores; however, the Ministry hopes to continue to increase the variety of data that is made available to the public.

### *Alberta*

In September 2004, Alberta Education introduced a new accountability framework<sup>154</sup> for assessing the progress of school boards in achieving their educational goals.<sup>155</sup> The Pillar tracks progress over 16 different measures in seven categories (see Table 3.9). Each jurisdiction is required to publish their report card at the front of their Annual Education Results Report, which can be obtained from the jurisdiction websites.

Each measure within the Pillar is evaluated on three bases: against the fixed provincial standard (the achievement measure); against the jurisdiction's prior three-year average result for each measure (the improvement measure); and an overall evaluation which combines the first two. Results are then colour coded on three different scales to highlight: performance according to percentile; changes in performance; and whether the jurisdiction's performance is on target or a cause for concern (see Table 3.10 for sample report card).<sup>156</sup>

It is worth noting that the development of the improvement evaluation base was intended to encourage competition within schools rather than with other boards/schools. One senior Ministry official<sup>157</sup> explained: 'I'm a big fan of competition, but competition with oneself rather than with others. The latter discourages

152 The Fraser Institute, a centre-right think tank, prepares a report card for all schools in the Ontario province. While the majority of interviewees were dismissive of the practice, we did note that schools or boards that fared well did not hesitate to work that piece of information in during the course of the interview.

153 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/bpr>.

154 The Pillar was introduced as part of a new funding framework, The Renewed Funding Framework, which provides core funding based on student enrolment, and additional funding based on particular challenges (demographic, population) faced in a given area. The framework has three pillars: funding, flexibility and accountability.

155 2007 marks the first time that report cards will be prepared for individual schools as well as for boards, and when schools and boards are evaluated on all 16 measures. Previously, there was not enough data on measures such as preparation for work and citizenship to produce the three-year jurisdiction average needed for the improvement evaluation.

156 See the following site for in-depth detail on the way the measures are evaluated and an explanation of the coding system: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/526352/apbrochurefinal-nov2006.pdf>

157 Alberta Education has requested that we warn readers that some of the quotations used do not necessarily represent an official position of Alberta Education, nor are they necessarily shared by other interviewees.

**Table 3.9. Categories and measures used in the Accountability Pillar**

Category	How success is measured
Safe and caring schools	Using a survey to determine the percentage of teacher, parent and student agreement that: students are safe at school, are learning the importance of caring for others, are learning respect for other and are treated fairly at school.
Student learning opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Annual drop-out rates.</li> <li>● Annual high-school completion rates.</li> </ul> Using surveys to determine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Percentage of teachers, parents and students satisfied with the opportunity for students to receive a broad programme of studies, including fine arts, career, technology, and health and physical.</li> <li>● Percentage of teachers, parents and students satisfied with the overall quality of basic education.</li> </ul>
Student learning achievement (Grades K to 9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provincial achievement tests: acceptable standard.</li> <li>● Provincial achievement tests: standard of excellence.</li> </ul>
Student learning achievement (Grades 10 to 12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Diploma exams: acceptable standard .</li> <li>● Diploma exams: standard of excellence.</li> <li>● Rutherford Scholarship eligibility.</li> <li>● Diploma exam participation.</li> </ul>
Preparing for life-long learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Annual high school to post-secondary transition rate</li> </ul>
World of work and citizenship	Using surveys to determine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Percentage of teachers and parents who agree that students are taught the attitudes and behaviours that will make them successful at work when they finish school.</li> <li>● Percentage of teachers, parents and students who are satisfied that students model the characteristics of active citizenship.</li> </ul>
Parental involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Using a survey to determine the percentage of teachers and parents satisfied with parental involvement in decisions about their child's education.</li> </ul>
Continuous improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Using a survey to determine the percentage of teachers and parents indicating that their school and schools in their jurisdiction have improved or stayed the same in the last three years.</li> </ul>

**Table 3.10. Accountability Pillar overall summary**

0000 Generic School Division

Corresponding colours on actual report card: ■ Green ■ Yellow ■ Orange ■ Blue

7	Measure category	Measure category evaluation	Measure	Jurisdiction results				Provincial results			Measure Evaluation		
				Current result	Prev Year result	Prev 3- year	Current result average	Prev year result	Prev 3- year average	Achievement	Improvement	Overall	
Goal 1: High Quality Learning Opportunities for All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safe and caring schools</li> <li>Student learning opportunities</li> </ul>	Good	Safe and caring	83.5	84.4	80.9	84.2	84.4	82.7	Intermediate	Improved	Good	
		Good	Programme of studies	77.7	77.2	73.7	78.5	78.1	76.9	Intermediate	Improved	Good	
			Education quality	86.6	84.1	80.8	87.6	87.7	86.0	Intermediate	Improved significantly	Good	
			Drop-out rate	2.5	3.2	3.6	4.7	4.9	5.3	Very high	Improved	Excellent	
Goal 2: Excellence in Learner Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student learning achievement (Grades K-9)</li> <li>Student learning achievement (Grades 10-12)</li> </ul>		High-school completion rate (3 yr)	78.9	78.7	78.2	70.4	70.4	69.1	High	Maintained	Good	
		Issue	PAT: Acceptable	75.0	69.4	74.2	76.9	77.0	77.3	Low	Maintained	Issue	
			PAT: Excellence	12.2	12.1	11.7	19.1	19.4	19.4	Low	Maintained	Issue	
		Acceptable	Diploma: Acceptable	85.1	86.6	88.1	84.7	85.7	85.6	Intermediate	Declined	Issue	
			Diploma: Excellence	19.5	19.2	19.7	23.0	23.0	22.0	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable	
			Diploma exam	57.9	58.0	58.1	53.7	53.5	52.4	High	Maintained	Good	
			Participation rate (4+ exams)										
			Rutherford Scholarship eligibility rate	35.2	35.3	35.1	37.2	35.3	33.9	High	Maintained	Good	
Goal 3: Highly Responsive and Responsible Jurisdiction (Ministry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation for life-long learning, world of work, citizenship</li> <li>Parental involvement</li> <li>Continuous improvement</li> </ul>	Acceptable	Transition rate (4 yr)	35.1	35.2	34.2	39.5	37.0	34.6	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable	
			Work preparation	74.2	68.6	74.1	77.1	77.0	74.7	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable	
			Citizenship	75.8	74.2	70.3	76.6	76.8	74.8	Intermediate	Improved significantly	Good	
		Issue	Parental involvement	71.0	74.5	70.7	77.5	77.9	76.0	Low	Maintained	Issue	
	School improvement	76.2	72.8	66.1	76.3	76.8	73.2	Intermediate	Improved significantly	Good			

collaboration.’ Another official pressed this point, noting: ‘We don’t publish rank order of schools; that’s a philosophical stance we take. Certainly external agencies get a hold of our data, but we don’t do that in our department.’

Like Ontario, there is a shared perception that the best way to get all stakeholders on board is through organic dialogue and relationship-building and not by ‘holding a hammer over them’. That is not to say that there are no consequences for poor performance. One senior Ministry official mused: ‘We hold children more accountable for their performance than we do adults. There should not be that disconnect ... If there are no consequences for [the school’s] actions, then it’s not accountability.’ The official went on to emphasise, however, that consequences do not necessarily have to be punitive in nature but may take the form of customised school improvement support. Note that this emphasis on positive rather than negative pressure is similar to the Ontario paradigm of accountability.

Correspondingly, within Alberta, each jurisdiction is required to address their low or declining measure results in their three-year plans. A range of capacity-building support programmes are offered by both Alberta Education and professional associations such as the Alberta School Board Association (ASBA), the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) and the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA). Take-up of these services is on a voluntary basis. Alberta Education has chosen not to develop prescriptive measures on the grounds that each school is best equipped to identify the strategies that work best in their circumstances.

*How much should we track into how they do it? That’s the problem; I guess that’s the challenge. I think our accountability framework is pretty good on keeping on the results based, out-*

*comes based focus. If you meet our standards then we have no business asking you how you did it.*

Senior Ministry official

The Ministry officials acknowledged that there have been some negative, knee-jerk reactions from other stakeholders. However, they feel that the gradual collaborative process adopted by the Ministry (teachers have been involved in the development of provincial standards) has been instrumental in creating a more widespread buy-in. Other stakeholders are more circumspect, with the majority expressing concern over the fact that there is too much emphasis on exam scores despite the fact that of the sixteen measures used, only four are related to student achievement data (based on performance in the provincial assessment tests and the high-school diploma exams).

The one exception to this story is the Alberta Teachers Association, which feels that there is a real disconnect between Alberta Education’s Accountability Pillar and the province’s stated education goals. Nonetheless, the majority of interviewees did acknowledge and appear to appreciate the government’s attempts to address that issue through the development of ‘softer’ indicators such as citizenship, which are more difficult to measure.

### 3.3.4 Thinking about choice and competition

In 2003, centre-right think tank the Fraser Institute developed the Canadian Education Freedom Index to measure the relative freedom that parents in different provinces have to educate their children. The index (see Table 3.11) analyses private provision of education, and looks specifically at regulations regarding home schools, private schools and charter schools.

**Table 3.11: Canadian Education Freedom Index**

Category	Home School	Independent School	Charter School	Average Score	Rank
AB	50%	75%	66%	64%	1
BC	50%	88%	0	46%	2
QC	50%	75%	0	42%	3
MB	25%	88%	0	38%	4
ON	50%	25%	0	25%	5
NB	50%	25%	0	25%	6
NS	25%	25%	0	17%	7
NF	25%	0%	0	8%	8
SK	0%	13%	0	4%	9
PE	0%	0%	0	0%	10

### *Alberta*

Alberta came in first, based on the extent of financial assistance that it gives students wishing to be home-schooled (it is the only province to do so), or to attend a private school. Alberta is also the only province in Canada to have legislated charter schools. One interviewee argued that Alberta's openness to outside providers is a reflection of the province's socio-economic history: 'I think that Alberta, because of its oil industry, is more open to entrepreneurial spirit, less into government interference ... the concept of the individual is more prevalent out west, and certainly in Alberta.'

Despite Alberta's supportive legislation, the overall number of private providers (charter or private) within the system has remained fairly stable (and relatively small: 4 per cent of Alberta students are served by the private sector). This stability can be partly attributed to strong opposition from the teacher union and some school boards. For example, according to Alberta legislation, charter schools, like public schools, have to hire certified teachers. However, the Alberta Teachers Association does not allow charter school teachers to be part of the Association – a personal disincentive that makes recruit-

ment of staff for charter schools exceedingly difficult at times.

Dr Lynn Bosetti, in her study of the 'Alberta Charter School Experience' (2000), found that under such circumstances, parents and communities often need 'missionary zeal' to successfully get a school up and running, and to ensure that it stays running. Furthermore, despite the fact that charter schools were envisioned as sites for innovation, Bosetti notes that 'to date, charter schools in Alberta appear to be less about competition, innovation and educational efficiency than they are about choice and community.'

Another possible explanation for the slow growth of the private sector in Alberta is the fact that public and separate school boards have worked hard on incorporating the philosophy of choice into their system. For instance, Edmonton Public School Board<sup>158</sup> has committed itself to providing education that meets the needs of its parents and students. The board has thus diversified the types of schools provided: in addition to the local neighbourhood schools, they have single-sex schools, gifted schools, and specialist schools in sports, arts, social sciences, and so on. Some school boards (particularly Edmonton Public and Edmonton Catholic) have also

<sup>158</sup> Some observers consider Edmonton Public to be the most successful example of a public choice programme in North America.

been fairly aggressive in co-opting successful private schools into the public system. (Under current legislation, private schools are partially funded; incorporation into the public sector offers schools significant financial gains.)

The diversity of schooling options within Alberta's public sector – an important area that was left out of the Canadian Education Freedom Index – has created strong competitive pressures between school boards. More crucially, these competitive pressures have had positive consequences for students. Edmonton Catholic's choice programme, for instance, was developed in response to the fact that the district had been losing students to Edmonton Public Schools. Even in rural communities, competition between the two main sectors (public and separate) is perceived by some to be fairly strong, a situation exacerbated by falling school rolls.

The diversity of schooling options also suggests that parental voice has a strong impact on the Alberta education system. In a survey of Canadian and Edmonton parents,<sup>159</sup> it was found that Edmonton parents are significantly more likely than the average Canadian parent to support the concept of choice<sup>160</sup> (92 per cent versus 78 per cent). Furthermore, about 62 per cent of Edmonton parents report that they have checked annual reports on schools' performances, and about 42 per cent of those reported using that information to make their decision, a percentage that is significantly higher than the national average of 45 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. Interestingly enough, Alberta also has the lowest percentage of parents who send their children to a neighbourhood school – a statistic that Alberta Education has interpreted as proof of choice in action, and that the Alberta Teachers Association perceives to indicate a lack of good neighbourhood schools.

### *Ontario*

Approximately 6 per cent of Ontario students are in the private sector, compared with 4 per cent in Alberta. Despite the private sector's small foothold, the 'threat' of further expansion is taken very seriously by the McGuinty administration, which has begun to monitor enrolment rates in the private sector as a measure of public confidence in the publicly funded education system. It is also noteworthy that when McGuinty first came to power, he cancelled a tax credit that former premier Mike Harris had introduced for parents who sent their children to private schools. (The credit, introduced in 2002, was initially worth 10 per cent of tuition fees, but was intended to grow each year until it was worth 50 per cent of independent school tuition fees.)

While private–public competition is comparatively low, as in Alberta the existence of four different school boards (English Public, English Catholic, French Public and French Catholic) generates competitive pressures. Unlike Alberta, however, in Ontario Ministry officials were less likely to view these competitive pressures positively. One official noted: 'Competition between schools can often create more negative outcomes ... we prefer a model of collaboration.' This viewpoint is unsurprising given the Ministry's attempt to embed an ethos of collective accountability and ownership.

Correspondingly, the Ministry has sought to increase the level of collaboration within the system, particularly across school boards and streams. Currently, many school boards organise schools into 'families' by geographical area. Each family is headed by a school superintendent, and the organisation structure is intended primarily for administrative purposes – although many families develop their own professional learning networks and practise economies of scale (e.g. the sharing of a literacy specialist). The extent to which this is

159 P. Maguire, 'Choice in Urban School Districts: The Edmonton experience' (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2006).

160 Defined here as: 'Parents should be able to send their children to another school if they are dissatisfied.'

### Alberta Initiative for School Improvement<sup>161</sup>

While competition is certainly leveraged as a driver for change in Alberta, the government and stakeholders have also encouraged collaborative practices and networks across schools, districts and stakeholders. Interviewees were particularly proud of the impact one model of collaboration, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), is having on the system.

Started in 2000, AISI aims to improve student learning through the development of projects that take into account the particular needs and challenges of school jurisdictions and communities. AISI was born out of an ongoing dialogue between the key players of the Alberta education system (Alberta Education, Alberta Teachers Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Home and School Councils Association, the Alberta Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, and the University Faculties of Education). From the start, AISI was conceived as a model for collaborative problem-solving: ‘The AISI approach to improving student learning is through partnerships and collaboration in a culture of continuous improvement, inquiry and reflection.’<sup>162</sup>

Under AISI, schools apply for funding to develop individualised schooling improvement projects. Schools have to demonstrate that their proposals are grounded in current theory and evidence. However, there is no penalty if the projects fail, thereby enabling schools to take larger risks. The projects are nonetheless rigorously reviewed by the School Improvement Branch of Alberta Education, which requires schools to provide data on demographics, staffing allocations, quantitative and qualitative student indicators, budget expenditures, and analyses of student outcomes and effective teaching practices. The results of each AISI project are compiled in a provincial database and presented each year at a learning conference – steps intended to ensure the rapid dissemination of best practices.

Internal reviews of the AISI programmes suggest a significant impact on the culture of schools in Alberta, not least owing to the high rates of participation: 90 per cent of public and private schools were involved in the first AISI cycle (2000–2003). The Provincial AISI Report for Cycle 1 indicates that AISI has had a positive impact on student learning (more than 90 per cent of all projects exceeded their baseline on the majority of measures every year), has developed a shared language of school improvement, has promoted evidence-based practice in classrooms and has enhanced the quality of professional development. Reviews by the University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge lend further support to the government’s assertion that the AISI projects are serving as hotbeds of innovation.<sup>163</sup>

An official at the Alberta Teachers Association boasted: ‘There’s been a tremendous amount of system learning. You go to a conference and most of the research that you’re reading about is stuff that’s been done in Alberta.’

