



ROLL PLAY

How creating better access to schools in Christchurch could affect school rolls

Executive Summary

This executive summary is extracted from Maxim Institute's research report, *Roll Play: How creating better access to schools in Christchurch could affect school rolls*. The complete set of research findings and the methods used to carry out the research are presented in the main report.

INTRODUCTION

This report looks at the impact of policies which could provide better access to schools for New Zealand children. Policies introduced by *Tomorrow's Schools* between 1989 and 1991 improved access to schools but they came under heavy criticism. These policies were steadily reversed throughout the 1990s, even though New Zealand research shows they improved the educational opportunities of many pupils from a range of backgrounds, allowing them easier access to different and better schools.

The purpose of this research is to move on from the myths, misrepresentations and rhetoric around making access to schools better for children. *Roll Play* takes a fresh look at the issues by examining the practicalities of allowing parents to choose the school they would prefer for their child. It examines the case of Christchurch, a major city in the South Island of New Zealand. In particular, the research focuses on the impact of creating better access to schools on the size of school rolls. Moreover, *Roll Play* explores the possible implications of changing school rolls for managing school capacity in Christchurch.

In looking at these issues, Maxim Institute commissioned the Survey Research Unit at the University of Auckland's School of Population Health to conduct a telephone survey of 424 parents in Christchurch.* The survey targeted parents of children who currently attend a secondary school in Christchurch asking them which schools their children attend, and also whether they would change their child's school under two scenarios where access to schools was improved. The first scenario asked them which secondary school they would change to if they could choose any state, state-integrated or private school and money was no object. The second scenario asked them if they could choose any state secondary school, which one would they most like to send their child to.

The results of the parental survey were analysed and presented by adapting innovative techniques previously used by a research team working at Cardiff University, combining the disciplines of the social sciences and geography. These techniques have not been applied before to the study of creating better access to schools in New Zealand. In particular, a number