More crucially, AISI is perceived by all stakeholders to have strengthened horizontal collaboration – that is, the links across jurisdictions and partners – and to have ‘established a foundation of trust between government and education stakeholders’.<sup>164</sup> On a micro level, every jurisdiction has an AISI coordinator who acts as a ‘boundary spanner’ – helping schools to develop links with other schools/jurisdictions that are tackling similar issues. On a systems level, the sense of ownership among the AISI partners has also buffered the initiative from some of the more political tensions between the Ministry and stakeholders.

AISI’s initial success has prompted the government to invest more money into the project and to introduce further cycles. Across the board, interviewees expressed strong support and pleasure with this move. A paper presented at the 2007 American Education Research Association Conference on AISI<sup>165</sup> positively concluded that ‘AISI has been a powerful antidote to resorting to quick fixes, narrow definitions of educational accountability and seeking standardised solutions to complex challenges. By building partnership fidelity in terms of capacity and intention trust, AISI can foster hope in the place of ambivalence.’

161 For more information, see: <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi.aspx>

162 N. McEven, ‘Improving schools: Investing in our future’ (Alberta: Alberta Education, 2006).

163 As these universities are also involved in the AISI programme, their work may also be categorised as that of internal reviewers. Alberta Education is in the process of commissioning an external review of AISI by an independent researcher.

164 Provincial AISI Report for Cycle 1, 2004.

165 J. C. Couture, S. Harris and M. Hrycauk, ‘Trust for Partnership Fidelity in School Improvement’ (2007).

the case, however, differs from board to board depending on the leadership of the superintendent.

“ Embedding the existing reforms to ensure sustainability and preventing teacher burnout may very well need to be the next strategic priorities for both governments”

In practice, this viewpoint does appear to have filtered down to practitioners: during focus groups with Ontario head teachers (secondary and primary) in Toronto, they were more likely to emphasise the value of collaboration with other schools in their school boards and in the district as a driver for improvement. This was also the case in interviews conducted at high-attaining public and Catholic schools, with interviewees crediting the use of collaborative networks (hard and soft; across primary and secondary schools; between schools of the same phase; between different school boards) as a significant lever in the transformation of school performance.

### 3.5 Reflections

In many ways, the experiences of Alberta mirror that of Ontario. The two provinces have had similar reform trajectories and have adopted comparable approaches to:

- Accountability (an emphasis on collective accountability and on positive rather than negative pressure);
- Collaboration (tone of interaction between stakeholders is key; development of framework for cross-school/board, multiple stakeholder collaborations);
- Governance (the devolution of autonomy of school jurisdictions and individual schools; a focus on developing human capacity).

It is in the specific strategies and measures that the differences between the two regions widen:

- Both provinces have taken significantly different stances towards private education provision. Alberta has chosen to provide partial funding to private schools as part of its commitment to choice and diversity. Ontario has chosen not to do so as the Government opposes the expansion of the private sector.
- This difference in attitude is mirrored to a lesser extent in both Ministries' stance on competition. The multiple public-school divisions in both provinces, by their very nature, engender a certain level of competitive pressure. In Alberta, however, market competition has at times (and in certain areas) been actively used as a driver for school improvement. The Ontario Ministry, however, actively discourages the notion of market competition, preferring to emphasise the merits of collaborative learning networks as a driver for change. Thus school boards are organised around the concept of 'families', and hard and soft networks of collaboration (inter- and intra-boards) are encouraged.

Arguably, the most significant challenge now facing both Alberta and Ontario is their ability to sustain the gains they have wrought so far. The first dimension to this dilemma – shared by both provinces – concerns the pace and sustainability of change. Results from studies on change management indicate that reforms take a minimum of five years to become embedded within any given system. The fast-paced nature of the Government's reform agenda, combined with the Government's focus on meeting short-term targets, raises concerns that the system is not being given enough time to institutionalise the myriad new initiatives.

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As an official of a major stakeholder organisation noted: ‘The ministry expects positive change in performance even before implementation is completed. They want to eat the cake before it’s baked.’

There is also concern that teachers may feel overloaded by the slew of initiatives. At a high-performing secondary school in Ontario, the school leadership team had produced a mind map illustrating the numerous provincial, district and school level initiatives that were being used (or

should be used) to further student achievement. The map was a complex web of interlinked policies, which documented over 40 potential initiatives. ‘We joke about the number of programmes that we’re supposed to be implementing,’ the principal said, ‘but it’s not really an exaggeration.’ Indeed, embedding the existing reforms to ensure sustainability and preventing teacher burnout may very well need to be the next strategic priorities for both governments.

# 4

## Hong Kong

Tseung Kwan O New Town is one of nine new housing developments in the New Territories. Walking out of the Tseung Kwan O MTR station, one is immediately greeted by the sight of towering apartment blocks. Most of these apartments are leased under the government's public housing scheme, although construction is underway on a block of 'for-purchase' condominiums. Painted a pristine white, with borders of blue and green, the public housing blocks present a stark contrast to the often dismal conditions of social housing

estates in England.

Nestled within Tseung Kwan O's ring of skyscraper blocks is a cluster of five schools, three secondaries and two primaries. The schools are built in startling proximity to each other, and the multiple elevations of each school block<sup>176</sup> makes it easy to look into the compounds of one's neighbouring schools. The question as to whether the egress of the schools' combined student population at the end of the day was difficult to manage drew a bemused but polite negative.

This practice of clustering schools in

166 *Education at a Glance (2007)*, Table A1.2a, p. 37.

167 Census and Statistics Department, 'Hong Kong in Figures, 2007'. Data is for the year 2006 and is for the population aged 15 and above.

168 *Education at a Glance (2007)*, Table A1.3a, p. 38.

169 Census and Statistics Department, 'Hong Kong in Figures, 2007'. Data is for the year 2006 and is for the population aged 15 and above.

170 *Education at a Glance 2007.*, Table B1.1b, p. 187; expenditure is reported in equivalent US dollars using purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates; for primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

171 For primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

172 *Ibid.*, Table B2.1, p. 205.

173 Census and Statistics Department, 'Education Data for 2006/2007'.

174 *Education at a Glance (2007)*, Table B4.1, p. 230.

175 Census and Statistics Department, 'Education Data for 2006/2007'.

176 To maximise very valuable land space, school blocks typically have anywhere between three to seven levels. It is also not uncommon to have school halls of two different schools built one on top of another to reduce the overall footprint.

**Table 4.1. Comparison of selected indicators**

Indicator	Hong Kong	OECD average	United Kingdom
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained at least upper secondary education (2005) <sup>166</sup>	51.5 <sup>167</sup>	68	67
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained a tertiary qualification (2005) <sup>168</sup>	24 <sup>169</sup>	26	30
Annual expenditure per student on core services, ancillary services and research and development (2004) <sup>170</sup>	n/a	\$6,608	\$6,656
Expenditure on educational institutions <sup>171</sup> as a percentage of GDP(2004) <sup>172</sup>	3.5 <sup>173</sup>	3.8	4.4
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure (2004) <sup>174</sup>	23.3 <sup>175</sup>	9.2	8.7

housing developments is certainly a testament to the efficiency of its urban planners. It is also a powerful visual demonstration of choice and competition within the Hong Kong education system. Families living in the newly built blocks of Kan Hok Lane have at their doorsteps the choice of three secondary schools:

1. QualiEd College (motto: 'All are educable'), sponsored by The EduYoung Organisation
2. The Logos Academy (motto: 'The heart of education is education of the heart'), sponsored by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union
3. Heung To Secondary School (motto: 'A value-added school providing high-quality education and austere atmosphere'), sponsored by the Heung To Education Organization Limited

Proximity, commonly cited by English parents as the reason for choosing their child's school, is not a big issue. Instead, schools aggressively compete to raise their profile within the community: hanging brightly coloured banners advertising their latest achievements; holding open events for the community; and engaging in branding activities that highlight each school's distinct vision of educational excellence. QualiEd College, for instance, counts among its teaching staff several prominent local writers and has taken upon itself the task of organising an annual writing competition to identify up-and-coming young authors.

Competition among schools is stiff, and falling school rolls have raised the stakes. What is particularly interesting about the Hong Kong scenario is that competition isn't restricted to an elite group of schools or students alone; QualiEd for instance, is one of a new breed of schools that are being set up with students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in mind.

Of all the case studies profiled in this book, Hong Kong offers the most advanced example of a competitive system of education provision. This chapter aims to trace the development of Hong Kong's education market and the changes realised by the territory's most ambitious reform programme to date.

#### 4.1 Historical context

Hong Kong's robust brand of free-market capitalism, strong Confucian tradition, British colonial inheritance and relationship with China has profoundly shaped the climate and structure of its schooling system. Yet, for all its differences, as the world converges under the formidable power of always-on technology, there are discernible similarities in the direction of travel.

As with many colonies, the early years of education provision in Hong Kong were closely tied with the fortunes of missionary groups, in this case the missionaries from the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. From the start, the colonial government relied heavily on these two bodies for the provision of education to local people in an attempt to manage (i.e. reduce) its administrative and financial costs. While the government subsidised the cost of operations at these church-sponsored schools, the day-to-day management, as well as the provision of start-up capital, was the responsibility of the Church.<sup>177</sup>

What is unique about Hong Kong is that this reliance on outside providers never ceased. Following the Second World War, the Government was faced with the need to rapidly expand education provision. Aware that they did not have the capacity to take on this task, the government chose to encourage more organisations (mostly charitable or religious bodies) to become School Sponsoring Bodies (SSBs).

Currently, only 5 per cent of public schools are operated by the government.

177 J. K. Tan, 'Church, State and Education: Catholic education in Hong Kong during the political transition', *Comparative Education* 33:2 (1997), Special Number (19): Education and Political Transition: Implications of Hong Kong's Change of Sovereignty, pp. 211–32.

The other 95 per cent are subsidised schools (also known as the aided sector), that is, public schools that receive financial subsidies from the government but that are operated by independent SSBs. There are approximately 100 SSBs, of which about 30 are considered to be ‘large’ bodies (i.e. run five or more schools); a significant number of SSBs run just one school. The Catholic and Anglican Churches remain the largest two providers in the public system.

This multiplicity of education providers can be said to have created a system of sub-systems, each with a unique ethos and (for the larger administrative bodies) administrative structure. Under current legislation, sponsoring bodies define the vision and mission of their schools. They appoint and manage all staff, and exert particular control over the leadership team (principal and senior managers).

In 1992, the government moved to introduce school-based management (The School Management Initiative) in an attempt to increase public accountability and efficiency, as well as parental and teacher involvement in decision-making at a school level. The assumption was that these changes would lead to an improved, and more even, quality of education across the system.<sup>178</sup> Take-up was initially voluntary in nature, although the government eventually made the practice mandatory after receiving several promising evaluations of the School Management Initiative.<sup>179</sup>

Concurrent with the school-based management reforms, Hong Kong was preparing itself for its return to the People’s Republic of China. Within the education sector, educationists were aware that the move would, at the very least, necessitate significant curricular reforms. For instance, the medium of instruction would likely be shifted to Mandarin (Pu Tong Hua), and the Chinese government had already indicated that it would mandate the introduction of civic education. The time, it

seemed, was ripe for a systematic review of the education system.

In early 1998, the Education Commission (a non-statutory body that advises the government on education matters, and the most important advisory body in education) started its review.<sup>180</sup> This took over two years to complete and the ensuing report, ‘Learning for Life, Learning through Life’,<sup>181</sup> redefined the aims and vision of Hong Kong’s education system and set out an ambitious ten-year programme of reform encompassing areas including governance, professional development, curriculum, assessment and admissions.

As with the other countries profiled in this book, Hong Kong’s vision of education in the 21st century emphasises elements such as all-rounded development – a love of and capacity for life-long learning, and citizenship. Where Hong Kong has garnered significant interest from researchers in curriculum development is in its emphasis on global, not just national, citizenship; and on democracy as central to the prosperity to its society:

*The overall aims of education for the 21st century should be to enable every person to ... [be] willing to put forward continuing effort for the prosperity, progress, freedom and democracy of their society, and contribute to the future well-being of the nation and the world at large.*<sup>182</sup>

‘Learning for Life’ also represented a watershed in the development of Hong Kong’s understanding of educational excellence. Of particular note is the fact that the proposals represent a conscious effort to:

- move away from Hong Kong’s famed (and infamous) examination-based system to one that offers more diverse opportunities for learning
- close attainment gaps and focus on educational equity through a commit-

178 Education Manpower Branch and Education Department (EMB & ED), *School Management Initiative: Setting the framework for education quality I Hong Kong school* (Hong Kong: the Government Print, 1991).

179 Since 2000, all public schools (government and aided) have implemented school-based management. More recently, however, the government has passed a bill requiring that all schools use a particular school-based management structure: the incorporated management committees (IMCs). The larger SSBs, in particular the Catholic Church, are resisting this change owing to concerns that the new management structure may diminish their control over their schools. The Catholic Church has in fact filed a lawsuit against the government. For a concise overview of the development and challenges of Hong Kong’s school-based management system, see H. Yu, ‘Implementation of School-based Management in Hong Kong: Recent developments and future challenges’, *Journal of Educational Change* 6 (2005), pp. 253–75.

180 For more information, see: [http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index\\_e.html](http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index_e.html)

181 The report, as well as updates on the implementation progress, can be found on the Education Commission’s website: [http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index\\_e.html](http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index_e.html).

182 Education Commission, ‘Learning for Life, Learning through Life’ (2000), p. 4.

ment to the principles of 'society-wide mobilisation' and 'no loser'.<sup>183</sup>

#### 4.2 Hong Kong's education system

As mentioned earlier, the majority of government-funded schools in Hong Kong are run by non-governmental organisations (charities or religious bodies). These schools are classified as 'aided schools'. The Government also provides partial funding to independent schools known as direct subsidy schools (DSS), in an effort to increase the diversity and quality of the private sector (see p70 for more detail.) Finally, there are a small percentage of international, fee-paying schools, of which the English Schools Foundation (providing education based on the English curriculum) is the largest provider.

Demographically, Hong Kong's population is largely ethnically homogenous. Most immigrants come from Mainland China, although China's booming economy has rendered migration to Hong Kong less attractive than before. The decline in immigration rates has overlapped with a

temporary dip in the territory's birth rate. Correspondingly, the Hong Kong education system is struggling with the problem of falling school roles, a situation that is not expected to stabilise until 2012 for the primary sector and 2018 for the secondary.

Politically, the Hong Kong education community is peopled with numerous advisory and representative bodies for a multitude of issues and type of schools. Public interest in education is high, and the Chinese-language press, in particular, is noted for its outspoken coverage of educational issues and controversies. Further information on the operational and governance processes of the system can be found in the appendices.

#### 4.3 Hong Kong in the literature

Hong Kong's schools perform very well by international standards. In the 2006 PISA assessments, Hong Kong was ranked second out of 57 countries for the performance of its 15 year-olds in science, second only to Finland. In mathematics,

**Table 4.2. Number of schools, pupils and teachers in the primary and secondary sector for 2006/2007<sup>184</sup>**

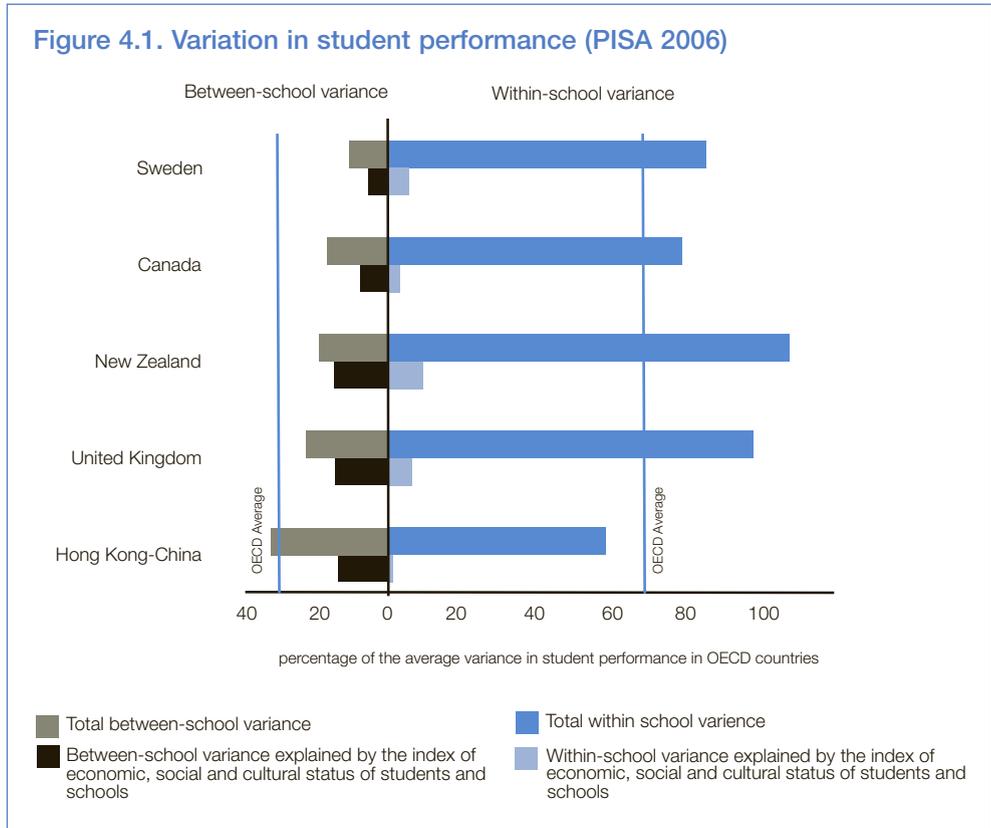
Authority	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of teachers
Primary	668	410,516	23,695
Government			
Aided	602		
DSS <sup>185</sup>	18		
ESF <sup>186</sup> & International	48		
Secondary	528	484,195	28,634
Government			
Aided	457		
DSS	46		
ESF & International	25		
Total	1,196	894,711	52,329

<sup>183</sup> As the section on culture will illustrate, this focus on equity has proven to be somewhat contentious.

<sup>184</sup> Hong Kong Education Bureau: <http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=1&nodeid=1038>.

<sup>185</sup> Publicly subsidised private schools, allowed to charge top-up fees.

<sup>186</sup> English Schools Foundation, the largest consortium of private, international schools in Hong Kong.



Hong Kong ranked at the top, alongside Chinese Taipei, Finland and Korea (i.e. the scores for these systems were not statistically different). As for reading literacy, the latest PISA results show a significant improvement in student performance since the first study in 2000; in 2006, only Korean and Finnish students outperformed Hong Kong students. Furthermore, the relationship between student performance and socio-economic background is weaker in Hong Kong than in the average OECD country. The achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds in Hong Kong is significantly smaller than the OECD average, suggesting that there is greater equality in the distribution of student performance.

For all that Hong Kong appears to be meeting the needs of its low achievers, the picture is not completely rosy. There is significant variation in performance between schools, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. These

findings suggest that the Hong Kong education system is highly segregated academically, an unsurprising fact in light of the territory's admission system of banding (see section 4.4.2). Researchers have also noted disparities between first-generation immigrant students and native students.

More worryingly for Hong Kong's vision of a society built on life-long learning is the finding that students report high levels of stress, a low sense of belonging to their schools and low motivation in learning. Indeed, in the TIMSS studies, Hong Kong is one of the lowest ranked participating countries with regard to the indicator of students' sense of belonging to their schools.

#### 4.4 Findings

##### 4.4.1 Culture

Researchers of East Asian education systems frequently argue that the extraordi-

nary academic successes of these systems can be traced to the cultural practices and assumptions that underpin these societies.<sup>187</sup> This thesis was certainly supported by a broad cross-section of stakeholders and analysts within the Hong Kong system, although interviewees were also quick to point out that the territory's Confucian<sup>188</sup> heritage can act as a double-edged sword.

As a route to excellence, Confucian philosophy places heavy emphasis on the value of learning. Education is both the means by which one becomes a moral, upright person and the tool with which one serves the larger community. The value of a good education has also been carved on to the Chinese mindset through historical precedence. Professor Kai Ming Cheng, Chair of Education at the University of Hong Kong, points out: 'For more than 2,000 years since the time of Confucius, examinations were the means of selection or nomination for high-status positions within officialdom. In the 1,000 years between the Sung dynasty and the downfall of the monarchy in 1911, civil examinations were an important annual national exercise. The civil examination, and nothing else, was the social ladder that enabled upward mobility.'<sup>189</sup>

Crucially, achievement in Confucian culture is generally considered to be more a product of hard work than a manifestation of one's innate ability. Stevenson and Stigler, in their classic comparative study of education in East Asia and North America, note: 'Chinese and Japanese societies allow no excuses for lack of progress in school; regardless of one's current level of performance, opportunities for advancement are always believed to be available through more effort. High scores on a test are interpreted as a sign of diligence.'<sup>190</sup> As such, parents, teachers and students themselves hold high expectations of what is possible, given adequate effort and support. Taking into account the evidence that high expect-

tations have a strong positive impact on student outcomes, it is possible that the low impact of SES on student performance in Hong Kong is a product of this cultural 'buffer'.

The practitioners we interviewed were appreciative of the fact that Hong Kong parents are generally very supportive of the efforts of their children's schools and teachers. It should be noted, though, that parental support here is not necessarily the same as engagement. We found that practitioners working at schools with lower socio-economic compositions were more likely to report a hands-off approach to school management issues among parents, with support being channelled to activities like fund-raising. One principal noted: 'When children come to school, their parents give them over to us ... we know that if we need their backup, if we scold their children, they will support [us].'

On the flip side, Hong Kong parents can be said to overemphasise a narrow definition of education achievement, as measured by national public examinations and other such standardised assessments. Professor Cheng argues: 'The cultural priority of clearly delineating one's status within the collective leads naturally to an educational system that emphasises examinations and competition.' One of our interviewees, a vice-principal at a high-performing, value-added school,<sup>191</sup> echoed Cheng's argument in a more tongue-in-cheek manner: 'In the Chinese society we all like examinations [*laughs*], it's true.'

The emphasis in Confucian culture on academic achievement has contributed to Hong Kong's reputation (as that of other East Asian countries) as an examination-oriented system characterised by high-stakes testing and high levels of stress among students. Indeed, educators express concern that students have little love of learning, perceiving the education system as a series of hoops to jump through in the pursuit of employment, rather than as a

187 See, for example, H. W. Stevenson and J. W. Stigler, *The Learning Gap: Why our schools are failing and what we can learn from the Japanese and Chinese* (New York: Summit Books, 1992); D. Biggs and J. Watkins, *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, 1996).

188 Traditional Chinese culture has been greatly influenced by Confucian teachings. As such, we will be using the term 'Confucian culture' rather than 'Chinese culture'.

189 K. M. Cheng, 'Can Education Values Be Borrowed? Looking into cultural differences', *Peabody Journal of Education* 73:2 (1998), p. 16.

190 Quoted in Cheng (1998), p. 95.

191 As in England, the term 'value-added' is used in Hong Kong to refer to a school's effectiveness at improving a child's performance, after prior student attainment has been taken into account.

### Jockey Club EduYoung College

EduYoung is an aided, secondary school in Tin Shui Wai, a recognised problem spot in Hong Kong due to the high rates of unemployment and poverty. Most of the students that EduYoung recruits come from the lower academic achievement bands and are disengaged from the traditional curriculum. The college has worked hard to develop and promote alternative programmes of study that the teachers and leadership team believe will better serve and resonate with their student population. (Many Band 2 and 3 schools<sup>192</sup> are attempting to carve niches for themselves within the system by diversifying the range of programmes offered.) The continued parental emphasis on academics is, however, creating a dilemma for these schools.

Jimmy Lui, EduYoung's vice-principal, explains:

*In our schools we try to balance what the parents ask for and what we want to do. In the past few five to eight years, we've been carrying out the education reforms, and Hong Kong schools tend to more follow the market. If the parents do not choose the school as their option, their children do not come to our school, the school will close down. Under this kind of market pressure, we have to respond to parents, but some parents, they're not clear what to give to their children.*

*At the moment, many, many parents are only asking for academic results. But for example in our school, we set this as only one of eight targets ... of course we are clear that we need to improve student academic performance, but at the same time we need a holistic programme to support them morally, mentally, have vision, to let them enjoy their school life ... That's why if we only respond to parents' demand for academic training ... then it's not good enough for our students, but we have no choice. We must respond to parents to make them choose us and let their children get into our school ... that's from my point of view quite a difficult job to carry out.*

good in itself. A member of the Committee of Home and School Cooperation's board of directors mused:

*It's difficult [to strike a balance]. Hong Kong parents want their children to do well and push them hard. And our students do do well internationally [in comparative studies like PISA] ... but where are our Nobel Prize winners? Our students don't love learning. They study to get a job and make money, not because they love to.*

This emphasis on academic achievement has also arguably led to a devaluing of vocational education and other applied pathways. Students who do not qualify for a pure academic course of study are often classed as failures, a source of shame for their families. Professor Ho, the Director of the Hong

Kong PISA studies centre, observed: 'The high-stakes testing system that we practise, it creates a lot of labelling ... the stigma is still there if you don't get all As, if you can't qualify to go on to university.' Given the objectives of the Learning for Life reforms (in particular the commitment to creating a system responsive to the needs of all students and to ensure that there are 'no losers'), altering this mindset is essential. In the introduction to the Commission's reform proposal, then Chairman K. C. Leung, in a pre-emptive move, argued:

*We must emphasize that the enhancement of the standard of students in general is never in conflict with the nurturing of academic excellence. Instead, we believe that all students have vast potentials, and education enables them to fully develop. Excellence is essential*

<sup>192</sup> In Hong Kong, secondary schools can be loosely classified into three bands based on the academic achievements of its student intake. For more information, see the section on banding and streaming.

*for the society, but a monolithic educational system can only produce elites in the very narrow sense of the word. The elites we need today are multifarious, and only a multifarious educational system, with diversified curricula, teaching methods and assessment mechanisms can produce the multi-talented people expected by the society.*<sup>193</sup>

Changing parental and societal expectations is, however, going to pose a formidable challenge for the government and educators, as the experience of Jockey Club EduYoung College illustrates.

#### 4.4.2 Banding and streaming

Hong Kong has a long tradition of grouping students according to ability at the secondary level, both across schools (banding) and within schools (streaming). Under the new secondary school placement scheme, students are ranked according to merit based on their scaled internal assessment results from the end of Primary 5 through Primary 6.<sup>194</sup> Students are then divided into one of three bands based on their percentile score, with Band 1 consisting of the top 33.33 per cent of the student population and so forth.

Parents and students can choose up to 30 schools which they wish to attend. The order in which parental choices are matched with available spaces is, however, determined by which band the student is in. Band 1 students are given first priority in the school placement process, followed by Band 2, and so on. However, within each band, students are randomly picked by the computer program. Thus, elite public schools, while receiving all Band 1 students, may not necessarily receive the top 5 per cent of the student population, but Band 1 students that fall anywhere from the first to the thirty-third percentile. Within schools, further streaming of students is at the discretion of principals and teachers. There are no statistics on the percentage of schools

that choose to stream students according to ability. Interviewees reported, though, that additional streaming, even at the primary level, is the norm.

As with New Zealand's decile system, these bands are not meant to indicate the quality of the school but the type of student population it tends to draw from. Nevertheless, due to the emphasis on academic achievement within the Confucian culture, attending a Band 3 school still carries a certain amount of stigma. As with New Zealand as well, there are significant differences in the socio-economic composition of schools from different bands. Researchers Salili and Lai note that 'In Band 1, the majority of the children come from middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds. Most Band 1 schools in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon peninsula are located in more prosperous areas, enjoy better facilities, have better teachers, and have more extracurricular programs than higher band schools.'<sup>195</sup>

Critics argue that attainment test results in primary school may not be a fair indicator for future performance in secondary school, particularly for individuals who are late bloomers. They also argue that the practice of banding may create self-fulfilling prophecies, since the physical environment and general culture of a school has been found to have an impact on student motivation and learning. As an illustration, in a longitudinal study on learning and motivation, Salili and Lai found that students in higher bands (i.e. lower-ability groups) 'used fewer strategies in learning, had lower self-efficacy and lower attainment scores. They also had less positive attitude, lower levels of motivation and were more anxious in learning English.' Researchers were unable to ascertain whether students in lower-band schools genuinely had less academic ability than students in higher-band schools.

Results from the PISA studies also clearly show that Hong Kong schools are highly academically segregated; the large

193 Education Commission, 'Learning for Life, Learning through Life' (2000).

194 Students' internal assessments are scaled using the average of the sampled results of Pre-Secondary One Hong Kong Attainment Test for that year, and the Academic Aptitude Test Results in the 1999/2000 school year.

195 F. Salili and M. K. Lai, 'Learning and Motivation of Chinese Students in Hong Kong: A longitudinal study of contextual influences on students' achievement orientation and performance', *Psychology in the Schools* 40:1 (2003), pp. 52–70, p. 53.

between-school variation suggests that the type of school one ends up going to is a greater predictor of future student achievement in Hong Kong than it is in the average OECD country. One interviewee, a prominent academic argued: ‘The banding system is problematic ... [the result of] a culture that accepts hierarchical inequities as natural, acceptable ... but unless they get rid of it completely, there’ll always be stratification within the system.’

Among practitioners, however, the practice of banding and streaming appears to be accepted as a pedagogical tool for effective teaching. The argument posed is that it would be extremely difficult and thus inefficient for teachers to meet the needs of an overly diverse group of students. As it is, the number of bands has been reduced from five to three as part of the Learning for Life reforms, in an effort to decrease the academic stratification of students. As one teacher explained:

*Not everyone learns at the same pace ... if we had to teach fast and slow learners at the same time, then we’d have very bored or very lost students.*

It is unclear, however, whether there is conclusive evidence to support this belief. On the other hand, academics and stakeholder representatives were more likely to interpret the practice of banding as a pragmatic course of action rather than as a sound pedagogical tool. Peter Hill, the Secretary General of the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority, and an international expert on education reform, noted: ‘Well, when you’ve been in a situation that’s highly banded you can’t just throw it out. The system would collapse. So moving from five to three is a lot of movement for these schools. Now, for an outsider who has had no banding, they think, well, why don’t you just throw it away?’ Another interviewee, the chair of one of the advisory councils, pressed this point, noting that

the system at present is ill prepared for a complete removal of the banding system: ‘It’s going to take a while to change. Our teachers have never been trained to deal with a diverse range of students ... the system is not ready ... until now [the preparation of the system is] not sufficient.’

Hong Kong academics and educationists remain concerned about the impact that banding has on educational equity. At a recent conference on Hong Kong’s performance in the PISA 2006 study, school academic segregation was flagged as a major policy concern. As some of our interviewees have suggested, though, a complete end to the practice of banding may well depend on how schools are adjusting to the impact of the new secondary school placement scheme.

#### 4.4.3 Competition

Hong Kong schools are fiercely competitive, and interviewees unanimously agree that competition between schools has been the most significant driver of improved standards in recent years. So, what factors have produced this competitive climate?

It appears as though Hong Kong’s falling school rolls are the biggest impetus behind the system’s competitive climate. Over the past five years, falling rolls have made ‘school survival’ a challenging reality for the primary sector. On average, 40 per cent of schools have been closed in each of the nine districts in Hong Kong; in two districts, up to 60 per cent of schools were closed due to insufficient numbers.<sup>196</sup> This demographic challenge of falling rolls is now affecting secondary school enrolment, and stakeholders are bracing themselves for similar rates of school closures. The grim reality of the situation is reflected in the way interviewees framed their discussion of the subject: as a matter of ‘life or death’.

The high rates of closure can be attributed to the government’s strict viability criteria: any school that fails to recruit 23 students for a Primary One class will auto-

196 Information obtained from Bureau official.

matically have their right to hold this class revoked. More crucially, that school will henceforth not be allowed to recruit any additional P1 students, in effect guaranteeing the permanent closure of the school within a few years. Several schools have taken the Education Bureau to court over these school closures, but the Bureau has held firm on the '23' magic number. (Bear in mind Hong Kong's compact size and (remarkably efficient) public transportation system. Students are by no means restricted to attending a neighbourhood school; indeed, in older housing estates, established schools need to recruit students from other areas in order to meet their minimum student targets.)

A senior official from the Education Bureau observed:

*If we give in on 23, people are going to keep pushing and then where will it end? It's a question of efficiency; we've calculated the minimum number of students that each class has to have to maximize resources ... we're not going to back down.*

Unsurprisingly, the government's intractability on this issue has raised the hackles of the main teachers union, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union. In a newsletter to its members, an article on school closures in the primary and secondary sectors described Bureau officials as 'ruthless' and 'cold-blooded' and the policy as having 'totally eradicated the trust between teachers and Bureau'. Of more pressing concern to the union was its perception that competitive pressures had created a situation wherein: 'Teachers have become salesmen, advertising agents, publicity officers, whose main task is to promote their schools. Schools have become agglomerations of desperate teachers who are forced to sacrifice their students' well-being for their schools' survival.'<sup>197</sup>

Is this posturing on the part of the union, or an honest representation of

grass-root dissatisfaction? Certainly, interviewees were quick to point out the pervasiveness of teacher concern over job stability and the increased workload that coping with the competitive climate had produced. A recent study for the Bureau put average teacher workloads at more than 55 hours a week.<sup>198</sup> At the same time, interviewees unanimously acknowledged that despite the pressures on schools and teachers for 'survival', the competitive climate had created a better outcome for students.

In the secondary sector, competition between schools is also driven by the parental choice provisions in the student admission framework. To facilitate the decision-making process, Hong Kong schools are required to publish information transparently on the web. A schools portal provides this service in a standardised form, showing staff numbers and qualifications, average length of teacher experience, teacher to student ratio, special programmes, presence of a parent-teachers association and a student union.

Schools have also begun to market themselves explicitly, producing glossy coloured brochures and small logoed trinkets (such as bags, pens and cups). In our visits to schools, it was not unusual to see large banners hung over the front of the school advertising the most recent achievement of its students. Schools work very hard at developing a brand for themselves, using highly evocative mottos, as already noted.

What is particularly fascinating is that this intensity of competition and branding is not just confined to the schools that draw on students from higher socio-economic classes, or that are known to be academically elite. Even among Band 3 schools (i.e. schools that draw their student population primarily from the lowest achievement band), competition is keen, as schools use the Bureau's value-added index and a range of vocational/applied pro-

197 <http://www.hkptu.org/ptu/director/pubdep/ptunews/508/ptunews.htm>.

198 Study on the Effectiveness of Public-sector Secondary Schools (Phase 2) Cross Case Report 2001.

### The direct subsidy schools scheme<sup>199</sup>

Competitive pressures have been further heightened by a deliberate policy of the Bureau to foster school diversity and choice, through the development of the private sector. Set up in 1991, the direct Subsidy Schools scheme was initially open only to secondary schools; since 2001, non-government primary schools have also been allowed to apply for DSS status.

Under the DSS scheme, schools are given a per-pupil subsidy and allowed to charge top-up fees of up to HK\$5,000 a month. Whilst HK\$5,000 is small change by English standards (approximately £200), it's worth bearing in mind that the compulsory years of schooling (Primary 1 to Secondary 3) is free in a government or aided school; from Secondary 4 to 7, school fees are around \$6,000 a year.

DSS schools are also given considerable leeway in making decisions on curriculum and admissions policy, a move that is supposed to be 'conducive to a better alignment between the values and expectations of parents and the school and provides a solid foundation for home-school cooperation'.<sup>200</sup> One of the more attractive features is their ability to choose their own medium of instruction – English is considered by most parents to be a vital tool for future success, but the government generally discourages all but the best government and aided schools from using English as a medium of instruction, because of China's emphasis on Mandarin. Fundamentally, though, the scheme is intended to engender a paradigm shift within schools: 'Because they have all sorts of power, the mentality changes ... we are talking about the mentality.'<sup>201</sup> Ownership of their own development is seen, here, as the most powerful lever for change.

As of the 2006 school year, 64 schools have joined the DSS scheme (46 secondary, 9 primary, and 9 primary and secondary schools). While the number is still far below government targets, it is worth noting that a number of the most academically prestigious aided schools have opted to become a DSS school. Critics of the direct subsidy scheme are concerned over the impact that it will have on equity within the system. They argue that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds will now have less opportunity to attend the best schools in the territory as they will not be able to afford the top-up fees.

When queried on this point, the Bureau official did not seem to perceive a potential conflict in interest. She countered with the argument that most of these elite schools now offered scholarships for poorer students, and that some DSS schools (such as QualiEd College) are specifically targeted for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and thus charge very low fees. Owing to the fact that the direct subsidy scheme is still fairly new, there has yet to be any research on the impact that changing status to DSS has on student outcomes or on school segregation by socio-economic status.

grammes (traditionally, Hong Kong's weakest link) to illustrate their ability to serve a population that has typically been left behind within Hong Kong's highly academic system. Thus, schools helpfully point out their ranking in the value-added index in their brochures, and in some cases, even in their school motto (e.g. 'A value-added school providing high-quality education and austere atmosphere').

Despite the intensely competitive climate, it does not appear as though opportunities

for collaboration are spurned. Indeed, high-performing schools appear to consider it an honour to be invited (either by a fellow school or the Bureau) to share their lessons with or serve as a mentor to other schools. One principal (herself a former Bureau official) explained: 'To be so good that everyone wants to learn from us, that's added prestige ... it's good promotion.' Furthermore, sponsoring bodies offer an immediate support network for their schools, with joint professional development training, curricular plan-

199 <http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=1475&langno=1>.

200 Speech by Mrs Fanny Law, GBS, JP Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower at the Grand Opening Ceremony of the St Margaret's Co-educational English Secondary & Primary School, on Friday, 25 February 2005.

201 Interview, senior Ministry official.

ning, and so on. Specialised stakeholder organisations (e.g. Special Schools Council) also offer a ready network for cross-school collaboration.

On a national level, the Bureau has set aside HK\$5 billion to set up a Quality Education Fund. Much like the Alberta Initiative for Schooling Improvement, the fund supports the development of individualised schooling improvement programmes that are research-based and that engage multiple stakeholders. Recipients of funding are also required to present the results of their research project at an annual conference.

The chairperson of a major stakeholder organisation argued that the introduction of the fund provided not just an influx of sorely needed money, but prompted a shift in attitudes: ‘It breaks the philosophy that everyone should get the same thing ... we’ve seen an increase in initiative of local bodies, and schools now have to own their own education development.’ This point was emphasised by another stakeholder representative, who asserted: ‘We didn’t really have a sharing culture before the fund was introduced ... there’s a commitment now to share good practice with each other.’ To date, however, there have been no independent assessments of the effectiveness and impact of the Quality Education Fund on education quality and standards in Hong Kong so it is not possible to verify whether or not the fund has increased horizontal collaboration within the system.

#### 4.5 Reflections

Given the extent to which the Confucian culture has shaped the climate of the Hong Kong education system, it is legitimate to question the extent to which policy interventions can be borrowed or lifted wholesale for application in England.<sup>202</sup> At the same time, it would be erroneous to treat Hong Kong as a completely alien system.

Peter Hill argues: ‘There’s nothing especially unique about the Hong Kong experience; the challenges they face are common problems across the world.’<sup>203</sup> The challenge, then, is in recognising the extent to which comparison is valid.

One such dimension would be the way in which competition and collaboration plays out in the Hong Kong system. Due to the confluence of a number of factors – sharp drops in the student population; Hong Kong’s small and highly urbanised area; and strict enforcement by the Education Bureau – schools have been forced to compete with one another for students. The stakes are high in this quest for survival, and schools have gone to considerable lengths to cultivate distinct identities, ethos, pedagogies and even target populations. What is particularly remarkable is that these competitive pressures operate evenly across the system, not just among elite schools catering to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. At the same time, competition between schools has been moderated by the natural support network formed by school sponsoring bodies (SSB).<sup>204</sup> Collaboration among schools run by the same SSB is common, particularly with regard to professional development. The government does, nonetheless, hope to increase collaboration; hence the establishment of the Quality Education Fund, which ties funding for schooling improvement projects to the involvement of multiple stakeholders.

The outcome of Hong Kong’s market system of provision has been fairly promising for parents and students: an increased diversity of educational choices; improved transparency and reporting to parents and communities; and higher standards across the board. Teachers and principals are, however, feeling the strain, and it’s questionable to what extent they will be willing to continue to work long hours under conditions of low pay, low autonomy and high stress. It seems reasonable to posit that the Hong

202 Underlying this issue is another, arguably more fundamental, question: can policy interventions alter cultural values and norms? (Should governments even try?)

203 Interview

204 From an English perspective, SSBs can be understood as quasi-federated structures.

Kong government and teaching unions will need, in the coming years, to revisit the terms of existing teaching contracts and redefine professional expectations.

Finally, the Hong Kong case study illustrates the powerful influence of culture on attitudes towards student attainment. Here, the Confucian emphasis on achievement as a product of hard work rather than as a function of innate ability has created an environment of high expectations of all students. This in turn may account for the higher average standards of Hong Kong's students, and the lower impact that students' SES has on their performance. (Though as the com-

parison of the SES school profiles of different bands demonstrate, it would be erroneous to say that class is no longer a factor.)

Nurturing a similar culture of student achievement in England will by no means be easy. Nonetheless, the government can begin by promoting a consistent focus on standards – as all the systems in this report are doing – and by presenting an unequivocal message that 'all students can achieve'. It would also be worth revisiting the way in which English discourse tends to fixate on ability as an innate measure of future success and the impact this has on student motivations and outcomes.

# 5

## Sweden

Rinkeby is a suburb of Stockholm noted for its large immigrant community. Approximately 85 per cent of the district's 14,000 residents are immigrants or of immigrant descent, and many of these are former refugees. Unemployment rates are considerably higher in Rinkeby than in the other boroughs of Stockholm – only 35 per cent of the working population is employed, compared to Stockholm's average of 72 per cent – and more than half of the residents are on welfare.

Media representations of Rinkeby are generally less than complimentary. At best, it has been described as a segregated enclave; at worst, an immigrant ghetto. Regardless, Rinkeby is a clear illustration of the changing nature and character of Swedish society.

At Bredbyskolan<sup>205</sup> – a 400-pupil, Grades 1-9 comprehensive school – the reverberations from this changing environment are a part of everyday life. Ninety-eight per cent of students here do not speak Swedish as a first language. While the majority of

**Table 5.1. Comparison of selected indicators**

Indicator	Sweden	OECD average	United Kingdom
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained at least upper secondary education (2005) <sup>206</sup>	84	68	67
Percentage of population, aged 25 to 64, that has attained a tertiary qualification (2005) <sup>207</sup>	30	26	30
Annual expenditure per student on core services, ancillary services and research and development (2004) <sup>208</sup>	\$7,744	\$6,608	\$6,656
Expenditure on educational institutions <sup>209</sup> as a percentage of GDP (2004) <sup>210</sup>	4.5	3.8	4.4
Public expenditure on education <sup>4</sup> as a percentage of total public expenditure (2004) <sup>211</sup>	8.3	9.2	8.7

<sup>205</sup> Bredby School.

<sup>206</sup> *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table A1.2a, p. 37.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, Table A1.3a, p. 38.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, Table B1.1b, p. 187; expenditure is reported in equivalent US dollars using purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates; for primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

<sup>209</sup> For primary, secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education.

<sup>210</sup> *Education at a Glance* (2007), Table B2.1, p. 205.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, Table B4.1, p. 230.

students are second- or third- generation Swedes, most come from families that have not been successfully integrated into the Swedish economy and society. Petty crime is a major problem in the borough, and the school has been the victim of three arson attacks in the last year alone.

At first glance, prospects for the school and its students are not promising. According to data collected by the National Agency for Education, the predicted student achievement rates are the lowest among all schools in Stockholm. In terms of actual outcomes, however, Bredbyskolan performs above expectations, and has garnered recognition as a value-added school. Absolute performance has also been improving, and the percentage of students eligible for upper secondary school (the gymnasium) has risen from 50 per cent in 2003, to 75 per cent in 2007 (the national average is 89 per cent).

What accounts for this extraordinary performance? Principal Bjorn Hjalmarsson believes that the school's upward trajectory can be attributed to the commitment of the teachers in ensuring that all students meet the national standards. 'Students have the right to leave school with good minimum standards,' he says. 'It's our duty to help them pass ... if the teacher's programme is presented but students don't learn, that's not OK.'

To that end, the school has developed a strong focus on data. Each student's performance is carefully monitored to ensure that their progress in all subjects is on track; if students are faltering, teachers work in teams to support the student. A central element of its strategy has been the personalisation of the national curriculum to make the lessons more relevant to the experiences of Bredbyskolan's student community. Sweden's differential funding scheme has also enabled the school to hire three full-time 'maternal-language' teachers and maintain a low teacher-student ratio – luxuries, given the resources of the average municipality.

The Bredbyskolan story highlights what is perhaps the best feature of the Swedish education system: its traditional emphasis on guaranteeing every child an equivalent education. 'In Sweden, our curriculum makes clear that this is what every student must achieve,' Hjalmarsson argues. 'When I was growing up, that was not true, some students pass, but some fail ... Now, there's been a change in thinking ... every student can and should pass. That's powerful.'

As this chapter shall illustrate, however, the traditional emphasis on equity in Sweden is being increasingly challenged, both by dissenters, and by socio-economic changes within society. Indeed, the Swedish school system is perceived by the Swedish public (and certainly the media) to be in 'crisis' (a term interviewees themselves used), and wide-ranging reforms are currently being planned. The specific nature of this 'crisis' and the implications of the upcoming reforms will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.

## 5.2 Setting the scene

There are 4,908 municipal and independent compulsory schools (Years 1 to 9) in Sweden (see Table 5.2). Most schools in Sweden are small, particularly by English standards. Sweden defines a large school as a school with more than 700 students, a category containing just 1.4 per cent of compulsory schools. A third of municipal compulsory schools have fewer than 100 pupils, while approximately 55 per cent of independent schools have fewer than 100 students.<sup>212</sup>

Since 1991, responsibility for the provision of education has been devolved to local municipalities and county councils. In 2006, there were 290 different municipalities (and, unbelievably, 3,712 school management districts) of varying sizes; the smallest municipality, Bjurhom, has a population of 2,600, while the largest, Stockholm, has 761,000 residents.<sup>213</sup>

212 Swedish National Agency for Education, descriptive data on pre-school activities, school-age childcare, schools and adult education in Sweden 2006 (2007).

213 The larger Stockholm Urban Area, of which the Stockholm municipality is a part, is sometimes referred to simply as Stockholm, a situation confusing to outsiders. Stockholm Urban Area has a population of about 1,200,000 people.

**Table 5.2. Number of municipalities, schools, pupils and teachers in compulsory schools (Y1 to Y9)<sup>214</sup>**

Sector	No. of school municipalities	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of teachers
Municipal	290	4,306	919,174	75,482
Sami	4	6	138	19
Independent	172	585	74,091	5,583
International	5	8	1,800	167
National boarding school	3	3	254	24
Total	474	4,908	995,457	81,275

Unsurprisingly, this diversity has created a staggering range in outcomes, particularly in terms of operational capacity and standardisation. While smaller municipalities could arguably benefit from some form of amalgamation, interviewees note that any form of rationalisation will be hard to enact due to resistance from local authorities who have come to prize their autonomy.

As indicated in Table 5.2, there are a number of different types of schools in the system: municipal schools (the majority of schools within the public sector); Sami schools, for Sweden's indigenous population; national boarding schools, for students with severe handicaps; independent or free schools; and international schools. Education is compulsory from the age of seven to sixteen, although parents can choose to send their child to school from the age of six.<sup>215</sup>

Demographically, Sweden's education system is faced with two challenges. The first is the fact that the system is about to experience a significant drop in the school-going population. From 1991 to 2002, the number of pupils of compulsory age increased by approximately 20 per cent, from around 870,000 students in 1991/1992 to just over 1,000,000 students in the year 2001/2002.<sup>216</sup> This boom necessitated an increase in schools and an expansion of the teaching force. However, the

school-going population is starting to fall again and population projections indicate that by 2009/2010, the number is going to drop to 1991/1992 levels. Correspondingly, the sector is starting to struggle with the reality of school closures and staff lay-offs.

The second demographic challenge faced by the Swedish system is the rise in the immigrant population. Since 1995, levels have been rising steadily, in large part owing to Sweden's fairly open immigration regulations. The majority (approximately one-third) of immigrants are from other Scandinavian countries. Another third of immigrants (37.8 per cent), however, are refugees, the majority coming from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Iran.<sup>217</sup> Within the school-going population, about 14 per cent of students on average have a foreign background; a majority of these students (approximately 60 per cent) are born in Sweden.<sup>218</sup>

A number of Swedish and international studies have shown that students with a foreign background<sup>219</sup> perform significantly worse than students born in Sweden and with Swedish-born parents.<sup>220</sup> The general socio-economic situation for immigrants also appears to have deteriorated, with immigrants in the 1990s performing more poorly in terms of employment and labour-market participation than in the 1980s.<sup>221</sup> Correspondingly, the education

<sup>214</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education, descriptive data on pre-school activities, school-age childcare, schools and adult education in Sweden 2006 (2007).

<sup>215</sup> It appears that this flexible start age is also being reviewed.

<sup>216</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education, 'Schools like any Other? Independent Schools as part of the system, 1991–2004', Summary Report in English (2006a), p. 44.

<sup>217</sup> UNHCR (2000), cited in Swedish National Agency for Education, 'Reading Literacy and Students with a Foreign Background – Further Analyses from the PISA 2000 Results', Summary of Report 227 (2005).

<sup>218</sup> Ministry interview.

<sup>219</sup> Defined here as: i) students born in the test country but with both parents foreign-born; and ii) foreign-born and with both parents foreign-born.

<sup>220</sup> See, for example, Swedish National Agency for Education (2005).

sector is struggling to ensure the integration of immigrant students, particularly those that were former refugees.

The latter group tends to congregate in isolated ‘pockets’. As with Rinkeby, some suburbs of Stockholm are almost entirely composed of first-generation to third-generation immigrants. Even among second-generation and third-generation immigrants, Swedish is not spoken as a first language, and practitioners working with those populations report similar cultural difficulties in acclimatising those families to the Swedish school system as with first-generation immigrants.

Further information on the operational and governance processes of the system can be found in the appendices.

### 5.3 History of reform

The Swedish Social Democratic Party has governed Sweden for 65 out of the last 74 years. These six and a half decades of rule have left an indelible mark on Swedish society, of which the most notable legacy is undoubtedly the social-democratic welfare state, founded on principles of social inclusion, equity and the redistributive role of the state.

Within the education sector, these principles of equity and redistribution have also infused the system’s development trajectory. From the 1960s onwards, the Social Democratic government pursued policies that aimed to guarantee the right of every child to ‘an equivalent education’. For instance, the introduction of comprehensive schooling pushed back selection from the age of 10 to the age of 16; pre-school education and after-school care was developed; post-secondary education was expanded; and progressive education that emphasised nurture, individual development and civic responsibility (and that critics argued distracted from the ‘real’ objective of education: learning) was promulgated.

In 1991, the Social Democrats were

defeated by a four-party coalition led by the conservative Moderate Party under Carl Bildt;<sup>221</sup> Bildt came to power on a platform of liberalising the economy (and, by extension, reforming the welfare state). In the education sector, then school minister Beatrice Ask oversaw reforms that devolved the responsibility of school operations to the municipal level, promoted parental choice, expanded the private sector through the legislation of independent schools, and revamped the national curriculum and assessment system to the current ‘goal-oriented’ system.<sup>222</sup>

Ask’s reforms were not without precedent. Since the mid 1980s, the Conservatives and Social Democrats had been largely in agreement over the need to devolve power within the school system. Indeed, Asks’ decentralisation policies built on a bill that was passed in 1989 delineating how responsibilities would be distributed to each governance level. The major policy difference between the two parties lay in the Conservatives’ promotion of an independent school system aimed at jump-starting what Bildt called a ‘freedom-of-choice revolution’.

The tenure of the Conservative coalition was short-lived; in 1994, the Social Democrat Party returned to power. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the party chose not to reverse the most controversial reform of the Ask and Bildt administration – the move to increase choice and diversity through the introduction of independent schools that were privately run but publicly funded. According to government-sponsored analyses of that period,<sup>223</sup> the Social Democratic government, in the face of changing political and economic constraints, had themselves come to recognise the merits of a choice framework, albeit one safe-guarded against increased inequity. A senior analyst at the Ministry of Education notes that the school-choice policy was very popular among parents, so much so that the Social

221 The other parties in the centre-right Alliance for Sweden are the Centre Party, the Liberal People’s Party and the Christian Democrats.

222 See appendices for more detail..

223 Swedish National Agency for Education (2006a).

Democrats would have been hard-pressed to rescind it. So the exercise of parental choice became a working reality in the Swedish system and the independent sector expanded rapidly.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Sweden's education system also grew in international stature, initially for its stellar performance in international assessments like PISA and PIRLS, and more recently for the perceived success of its devolution and freedom-of-choice framework.

Internally, however, storm clouds were brewing. The media regularly published articles containing sentiments like the following excerpt, about the decline of the education system:

*Academic knowledge has been sidelined in an approach where little is demanded of the students. During lower grades students are often not given homework. Before the 8th grade they are not even given grades. Respect for teachers has declined as the adults have limited power to deal with troublesome students and as disciplinary actions are very rare.*<sup>224</sup>

Growing public fears over a perceived decline in the quality of the education system made education a hot topic in the 2006 elections – a fact that the opposition coalition successfully capitalised on. In September 2006, after 12 years of Social Democratic rule, the four-party coalition led by the Moderate Party returned to power under Fredrik Reinfeldt. This swing towards Conservative rule was also reflected on the local level in many municipalities, including Stockholm. On a national level, the education portfolio is currently held by the Liberal Party.<sup>225</sup>

It is worth noting that part of the Moderate Party's appeal was their agenda of education reform. The new schools minister, Jan Bjorklund (chairman of the Liberal Party), has long been one of the

fiercest critics of the Social Democrats' school policies, arguing that Swedish schools have been on the wrong track since 1968 and have treated knowledge and student discipline with disdain. Correspondingly, the new government has a raft of reforms planned (to be unveiled in spring 2008). As of the time of publication, it appears that key initiatives will include:

- The introduction of more national assessment examinations. Currently, there is no compulsory national examination until Year 9, the last year of compulsory schooling, when the student is aged 15 or 16.
- The use of grades from the age of seven. Currently, students are not given grades before the first term of their eighth grade in an effort to prevent stigmatisation based on academic ability. The Ministry also intends to introduce finer grading levels (from 3 to 7) to allow more differentiation in the assessment of student performance.
- A shorter inspection-cycle. Under current provisions, each school will be evaluated once every six years; the Conservative Party wishes to increase this frequency to once every three years.
- A re-evaluation of the national educational goals. Under the current curriculum, teachers are given considerable flexibility to tailor the curriculum to their students' needs. There is concern, however, that this room for innovation has been exercised to the disadvantage of students, and that the goals themselves need to be less broad to avoid misinterpretation of government objectives. It is likely that the list of core subjects will also be expanded to include History.
- An overhaul of Swedish policy on student discipline and behaviour, or, more accurately, the introduction of a school policy on student discipline – as of July

<sup>224</sup> Nima Sanandaji, chief executive of free-market think tank Captus, in *The Local*, 19 March 2007.

<sup>225</sup> The Liberals are seen to be more right wing than the traditional Conservative Party (the Moderates), which is pursuing a more centrist path.

2007, the sector did not have one. For example, teachers would be authorised to send written warnings home to parents and reduce grades for pupils caught playing truant. The most controversial aspect of this proposal appears to be the creation of a provision that would enable teachers to dismiss pupils from the classroom at both grundskola (compulsory) and gymnasium (upper secondary) levels.

- ‘Teacher boosting’ policies aimed at improving teachers’ education levels and status. Part of the strategy includes a reform of existing teacher-training programmes.

#### 5.4 Claims to fame

As with the East Asian countries, the Nordic systems tend to perform well in international assessment studies such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. Finland is the most well known and celebrated of the countries in this group, but Sweden has also been successful.

In all three PISA studies, Swedish students performed significantly above the OECD average in reading literacy, and slightly better than the OECD average in mathematics, problem-solving and science. In terms of trends, Sweden’s performance in reading literacy was found to be comparable across the PISA studies, although a comparison of results from the PIRLS 2001 and 2006 studies found a significant decrease in student performance. Similarly, the TIMSS studies suggest that despite Sweden’s relatively high performance in mathematics and science, there has been a slight, absolute decrease in student performance. In 2003, Year 8 Swedish students performed less well in mathematics than their counterparts in 1995; their performance in science has also seen a marginal drop.<sup>226</sup>

The Nordic countries also tend to perform well on measures of equity. Sweden is

one of four countries (the others being Finland, Norway and Iceland) with the lowest between-school variance in the OECD. Sweden also scores significantly below the OECD average on: i) the impact of student’s socio-economic background on student performance; and ii) the degree of variation between the high and low achievers.

More recently, Sweden has garnered international attention for the perceived success of its school-vouchers system. One of the most common critiques of choice frameworks is that families that exercise choice tend to be those who are the most able (financially and culturally) to navigate the educational bureaucracy. Consequently, students from higher socio-economic families end up opting out of struggling schools and leaving behind poorer students in schools that further decline as a result of middle-class flight.

Some researchers argue, however, that Sweden is for the most part circumventing this dilemma. A recent article in *The Economist* proclaims: ‘... the strongest evidence against this criticism comes from Sweden where parents are freer than those in almost any other country to spend as they wish the money the government allocates to educating their children.’<sup>227</sup> Other achievements that are frequently lauded include the sector’s rapid growth, and the positive impact that independent schools have had on student and school performance. These claims, both positive and negative, will be discussed in closer detail in the following section.

#### 5.5 Findings

##### 5.5.1 Competition and choice

In 1991, the Conservative coalition government pushed through the Choice and Independent School Bill. It was hoped that competition from the new private, independent schools would raise standards,

226 Swedish National Agency for Education (2007), p. 155.

227 [http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9119786](http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9119786)

empower parents and students and produce hotbeds of teaching innovation. Under the legislation, companies or organisations apply directly to the National Agency for Education for permission to set up an independent school. However, funding comes from the local municipalities, with each school receiving 85 per cent of the standard per-pupil funding; start-up capital (for the renovation of building premises, for example) is expected to be provided by the organisation/company running the school.

To reduce the threat of segregation by financial ability, independent schools are not allowed to charge fees; hence the other name of independent schools in Sweden: free schools. Where the number of applicants exceed the number of places, independent schools are allowed to use entrance tests or queuing systems to select students. Unsurprisingly, this practice has produced distinct trends in the composition of the average independent school student body. On average, independent schools have a larger proportion of female students, pupils with parents who have attended post-secondary school, and pupils with a foreign background. Moreover, these students with a foreign background are more likely to have parents with higher education qualifications than their counterparts in municipal schools.<sup>228</sup>

The first wave of schools that were set up tended to be primarily of a religious nature or small community schools that would have otherwise been closed down by the municipal authority. As the movement picked up steam, more educational organisations with a specific philosophy came on board – for example, the Rudolph Steiner and Montessori schools. The most recent wave of schools has seen the entry of for-profit companies into the movement, with ‘generalist’ schools that tend to closely mirror the philosophy of Sweden state schools. Currently, generalist schools are the largest category of independent schools.

Since the introduction of the voucher system, Sweden has gained increasing prominence internationally as a choice system that works – one that raises standards, is cost effective and has had a negligible impact on equity. In England, too, the case study of Sweden has often been used to illustrate politicians’ and policy-makers’ conceptions of what a working choice framework could look like.

In terms of raw data, the figures for the growth of the private, independent school sector has been impressive. *The Economist* reports: ‘... the result has been burgeoning variety and a breakneck expansion of the private sector. At the time of the reforms only around 1% of Swedish students was educated privately; now 10% are and growth in private schooling continues unabated.’ The rapid growth of the independent sector suggests, among other things, that there has been a corresponding contraction in the number of public schools owing to pressures of competition.

The actual experience on the ground is, however, somewhat different. It is of crucial importance to note that the introduction of the voucher system coincided with a significant growth in the school-growing population. As mentioned earlier, in the past 15 years the number of pupils of compulsory age has increased by approximately 20 per cent, from around 870,000 students in 1991/1992 to just over 1,000,000 students in the year 2001/2002.<sup>229</sup> Our interviewees thus noted that competition between schools has yet to fully come into effect, since there had been a ‘surplus’ of students. A 2006 study found that only 41 municipalities reported having had to close schools down because of the opening of independent schools.<sup>230</sup> A senior official for the National Agency for Education said:

*It is true that there has been much growth in the number of independent schools ... we have not closed that many schools, though, because the population*

228 Swedish National Agency for Education (2006a), p. 17.

229 Ibid., p. 44.

230 Ibid., p. 27.

**Table 5.3: Pupils completing Year 9 for the school year 2004/2005<sup>231</sup>**

School type	Average merit rating	Proportion of pupils eligible for upper secondary school
Total	206.3	89.2
Municipal	204.9	88.9
Independent	226.2	93.4

*grew at the same time. If we had not had the independent schools then one would have had to open more municipal schools ... there's just too many students.*

This picture is, however, changing. As previously noted, the school-going population is starting to fall again and population projections indicate that by 2009/2010 the number of students is going to drop to 1991/1992 levels. Correspondingly, municipal (and independent) schools are starting to feel the pinch, with more frequent reports of failing municipal schools having to be closed down.

A principal at a successful school in inner Stockholm noted: 'Before, there was no reason to change. We had more students than places!' Another interviewee, a representative of Laraforbundet (the largest teachers' union) concurred: 'I think we're only just starting to see what impact competition between schools, not just free and municipal, but free and free, municipal and municipal, can do for the quality of education. Now schools know that they have to compete for students where before students would come anyway, regardless of their reputation.'

There is evidence that where a competitive environment has developed, standards have risen. In an internal survey of municipal education directors by the National Agency for Education, municipalities with larger proportion of pupils in independent schools were more likely to: i) perceive relationships between schools as characterised by competition; and ii) say that the

presence of independent schools in their jurisdiction had contributed to school improvement in compulsory schools in their municipalities.<sup>232</sup> This finding supports the argument put forward by Caroline Hoxby, a Harvard economist, who concluded that successful choice reform is akin to a rising tide which lifts all boats.

Research by the National Agency for Education and independent researchers also suggests that students at independent schools perform better than their municipal counterparts. As Table 5.3 illustrates, students in independent schools have higher average merit ratings and graduation rates than pupils in municipal schools.<sup>233</sup> While part of this variation can be explained by factors such as differences in the composition of the student body and the lower teacher-to-pupil ratios, additional analyses suggest that independent schools produce better results in some circumstances. For instance, academic programmes at independent upper-secondary schools are more successful in improving pupil attainment (even after prior attainment has been taken into account) than their municipal equivalents.<sup>234</sup>

### 5.5.2 Equity

*The Education Act stipulates that the education provided within each type of school should be of equivalent value, irrespective of where in the country it is provided.*

Curriculum Lpo 94, p. 4

231 Swedish National Agency for Education, Educational Results National Level Part 1, Report 274 (2006b), p. 19.

232 Swedish National Agency for Education (2006a), p. 26.

233 The merit rating refers to the cumulative points for the 16 best grades in a pupil's leaving certificate at the end of Year 9, where the grade Pass = 10 points, Pass with distinction = 15 points, and Pass with special distinction = 20 points (From Swedish National Agency for Education (2006a), p. 8. 'Graduation' rates refer to the proportion of pupils eligible for upper secondary school.

234 Swedish National Agency for Education (2006a), p. 39.

The Swedish school system has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on an equitable distribution of learning outcomes, typically defined as an ‘equal opportunity to learn, including a degree of compensation for students with a less advantageous background’.<sup>235</sup> So, for example, schools dealing with challenging populations (e.g. communities with high unemployment rates; a school population with a high proportion of second-language speakers or immigrants) receive targeted funding that can double the amount of resources (financial and personnel) available to them.

As with East Asian societies, Swedish society places more value on communalism than on individualism. Observers of Swedish culture argue that at the heart of the Swedish psyche is a philosophy or mindset known as ‘*lagom*’. There is no corresponding term in the English language, but it could be defined as ‘not too much, not too little’. Wallenberg argues:

*So powerful is this belief in lagom that Swedes almost religiously subscribe to a self - disciplined lifestyle that eschews excesses and where striving for individuality is looked upon as being socially inappropriate. In manner and thought, Swedes value an economic and social system of checks and balances, free from the generated inequalities of unrestrained capitalism or the waste and mistakes of rigidly focused authoritarian, centralised planning. For the Swede, lagom and ‘the middle way’ represent the best that society has to offer.*<sup>236</sup>

Indeed, a traditional Swedish proverb ‘*Lagom ar bast*’ (literally, ‘Lagom is best’) is translated in the Lexin Swedish-English dictionary as meaning: ‘Enough is as good as a feast.’

Within the Swedish education system, this emphasis on egalitarianism can best be seen in: i) the legislation’s emphasis that every child is entitled to and should receive

an equivalent education; and ii) the high minimum standard set within the system – that every child should leave compulsory education with the capacity of going on to some form of post-secondary training. ‘We’re a system focused on our low rather than high achievers,’ a prominent academic explained. ‘The objective is to get all our students past the minimum level, and most of our resources and energies go towards meeting this goal.’

Indeed, 98 per cent of 16-year-olds make the jump from compulsory to upper secondary education – an impressive figure, particularly when one considers England’s own drop-out rate at age 16.<sup>237</sup> However, of the cohort that goes on to upper secondary, only 70 to 75 per cent of students graduate within four years – a figure that education officials have declared ‘below reasonable expectation’. The Ministry does note, though, that approximately 50 per cent of upper-secondary school drop-outs go on to complete their education through adult education classes.<sup>238</sup> Some commentators also argue that Sweden’s emphasis on ensuring a high minimum standard for all students has enabled Sweden’s students to ‘do well at the top’ – in the PISA studies, the percentage of students performing at high proficiency levels (i.e. Levels 4 to 6) is higher than the OECD average.

It appears, however, that traditional support for the goal of ensuring an equivalent education for all may be eroding. During our interviews, some interviewees made disparaging references to what they termed Sweden’s ‘culture of mediocrity’ or ‘culture of averages’.<sup>239</sup> For instance, a principal at an independent school (who formerly worked in the municipal sector) noted: ‘I think that we tend to squash our brightest students. The curriculum is designed for most to reach and so those that are very smart, once they reach that limit, don’t really have [anywhere] else to go.’ Another interviewee, a political appointee within

235 Swedish National Agency for Education, ‘Equity trends in the Swedish school system’, Report 275 (2006C), p. 6.

236 (Wallenberg, 2005) cited in MacBeath, J. 2006. *Stories of Improvement: Exploring and Embracing Diversity*. International Congress on School Effectiveness and Improvement, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

237 Note, though, that approximately 10 per cent of these students do not meet the entry requirements for mainstream upper secondary school and are instead placed in ‘individual programmes’. These individual programmes are intended to prepare the student for transfer back into the mainstream gymnasium lines. Research suggests, however, that less than 20 per cent of students complete this transfer.

238 P. Bavner, ‘Equity in Education Thematic Review, Sweden Country Report’ (Stockholm: Ministry of Education and Science, 2004).

239 One of the chapter’s reviewers argued that there is no hard evidence to support the opinions outlined in this paragraph, and thus disagreed that Sweden’s historical commitment to ensuring an equivalent access to education for all children was being challenged.

the Stockholm municipality education bureau, argued: ‘We have been so concerned about getting everyone through the system that we have lowered our standards. We don’t differentiate between someone doing very well in maths, let’s say, or someone doing very well in woodwork – it counts the same! [For entrance to university] If Sweden is going to be competitive we’re going to need to start pushing our best ... we’re not all the same.’

This clash of paradigms can perhaps best be illustrated in the arguments surrounding the existing grading system. Prior to 1994, grades were awarded on a norm-referenced basis wherein the distribution of grades (from 1 to 5) was supposed to follow a normal distribution curve:

Grade	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage of students receiving grade	7%	24%	38%	24%	7%

The Swedish National Agency for Education reports, however, that in practice there was a common misunderstanding among teachers that the distribution was supposed to apply to each class. It was also rather difficult for a teacher to accurately anticipate where a student’s perform-

ance fell in reference to the national norm.<sup>240</sup> In a move to address the discrepancies in grading that arose, the government instituted a standard-referenced grading system in 1994 as in the box below.

Supporters of the new grading system argue that whereas most teachers had previously expected a certain percentage of students to fail, there was now the expectation that it was possible for every student to achieve the minimum standard. A principal of a high-performing school in Stockholm (himself a frequent speaker at international conferences on the experience of the Swedish system), notes: ‘It was a powerful change in mentality, from “some are always going to fail”, to “all can and should pass”.’ Critics argue, however, that the grading system, in flattening the distribution curve, has at best held the top students back and at worst lowered standards to ensure that all students are capable of passing – an argument familiar to those who mourn the loss of England’s norm-referenced allocation of A-Level grades.

Additionally, research by the government suggests that the introduction of school choice has contributed to a small rise in school segregation.<sup>241</sup> This trend is troubling, particularly for a country that prides itself on its emphasis on equity (see Table 5.4). At the same time, it would be unjust to heap the blame for increased school segregation solely on the choice framework. A recent report on equity trends in the

Grade	Interpretation
-	Has not attained all goals in the subject
Pass (G)	Has attained all goals in the subject
Pass with distinction (VG)	Has attained all goals in the subject and satisfies the criteria for the award of pass with distinction
Pass with special distinction (MVG)	Has attained all goals in the subject and satisfies the criteria for the award of pass with special distinction

240 For a more in-depth assessment of the old and new grading system, including their relative strengths and weaknesses, cf. Swedish National Agency for Education, *National Assessment and Grading in Sweden* (2005).

241 See Swedish National Agency for Education (2006C) for a review of recent research.

**Table 5.4. Comparative indicators on education equity<sup>242</sup>**

Indicator	Sweden		Direction of Change	Notes
	1998	2004		
Between-school variation: the degree to which attending a particular school makes a difference in student outcomes (measured in average national final grades)	7.8%	11.6%	Negative	There has been a significant increase (about 50%) in between-school variation. It appears that part of this change can be attributed to the introduction of independent schools and the rise in residential segregation
Between-student variation: the degree of variation between low and high performers (measured as total deviation in average national final grades)	60 points	66 points	Negative	There has been a significant increase (11%) in between-student variation. This increase may be attributed to changes in the grading system; researchers have also found evidence of grade inflation <sup>243</sup>
Impact of student's socio-economic background on student achievement (measured by effect of having at least one parent with tertiary education)	35 points	37 points	No Change	Small, but not substantial, increase in the impact of a student's socio-economic background on student performance
Degree of school segregation (measured as between-school variation in distribution of pupils with highly educated parents)	17.6 points	19.4 points	Negative	A significant increase of approximately 10% indicating that segregation by socio-economic background has increased
Impact of school's socio-economic composition on student achievement (measured in average final national grade points)	23 points	39 points	Negative	A substantial increase of approximately 70%, suggesting that there is a stronger impact on student performance due to school's average socio-economic composition

Swedish school system points out that most students choose to go to the school that is geographically closest to their home, thereby suggesting that the increase in school segregation is also a reflection of an increase in residential segregation.<sup>244</sup> This residential segregation is exacerbated by

the impact of immigration.

It was interesting to note that in terms of perception, our interviewees were far more concerned with educational inequality as a result of changes in immigration patterns than as a result of socio-economic background or gender. It was not uncom-

<sup>242</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education (2006c).

<sup>243</sup> See, for example, C. Wikstrom, C. 'Grade Stability in a Criterion-referenced Grading System: The Swedish example', in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* 12:2 (2005), pp.125-44.

mon to hear interviewees voice statements like: ‘It’s important that we not be an immigrant school in Rinkeby but a Swedish school in Sweden’<sup>245</sup> and ‘We’ve got a real problem with the experience of immigrant students ... their performance is shockingly poor compared to native students.’<sup>246</sup>

It appears, though, that the government does not believe it entirely possible to reconcile the goals of diversifying the system and maintaining equity, suggesting that some degree of trade-off is necessary. In the closing statement of the NAE report on equity, the agency states:

*It should be made clear that the observed deterioration in equity, likely due in part to school reforms, does not necessarily imply that the total net benefits of these reforms are negative. Increased freedom of choice as well as an increased diversity of schools has generated many positive effects unrelated to equity. The **political** question is therefore, how much variation and freedom of choice can a school system accommodate while claiming to maintain an equitable distribution of learning outcomes?*

Overall, the picture suggests that Sweden’s equity performance is on a slight downward trend, albeit from an extremely positive starting point. It remains well above average in OECD measures of equity. Whether this decline is considered acceptable, given the benefits of choice and diversity, may well depend on wider changes in Swedish society.

### 5.5.3 Coming to grips with accountability

The language of accountability, as understood in Anglo-Saxon culture, is fairly new to the Swedish educational milieu. There is no comparable term for accountability in the Swedish language, and we often found that it was necessary, during the course of

an interview, to provide our respondents with an explanation of accountability (as understood in England), or to use a substitute phrase like ‘held responsible for’. This is not to say that Swedish practitioners and educators do not understand or subscribe to the concept of accountability. Rather, the point is that they have previously discussed and framed the issue in different terms.

For instance, in going through official documents and discussions with our interviewees, we found that they demonstrated a highly developed understanding of professional accountability. In a chapter on the fundamental values of the Swedish education system, the national curriculum clearly states: ‘Education shall be adapted to each pupil’s preconditions and needs. The Education Act stipulates that the education provided within each type of school shall be of equivalent value, irrespective of where in the country it is provided.’

This statement of belief, that schools and teachers have a responsibility to adapt to student needs in order to secure successful outcomes,<sup>247</sup> has very powerful implications for professional accountability, as the opening case study on Bredbyskolan illustrated. A vice-principal working at another Rinkeby school noted: ‘You can’t put the blame on the child ... never ... it is up to the teacher to ask “what do I need to do differently in order to help my child learn?”’ Another principal concurred, using even stronger language to argue: ‘As a teacher, you do not have the right to stop trying to move students ahead.’ The language of rights and duties is striking.

To what extent is this focus on teacher and school adaptability embraced and practised across the system? Most of our practitioners agreed with the emphasis on adaptability, although there was considerable disagreement as to how widely it was actually practised. According to the representative of Lararförbundet: ‘More and more teachers are accepting that it is their

244 Swedish National Agency for Education, ‘Equity trends in the Swedish School System’, Summary of Report 275 (2006c), p. 24.

245 Vice-principal, primary school in Rinkeby.

246 Senior manager, national agency for school improvement.

247 This focus on child-centred learning is very much in line with Swedish social policy.

responsibility to make students learn ... five, ten years ago, this wasn't really the case ... it's getting better.' A senior analyst at the Ministry of Education and Research was considerably less optimistic, arguing that while most teachers gave a token nod to the idea of adaptability, in reality many did not have the capacity or training to do so. He observed: 'There's no strong sense of professionalism, teachers aren't typical learners and schools are not learning communities.'

This discrepancy between intent and practice in the process of increasing transparency and accountability was raised over and over again by our interviewees. On one hand, these concerns could simply be a result of growing pains. Many of the practices associated with accountability frameworks in England (e.g. inspections, league tables) are still fairly new to the Swedish system. For instance, school inspections were only introduced on a regular basis in 2003. The National Agency for Education is still coming to terms with the logistical details of ensuring a quick inspection turnaround. By that same reasoning, the difficulties that some users have reported in accessing school performance data through the national database (SIRIS) could be attributed to the fact that the database is very much a work in progress.

On the other hand, some concerns suggest a more serious tussle over the balance of power in a governance system that has prized autonomy. As an illustration, consider the consequences of a poor inspection report. The responsibility of monitoring school reform belongs to the local municipality; while the NAE can request that schools develop a schooling improvement plan, they are not able to mandate specific actions or take punitive action should improvements fail to occur. As one Ministry analyst disparagingly noted: "Free" schools as a paradox are more subject to state governance and have thus

more accountability in the system than municipal schools. The NAE can refuse to renew their grant if they don't perform, whereas in a municipal school, the NAE can't strongly interfere.'

There also appears to be some professional resistance to the existing accountability framework. According to the union representative: 'We do think that it is legitimate to require inspections but we worry that they are not inspecting the right thing ... teachers are very important in the Swedish system, but they spend so little time observing or talking to teachers.' Correspondingly, the union is currently advocating more teacher input and assessment.

#### 5.5.4 Teachers: Autonomy and status

Under the Swedish system, teachers are given considerable autonomy in fleshing out the curriculum and choosing the appropriate pedagogical methods and tools.<sup>248</sup> The emphasis on individualising education also means that each teacher is expected to be able to adapt to each child's specific learning needs (as described in section 5.5.3). Within such a framework, it is unsurprising that stakeholders raised numerous concerns about the challenges involved in developing an effective teaching force.

Across the board, the majority of our interviewees felt that the availability of qualified teachers posed a serious barrier to achieving high standards across the system. During the 1990s, the sharp rise in the student population, coupled with the economic recession, created a situation where demand for trained teachers outpaced supply. As a stopgap solution, schools began to hire untrained personnel, and the proportion of untrained teachers in the system is now fairly large. At present, 84.3 per cent of the teachers in compulsory schools have higher-education training qualifications, compared with 73.2 per cent of teachers in upper secondary schools.<sup>249</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Recall that the goal-oriented framework prepared by the national government was consciously designed to allow for considerable interpretation and innovation on the part of the teacher.

<sup>249</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education (2007).

## Teacher wages reform

Since 1995, Swedish teachers have been paid according to a decentralised, individual pay scheme. The move to a performance-related pay scheme was introduced with the objectives of increasing efficiency (particularly in budgetary terms) and improving the quality of teaching. It was also intended to clarify the division of responsibilities between the central and local government: municipal officials were concerned that they had no control over key working conditions such as pay and hours, despite the fact that they were in charge of hiring and paying staff.

The broad conditions of employment with regard to pay and working time are agreed upon by the two teacher unions and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, the organisation representing the employers. In terms of implementation, the process of wage setting can occur either as a one-to-one dialogue between the teacher and school principal, or through negotiations with the local union.

Given how contentious the issue of performance-related pay is, the obvious question in this instance would be: how did the government manage to abolish the fixed-pay system, which was at that time widely supported by the teacher unions?

According to a UNESCO case study on Sweden's reforms,<sup>250</sup> the economic crises of the 1990s had created a deadlock at the bargaining table. With little money to spare, municipalities refused to address an increase in teachers' salaries without a move towards an individualised pay scheme. The teacher unions in turn had come to perceive that an increase in wages would only be possible if they raised the status of teachers. To that end, the unions signed a declaration that explicitly stated their responsibility in improving the quality of school education. The unions also hoped that competition for teachers at a local level would lead to a collective wage increase beyond what would be promised in a central contract.<sup>251</sup>

Have the reforms lived up to these hopes? Existing research<sup>252</sup> suggests that the scheme has functioned so far more as a labour-market instrument than as a means of rewarding performance. The reasons are twofold. First, a shortage in the supply of teachers drove up the entry-level wages of new teachers. This, coupled with budget constraints, meant that principals were not always able to raise the salaries of existing teachers. Second, as municipalities are still developing clear criteria for assessing teacher performance, there is still a tendency to evaluate teachers on the basis of effort and commitment rather than on actual outcomes.

Additionally, union dissatisfaction with the implementation of the national agreement is creating new tensions between the teachers' unions and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities, the body representing municipal employers. The chief assertion here is that teacher salaries and working conditions have not improved sufficiently, or at least not as much as the unions had anticipated.

There is reason to believe, however, that these concerns are simply growing pains. Support for the individualised pay scheme has risen considerably among teachers. A survey carried out by *Läraförbundet*,<sup>253</sup> the largest teachers' union, found that over 60 per cent of their members were in favour of the scheme (compared to less than one-third of members in 1999). Indeed, the *Läraförbundet* interviewee commented: 'We are quite supportive of the [individualised wage] system ... we think that it has been a good motivator for teachers.' A senior Ministry analyst concurred, noting: 'We are one of the few countries with individualised pay for teachers ... we haven't gone as far ... made as much of it as we could have, but it's there ... we can work on it.'

250 A. Strath, *Teacher Policy Reforms in Sweden: The case of individualised pay* (Paris: UNESCO, 2004).

251 In practice, the individualised wage scheme has been expanded in phases. The First Agreement included a 20 per cent stipulated increase in national expenditure on teacher's salaries and a minimum salary level. In the current incarnation, minimum salary is only for pre-school, primary and mother-tongue teachers, and guaranteed raises are only for the first two years of the contract (instead of all five).

252 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–19.

253 Cited in Strath (2004).

The difficulty in developing an effective workforce appears (as in the other countries profiled) to have two dimensions: gaps in the quality of training; and difficulties in recruiting the best candidates. With regard to the former, interviewees raised concerns over the fact that: ‘We ask a lot of our teachers, and to do the job well it’s not enough to know something about the subject. They need to understand the pedagogies, the psychologies of working with children of different ages.’<sup>254</sup> Another interviewee, a senior official at the National Agency for Education, concurred with this, noting: ‘There’s an ongoing investigation on the qualification of teachers ... we want to introduce some kind of certification, because currently training is provided by more than twenty institutions and there are considerable differences between them.’

Does training as a teacher, and in the specific subject being taught, really matter? Readers familiar with the English context may point to the effectiveness of the independent schools’ teaching force – a significant portion of which do not have formal teaching qualifications. Research conducted by the National Agency for Education suggests, however, that there is some evidence for the argument that qualified teachers have a greater, more positive impact on their students. Specifically, they found that in two out of the three subjects examined (Swedish and English), students achieved better results with teachers who have undergone teacher training and education in the subject. No comparable correlation was found for Mathematics.

The second dimension of the problem, and arguably the more serious, is that teaching (as in the other countries profiled) has lost its lustre and thus fails to attract high-calibre candidates. Frequent concerns were also raised about the degree of remuneration afforded the teaching profession in comparison to other occupations. Indeed, the most recent round of

negotiations between the teacher unions and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions for a new teaching agreement (see box on teacher wages reform) has been drawn out, in no small part, because of union dissatisfaction over the pace of salary increases in the last ten years.

The link between recruitment and remuneration was underscored by an education official for the Liberal Party (the party in charge of the municipality of Stockholm), who asserted: ‘There are so many spaces in the teacher education, but it really comes down to salaries ... teacher salaries aren’t competitive and we need to make them so if we want to get the best people.’ In response to this allegation, a Ministry official argued that ‘Teacher wages have been going up; the problem is that for the work that they do, teachers still feel underpaid.’

Indeed, a number of interviewees raised concerns over the breadth of objectives that teachers and schools were expected to achieve. One academic argued: ‘Swedish teachers have broader task requirements compared to other countries ... this affects their ability to be effective.’ The real challenge may well be revisiting the tasks that schools are expected to achieve, and to seriously question how many of the current goals have justly been placed on the shoulders of teachers.

## 5.6 Reflections

Given the attention and accolades heaped on the Swedish education system (at least in England), we were fascinated by the belief within Sweden that the system is in a state of crisis. Granted, the extent of discontent with the Swedish education system appears to be: i) inversely related to the distance between the individual and the school (for example, parents and teachers were more likely to view the system in a positive light than someone with no direct links to a child studying at school or to an

<sup>254</sup> Interview with union representative.

educator); and ii) related to one's ideological stance. Nonetheless, we were bemused by the number of interviewees who expressed genuine curiosity over our decision to study Sweden, rather than their neighbour, Finland.

Is the Swedish education system in crisis? No more, one might argue, than any other country.

In a recent audit on the national assessment and grading system, the National Agency for Education reported: 'This system is heavily reliant on the integrity and professional assessment capacity of school-teachers, but is also vulnerable to failure at the local level.'<sup>255</sup> This pronouncement neatly encapsulates the double-edged nature of the Swedish education system. On the one hand, the autonomy accorded to practitioners under the current system has empowered them to act as curriculum developers and to capitalise on their intimate knowledge of their pupils and community. On the other hand, in instances where teachers, and schools, are not living up to the responsibilities placed on them, the lack of an external accountability framework makes it difficult for the Ministry to rein them in.

The emergence of the independent sector during a period of considerable student population growth appears to have limited the impact of competition, although this

situation is likely to change with the projected decline in student numbers. Where it has had an impact, the presence of the independent sector has arguably prevented state counterparts from being complacent and has reshaped the terms of the debate. Additionally, the popularity of the parental-choice policy renders a return to a purely state-school environment, or even one with strong central control, untenable. Finding a balance between autonomy and accountability will require redefining expectations on the part of stakeholders and actors at the state, municipality and school level.

Finally, Sweden's historical commitment to ensuring an equivalent education for every child is reflected not just in official policies (e.g. their differential funding formula, which gives schools in challenging circumstances additional resources), but also in professional discourse – helping learners learn is not simply a job function, but a duty. At the same time, there is evidence that education inequality is increasing in Sweden – a downward trend that demands immediate redress. Arguably, the most important challenge for the new Conservative-led coalition is to preserve the best of the Social Democratic heritage – the commitment to ensuring an equivalent education for each child – alongside necessary reforms to create a more responsive, transparent system.

<sup>255</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education (2005), p. 28.

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# 6

## Conclusion

Despite the considerable differences in organisation, structure and philosophy, the conundrums faced by each of the systems profiled were remarkably similar. A basic, and by no means conclusive, list of questions could include the following:

- How can governments support the development of professional autonomy while ensuring institutional and professional accountability? How might governments ensure the maximum availability of effective teachers?
- How should the contract between parents, students and schools be framed?
- What is the optimum balance in power-sharing which would give schools sufficient room to innovate, but also ensure that the centre has the leverage to rein schools in where necessary?
- How might systems maximise the benefits that parents and students receive from competition between schools, and that schools receive from engagement in collaborative networks?
- What is the best relationship between the fee-paying and state sectors? How can the energy and performance of the fee-paying sector be harnessed so that it is available to as many as possible?

The countries and provinces examined have not always pursued similar policy solutions in their quest to square the above circles. Nonetheless, even where there were significant differences in approach, a closer examination of the internal logic of each system reveals common underlying principles. In this conclusion, we will draw

together these tenets to create a framework, a proposal of what we believe a coherently aligned school system should look like.

Specifically, we suggest that an ideal system can be characterised by the analogy of ‘tight, loose, tight’: clearly delineated objectives, responsibilities and standards; the freedom and autonomy to innovate at the school and classroom level; and comprehensive mechanisms for evaluating school performance and ensuring institutional and professional accountability. In doing so, this chapter lays the groundwork for our follow-up report on specific policy proposals for the English context.

### 6.1 First ‘tight’

#### *Clarity and consistency of vision*

Keeping large-scale, system-wide reforms on track is, as our own experiences in England have taught us, a Herculean task. Changes need to be simultaneously undertaken by all stakeholders, on multiple levels, and sustained over long periods of time. Without universally understood and agreed-upon objectives, it is not difficult for those who are implementing the diverse facets of a change programme to become overwhelmed by ‘initiatives’, to lose sight of the overarching end goal, or, more worryingly, to clash with one another over what the desired outcomes should be.

Contrast this scenario – as seen to different degrees in Hong Kong, New Zealand and Sweden – with the experience of Ontario. The McGuinty administration

has successfully distilled their overarching vision of education into concrete end goals, which can be summed up in a single tagline: raising the bar, closing the gap. The simplicity of this message, and the consistency with which it has been presented, creates no ambiguity. There is no doubt as to what every partner in education – administrators, practitioners, parents and students – should be aiming for.

Having a clear and consistent message alone, however, is but one side of the story. Researchers have long noted that policies mutate as they travel from the top, where they were developed, to the bottom, where they are implemented at the school or classroom level. While some of this distortion can be seen as a side effect of large bureaucracies, some is doubtlessly also the product of resistance to the mission at hand.

The Harris administration's experience in Ontario offers a particularly instructive lesson in political strategy. Its failure to bring all stakeholders on board not only damaged public confidence and teacher morale, but also overshadowed the positive – and necessary – elements of their reform agenda. This lesson, that the tenor of any given policy can have a powerful impact on how it is received, is one worth heeding. This is particularly true if we accept that shared vision is less a precondition of successful change than a product of concerted, honest engagement with all partners.

#### *Changing the culture of student achievement*

The case studies in this book add to a growing mountain of evidence that cultural contexts create powerful incentives, or disincentives, for student achievement. The Confucian emphasis on hard work as the determinant of success, for instance, produces high expectations – among teachers, parents and students alike – that every student can, and should, achieve. This cultural norm is far removed from the status quo in England, where we often excuse underachievement.

Changing England's cultural attitudes towards student achievement will undoubtedly be a complex and time-consuming process. Yet we cannot afford to be daunted by the challenge ahead: the stakes are far too high. So, what can our case studies tell us about possible steps forward?

The first step is to create a rigorous focus on standards. All four countries have committed themselves to measuring progress by attainments in educational outcomes, although some are certainly further down the line than others. The harder task is to develop an educational climate or context that makes it feasible for students in all schools to achieve success, which Ontario is now attempting.

#### *Setting minimum standards and expectations*

Professor Dylan Wiliam, a specialist in assessment systems, has argued that teachers will inevitably teach to the test; the real challenge is in finding a test that is worth teaching to. By extension, national assessment and qualification frameworks are only as good as the standards they are aligned with and the curriculum that they are based on.

Sweden's two-tiered goal-oriented curriculum is particularly constructive in that it both establishes the baseline expected of all students upon leaving school (i.e. 'goals to be attained') and sets high expectations for the overall performance of the school community (i.e. 'goals to aspire to'). The latter provision signals that achieving the baseline alone is an insufficient criterion for educational excellence. Rather, the goal is to keep pushing boundaries and to create an expectation of constant improvement and growth for every student, and the system as a whole.

## 6.2 Mediating the 'loose'

#### *Balancing school autonomy with central oversight*

All of the profiled case studies have embraced some form of school-based manage-

ment on the grounds that increased autonomy at the school level will encourage innovation, heighten responsiveness to student needs, empower parent and community involvement and increase overall efficiency. New Zealand, which has gone the furthest in embracing the school-based model of decision-making, clearly illustrates the strengths of this hypothesis, with strong bottom-up innovation, particularly with regards to collaboration on schooling improvement initiatives.

At the same time, the difficulty that New Zealand has been facing in systematically replicating changes on a large scale, and in maximising the efficiency of their resources, suggests that there is need for some form of middle management. Canada (Ontario and Alberta), Sweden and Hong Kong have school district boards or school sponsoring bodies that not only enable economies of scale, but also provide administrative support for each individual school – a task that frees up time for principals and teachers to focus on what’s really important: teaching. More pointedly, these ‘expert centres’ act as ‘internal auditors’, ensuring a degree of comparability in standards across schools and supporting individual school governance.

England’s existing structure for overseeing schools is comparable to that of Sweden and Canada. Over the years, however, local authorities have had their powers haphazardly removed to the point where their ability and capacity to support or hold schools accountable is questionable. The challenge is either to reinvigorate the local authorities (e.g. by returning some measure of control over funding so that the local authorities have leverage with individual schools) or to radically re-imagine how we formally network schools. Here, Hong Kong offers a potential way forward, as their mid-tier governing bodies are not defined by geographical boundaries, but by subscription to a particular mission and ethos.

#### *Tempering competition with collaboration*

The evidence from the countries profiled strongly suggests that systems are most effective when there is a balance of competitive pressure and collaborative relationships within the system. Within the publicly funded education sector, it appears that some forms of school organisation are better suited to achieving this balance than others.

For instance, in Ontario and Alberta, the presence of more than one publicly funded school authority in the same district (i.e. the public and separate school boards) automatically creates a competitive climate. At the same time, these boards also provide a natural support network for individual schools to draw on in terms of resource-sharing and professional development. Similarly, in Hong Kong, school sponsoring bodies, in not being defined by geographical boundaries, simultaneously create conditions of competition (between schools belonging to different SSBs) and collaboration (among schools belonging to the same SSBs).

In contrast, there are no comparable competitive pressures within the English publicly funded system. Local authorities are essentially monopolies, and there is little incentive to compete with schools in the same area. At the same time, local authorities show little evidence of being strategic leaders in delivering benefits of collaboration. Far more promising are the trust and federation models that are being promoted, although take-up rates would have to increase significantly before any observable differences on the system as a whole can be assessed.

#### *Creating a new deal for teachers*

Getting an effective teacher into every classroom is arguably the most important and problematic of the challenges to education reform. First, recruiting the best candidates is difficult given the many other attractive options for graduates, especially

in shortage subjects such as science. Under such circumstances, it is not unusual to see the capabilities of teachers called into question, and to have high levels of central prescription, as has been the case in England.

Improving remuneration – whether through salary increases, or the restructuring of existing remuneration schemes – would certainly improve the government’s chances of attracting better candidates into the profession. For instance, in England, a high proportion of teachers’ overall remuneration is end-loaded through ‘gold-plated’ pensions. Such structures encourage long stay and ultimately can trap teachers in a job they no longer want to do.

The problem, however, is that administrations are understandably loathe to raise salaries without some kind of guarantee that there will be a commensurate rise in teacher quality and performance. In all countries, it is clear that a new deal needs to be struck with the profession wherein teachers are promised more autonomy, better remuneration and higher esteem, in return for rigorous expectations of professional accountability within a competitive environment. Ideally, this should include the creation of a more timely mechanism for moving on ineffective teachers and easing out long-serving and demotivated but essentially competent teachers.

Striking such a deal would, however, first mean reaching a *détente* with the powerful and fragmented teacher unions and professional associations. Sweden’s gradual implementation of an individualised wage scheme (i.e. performance-based pay) is one possible way forward, and warrants closer examination.

#### *Guaranteeing a basic level of equity and excellence*

Given our objectives of developing a system that produces high standards for all, and the fact that students from particular backgrounds (e.g. high socio-economic status, native-language speakers) are fre-

quently at a disproportional advantage compared to the rest of the student population; there is a need to build in ‘equity safeguards’.

For instance, school admission policies may need to be regulated by the centre in order to prevent schools from the practice of cream-skimming. If open boundaries are adopted, then provisions need to be developed to ensure that economically disadvantaged families have sufficient financial resources to cover additional transportation costs (e.g. Edmonton Public School District in Alberta). Differentiated funding schemes, such as the one used in Sweden, could also be explored to encourage schools to work with more challenging student populations, and to ensure that said students have the support that they need.

Similarly, in order to guarantee that all students achieve the baseline set by the government, minimum expectations of the quality of teaching experience provided to students need to be set. Examples of such bulwarks might include the requirement that all teachers have a minimum level of training and education (e.g. Alberta’s Teaching Quality Standard), and ensuring that students have access to a broad range of vocational and academic pathways (New Zealand’s secondary school reforms).

### 6.3 Second ‘tight’

#### *Rethinking the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of measurement*

The countries we profiled have adopted different approaches to ensuring institutional accountability. Of these case studies, Canada and Hong Kong are perhaps the most alien to the English observer. Hong Kong’s schools are held accountable by the market, living or dying by their ability to recruit students. In contrast, both the provinces of Ontario and Alberta utilise a supportive paradigm grounded in a philos-

ophy of collective accountability, and actively discourage any notion of ‘naming and shaming’.

Arguably, England needs to rethink its approach towards institutional accountability, particularly since our reliance on assessment-based league tables has proven to be partly counterproductive. Instead, the emphasis should be on the development of user-friendly measures which can be understood easily by those who need them most: teachers, parents and students. We stand to learn from systems such as Alberta, which is developing measures for evaluating progress on less tangible educational goals (e.g. surveys of parental and student satisfaction) in addition to the standard canon of achievement indicators. Ontario and Alberta have also developed sophisticated mechanisms for comparing school progress over time, a system of evaluation that emphasises competition with self rather than just between schools.

Yet developing a better set of indicators alone is not sufficient; the process by which evaluation occurs also requires re-examination. For instance, information gathered should be fit for purpose: a summative assessment of individual student achievement at a particular point in time is not necessarily the best or most desirable way to evaluate the performance of the system as a whole. Nor, as the experiences of Sweden and New Zealand suggest, is a regular cycle of school inspections necessarily the most effective use of resources.

#### *Reporting to the government, schools, parents and the public*

Finally, if governments are serious about empowering parents and students, then access to information that can be trusted is vital. Interestingly enough, however, reporting to parents and the public is an issue that all four of the countries profiled here struggle with. In part, this difficulty may arise from the particular accountability paradigm adopted. Ontario, for exam-

ple, has a sophisticated system of measuring institutional accountability; however, due to the government’s philosophy of not publicly naming and shaming boards, the amount of information that is made available to the public is left to the discretion of individual school boards and schools.

“ We stand to learn from systems such as Alberta, which is developing measures for evaluating progress on less tangible educational goals (e.g. surveys of parental and student satisfaction) in addition to the standard canon of achievement indicators. ”

Yet if parents and students are to be engaged as active partners in the learning process, more, if not all, of this information should be made publicly available. Having a common public portal for accessing school information, such as that used in Sweden and Hong Kong, is one fairly straightforward way of simplifying the process of acquiring information on school performance. Part of the solution will also come from developing measures that are straightforward and easily understandable. The league-table system currently used in England, for instance, is now couched in so much statistical legalese that trying to understand the information often creates more chaos than clarity. In contrast, the ‘traffic-light’ nature of the Alberta report cards are intuitive, as is the reporting system of programmes such as asTTle in New Zealand, which offers parents, at a single glance, an understanding of how their child fares in comparison with the national mean.

#### 6.4 Final thoughts

Whether one prefers the saying ‘God is in the details’ or its variant, ‘The devil is in the details’, the message is unequivocal: it is in the specifics of design and implementation that the success of any policy is

determined. Here, the increasing sophistication of education research is proving to be an invaluable ally. We now have a better (though by no means perfect) understanding of what does or does not work, and, as each case study has shown, effective utilisation of such knowledge can produce powerful results.

At the same time, policy making and implementation never occurs in a vacuum. Beyond the staple list of socio-economic and cultural factors, politics has been an all-too-visible hand shaping the parameters of what is or is not feasible. In each system, finding a balance between autonomy and control, competition and collaboration, and support and pressure was as much an

exercise in political astuteness and pragmatism as it was in empirical know-how.

Given that elections have been won or lost on the basis of education platforms, it is unlikely that this situation will change. The point, however, is that each system has sought a balance that resonates with their audience and, once found, every effort has been made to ensure that policies build upon one another to achieve internal coherency.

There may be many ways to achieve educational equity and excellence. As these case studies demonstrate, however, fragmented policies will remain just that unless they are grounded in a coherent narrative of change.

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# Appendix

## NEW ZEALAND

### Developing Policy

National policy is set by the Ministry of Education and Parliament, in consultation with key stakeholder organisations. The teacher unions and professional associations have a particularly strong lobby and have, in the past, succeeded in blocking legislation.

### Operation of Schools

Each state and state integrated school is governed by a board consisting of five or more elected parent trustees; the principal; a staff representative; and in secondary schools, a student representative. The board sets the school's overall strategic direction and is responsible for the management of staff, property, finances and curriculum. It is worth noting that boards do not manage the staffing budget. Instead, schools are assigned a staffing entitlement based on size and type of school.

### Finance – Budgets

Operational funding is provided by the central government based on the decile-funding formula. Schools are provided with a lump sum and it is the responsibility of the board and the principal to allocate the resources as they see fit

### Curriculum

The New Zealand Curriculum sets out, in fairly broad brush strokes, a framework for learning and assessment. It is, however, primarily the responsibility of each school (i.e. the principal and teachers) to determine how the curriculum will be delivered. There is thus considerable scope and demand for innovation at a school-level.

### Nation-wide assessment

The National Education Monitoring Project assesses samples of year 4 and year 8 students every year on a four year rolling cycle on different aspects of the national curriculum. There is no system-wide assessment of student learning until Year 11, when all students take the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

### Pedagogy and Assessment

Responsibility for pedagogy and assessment falls on teachers at a school-level. Consequently, both in-class methods and assessment tools tend to vary significantly, although the central government is currently seeking higher levels of standardisation by (i) sponsoring of research in best-practices for teaching; and (ii) encouraging the use of standardised assessment tools like asTTle (see section 2.4.1)

### Teacher Training and Registration

The New Zealand Teachers Council is an independent body responsible for registering and certifying teachers. The NZTC is also responsible for approving teacher education programmes.

### Staff Management – hiring, firing and appointment

School boards may autonomously hire, fire and appraise school principals. Teacher management is primarily the domain of school principals, although strict union regulations make firing teachers a lengthy and arduous process.

### Pupil Management – admissions and discipline

Under New Zealand's choice framework, students can choose to attend a school in another catchment area if the school has the capacity to accept them. The Tomorrow's Schools agenda placed the responsibility for

setting criteria for enrolment in oversubscribed schools in the hands of school boards. Since 2000, however, oversubscribed schools have to follow a selection criteria set by the Ministry. In addition, students now have an absolute right to attend their local school (based on geographical zone). Discipline regulations are set at a school level by the trustees and principals

## CANADA

### Developing Policy

Policy development is generally a Ministry-led process, supported by consultation with stakeholder organisations. It should be noted though that stakeholders, particularly practitioners, have strong lobbies and can, if they choose, pose a significant roadblock to the government

### Operation of Schools

School boards are responsible for the number and size of schools; the building and maintenance of sites. The day to day management of each school is handled by principals. Neither province has a formalised system of school inspections. It is expected however that school boards will, throughout the year, maintain close contact with individual schools through the district superintendents and other supervisory officers. Both Ontario and Alberta have school and parent councils which provide an important bridge between school staff and parents. These councils are advisory in nature and have no direct influence in school administration. They can express their views to the principal on matters important to them, and principals must consult school councils and report back on how s/he will proceed based on advice received.

### Finance – Budgets

**Ontario:** The provincial government uses a funding formula to determine the amount of money allocated to each school board/authority. Boards set and manage their own budgets, although certain amounts of funding are ‘enveloped’ for accountability purposes (i.e. to ensure that boards and schools are spending the allotted money for the intended purpose)

**Alberta:** School boards are responsible for allocating money to schools and programmes within their jurisdiction. Each board receives a base sum that is based on its enrolment numbers (in effect a voucher system without the name of vouchers). Additional funding is then provided based on considerations like geographic location; student population; small schools by necessity etc.

### Curriculum

**Ontario:** The Ontario Ministry of Education sets the curriculum for the primary and secondary school sectors. The provincial curriculum is regularly reviewed by subject in a 7-year cycle. Student achievement is assessed on four levels:

- L1: the student demonstrates some of the required knowledge and skills in limited ways. Achievement falls much below the provincial standard
- L2: the student demonstrates some of the required knowledge and skills. Achievement approaches the provincial standard
- L3: the student demonstrates most of the required knowledge and skills. Achievement is at the provincial standard
- L4: The student demonstrates the required knowledge and skills. Achievement surpasses the provincial standard

**Alberta:** Alberta Education sets the curriculum for the primary and secondary sector. All school jurisdictions have to use the Programs of Study (legal documents outlining expected student outcomes in each subject)

to ensure that students meet provincial standards. Schools do, however, have flexibility in deciding the order in which the curriculum is taught and how it is taught.

### Provincial Assessment

**Ontario:** Students are tested in Grades 3 and 6 on reading, writing and mathematics; in Grade 9 for mathematics and in Grade 10 for literacy skills. The provincial assessments are run by an independent agency, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Results from the assessments in grades 3, 6 and 9 do not form part of the child's report card. However, students have to successfully write the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test in order to obtain the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

**Alberta:** Students are tested in Grade 3 and on reading, writing and mathematics; and in Grades 6 and 9 for reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies. The tests are meant to measure student achievement relative to the provincial standard and are thus closely aligned with the provincial curriculum. In Grade 12, provincial diploma examinations are administered in the core subjects. Unlike Ontario, there is no separate agency in charge of provincial testing; instead, a branch within Alberta Education oversees the administration and development of the tests

### Pedagogy and Assessment

**Ontario:** School boards determine the programme of studies and assessment tools used within their district. Teachers have considerable leeway in choosing an appropriate methodology although the establishment of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has produced more standardisation in the use of 'good practice.' All schools are required to use a standard provincial report card that reports student's progress vis-à-vis the Ontario curriculum through the four levels described above.

**Alberta:** The programme of studies is set by Alberta Education although individual school boards have control over the method of delivery. Within schools, teachers have considerable leeway in choosing an appropriate pedagogy and assessment tools. In 2005, the government introduced a controversial<sup>256</sup> initiative that would require all schools to report the grade level achieved by students in four core subjects by the school year 2007/2008. Under the new Grade Level of Achievement Reporting system, a student in Grade 3, for instance, could be assessed as performing at a Grade 2 or Grade 4 level.

### Teacher Training and Registration

**Ontario:** The Ontario College of Teachers, an independent body, is solely responsible for setting standards for teacher training, and for certifying teaching institutions. Teachers are trained either through a four year teaching course, or a one-year conversion programme (after completion of a bachelors degree)

**Alberta:** Alberta Education is responsible for setting standards for teaching and for certifying training institutions. Alberta was the first province in Canada to adopt a teaching quality standard in 1997. The Teaching Quality Standard established guidelines for the professional knowledge, skills and attributes expected of all teachers. These guidelines apply to the preparation of teachers, ongoing professional growth and teacher evaluation throughout the province. More recently, Alberta Education is in the process of developing a Quality Standard for Principals and for School Superintendents.

### Staff Management – hiring, firing, appraisal

**Ontario:** The responsibility for hiring and firing rests at the board level, while responsibility for appraising teachers is held at the school level based on requirements and documents issued by the ministry.

**Alberta:** The responsibility for hiring, firing and appraising teachers is primarily held at the school level. The flexibility with which principals can act is however constrained by board and union regulations.

<sup>256</sup> With the exception of the Alberta Teachers Association, interviewees from stakeholder organisations noted that the controversy was less over the need for honest and accurate reporting, than about *how* the government intended to use the information. Concerns were raised over the information being used in a punitive 'name and shame manner.' The ATA on the other hand believes that it is unfair to assess a student against a curriculum that they were not taught and that reporting based on a single number diminishes the potential richness of feedback to parents.

### **Pupil Management – admissions and discipline**

**Ontario:** School boards in Ontario generally use catchment areas when determining which school a child should go to. Boards differ however in cases where parents wish to send a child to a school beyond their catchment area. Regardless, enrolment is open (i.e. not test based), with the exception of entry to schools for gifted children. Similarly, student discipline policies are set at the board level.

**Alberta:** All school boards in Alberta guarantee the right of students to attend their neighbourhood schools. However, due to the emphasis on parental choice, some school boards have established alternate enrolment provisions for specialist schools within their jurisdiction; others, like the Edmonton Public and Catholic School Boards, have open boundaries. Student discipline policies are set at the board level although provincial legislation requires every secondary school to have a police liaison on site.

## **HONG KONG**

### **Developing Policy**

In 1984, a non-statutory body, the Education Commission, was set up to advise the government on educational matters. The EC is peopled by prominent educators, academics and representatives from stakeholder organizations. Since its establishment, the EC has consistently shaped the system's reform agenda, creating a policy-making feedback that is arguably more bottom-up in nature than most systems.

### **Operation of Schools**

The Education Bureau has divided Hong Kong into 18 administrative districts. Since the majority of schools are run by sponsoring bodies, however, district officials operate more in a support and monitoring capacity. As one might imagine, the larger sponsoring bodies (e.g. the Catholic Church) operate much like school boards in Canada and Sweden, enabling economies of scale in areas like procurement and staffing. Since 2000, all aided and government schools have switched to a system of school-based management.

### **Finance – Budgets**

The government uses different funding formulas for different types of schools. Aided schools receive a grant sum for each class of students it fills. DSS schools on the other hand receive per pupil funding. Schools have considerable leeway in deciding how they wish to allocate their funds. Schools belonging to the same sponsoring body may also, when necessary, pool funds for shared resources

### **Curriculum**

The curriculum is undergoing significant overhauls to become “more flexible, diverse and integrated.” Schools and teachers have significant input in the development of curricula. Each school also has the freedom to personalize a certain percentage of their curricula to meet the needs and interests of their student population.

### **Territory-Wide Assessment**

Schools are required to perform Basic Competency Assessments of students in the subjects of Chinese-Language, English-Language and Mathematics. The BCA is composed of two parts: Territory-wide System Assessments (TSAs) and Student Assessment (SA). SA is an online assessment programme that enables teachers to closely monitor student learning, and develop immediate interventions where necessary. TSAs are pencil and paper tests at the end of each Key Stage: Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3. TSAs are developed by teachers and administered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority

### Pedagogy and Assessment

The government is currently focused on developing teacher capacity for assessment for learning. Schools have some leeway in making curricular and programming decisions, although DSS schools have the most autonomy.

### Teacher Training and Registration

Teacher training institutes are certified by the Education Bureau. There are also a number of advisory bodies that work on the issue of developing teaching standards, a professional code of conduct etc. Hong Kong had considered establishing a General Teaching Council (following England's example) but decided against it as on the grounds that the teaching community themselves needed to, voluntarily, develop their own monitoring body.

### Staff Management – hiring, firing, appraisal

Each sponsoring body is responsible for staffing its school/s. Teachers and principals apply directly to the school they are interested in; salaries are nonetheless standardised in government and aided schools (following a civil servant wage scheme). Larger sponsoring bodies may also choose to rotate its leadership teams to get the most effective principals into struggling schools. DSS schools set their own wage scale and are thus required to negotiate a separate contract with their teaching staff.

### Pupil Management – admissions and discipline

Student admission policies in the primary sector are set by the government. Approximately half of the places are allocated to students with siblings or parents at the school; or who are affiliated with the sponsoring body. The remaining places are allocated based on parental choice. Oversubscribed schools have their places randomly allocated by a computer programme. In the secondary sector, schools are allowed to admit up to 30% of their students according to their education philosophy. Admissions criteria and weightings must be made public prior to the application process; schools may interview students but no tests can be conducted. The remaining places are allocated through a process of banding<sup>257</sup>, parental choice and in over-subscribed schools, random allocation.

## SWEDEN

### Developing Policy

National education policy and guidelines are formulated by the Riksdag (Parliament) and the government (Ministry of Education and Research). The two professional associations/unions have strong political lobbies, as do the association for independent schools.

### Operation of Schools

The National Agency for Education is the central administrative authority for the Swedish public education system from preschool up to adult education. The NAE's role is primarily in overseeing the school system; inspection of schools and collecting information for evaluative and monitoring purposes. The NAE is also responsible for approving and inspecting independent schools. Provision of education is the responsibility of the municipalities (through local boards of education) and there is significant variation in the organisational set up of each municipality. Stockholm for instance has 18 districts and is in the process of recentralising power by taking back certain administrative and governance duties. At the school level, parents and teachers are not as involved in decision making as compared to other countries that practice school-based management. Principals traditionally have strong roles in the local school system

<sup>257</sup> See section on banding and streaming, 4.4.2

### Finance – Budgets

The majority of municipal education is funded through income taxes, although the state does provide a block grant. There are no national regulations on how resources should be allocated between schools beyond the provision of compulsory services. For the most part though, municipals distribute money on a per pupil basis with additional resources earmarked for schools with challenging school populations (e.g. special needs, high unemployment, immigrant). The responsibility for determining teachers' salaries is usually decentralised to the individual school although some municipalities prefer to negotiate contracts with the union.

### Curriculum

The current national curriculum (Lpo 94) has been in place since 1995. The curriculum identifies two types of goals:

- goals to strive towards – provides guidelines for the direction of teaching in schools
- goals to attain – the knowledge and skills that students should have developed by the end of the course

The goals are written in fairly broad brush strokes as teachers are expected to design, with student input, an individualised programme of study for each student.

### Nation-Wide Assessment

During the compulsory school years, the only compulsory national assessment is the Year 9 examinations for Swedish, English and Mathematics. There is a Year 5 examination that is voluntary; most municipalities have however made it compulsory so much so that 97% of schools now sit for the Year 5 examinations. The examinations are developed by universities and teacher working groups, under the stewardship of the NAE. Examinations are marked internally by the students' teachers. The scores are not however counted in the student's final grades but instead serve as an indicator for teachers as to whether their students are on track to completing the compulsory phase of education.

### Pedagogy and Assessment

Most assessment within the Swedish system is teacher-based. Teachers have considerable autonomy in deciding the particulars of the curriculum they wish to teach, and the pedagogy they use. In an effort to increase student voice within the system, decisions on pedagogy and assessment are expected to be jointly made by teachers and students after a discussion of relative merits etc.

### Teacher Training and Registration

The state (Ministry of Higher Education) is responsible for certifying teacher training institutes. Whilst the Education Act requires teachers to be qualified, loopholes within the legislation have created a situation wherein approximately 20% of teachers have no qualifications. The two teachers unions have been lobbying for the government to set up a requirement for 'authorisation' – their equivalent of registration in the UK. The new Conservative government has agreed to put authorisation of teachers on their agenda.

### Staff Management – hiring, firing, appraisal

Teacher evaluation is not regulated by law. However, all schools are expected to have regular 'development dialogues' with their staff. The responsibility of hiring and firing of staff is generally devolved to the school management level, with input from the municipal authority and the teacher unions.

### Pupil Management – admissions and discipline

Under the choice framework introduced in the early 90s, students are allowed to attend any school (municipal or independent) of their choice. While neither municipal nor independent schools charge fees, most municipalities will not pay for transportation costs should a student decide to study in a school outside of the municipality they live in. Oversubscription in the municipal and independent school sectors are addressed on a 'first-come-first-served' basis although what that actually means in practice is less clear.

In recent years, the expansion of international comparative studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS has significantly changed the way we assess the success of any given education system. Strong internal progress is no longer sufficient to merit a positive evaluation. In a world where education is viewed as the means by which nations achieve and maintain an edge over their competitors, success is increasingly defined vis-à-vis the performance of other systems.

This report looks at five systems – New Zealand, Canada (Ontario and Alberta), Hong Kong and Sweden – which generally perform better than England on counts of excellence and equity. Despite their differences, we found that the challenges faced by each of these systems were remarkably similar. Crucially, even where there were differences in approach, a closer examination of the internal logic of each system revealed common underlying principles. These tenets were drawn together to create a proposed framework for a coherently aligned, ‘tight, loose, tight’ system.

*Lessons from Abroad* is the companion report to our main study on English education reform, detailed in *Helping Schools Succeed: A Framework for English Education*.



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Policy Exchange  
Clutha House  
10 Storey's Gate  
London SW1P 3AY

[www.policyexchange.org.uk](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk)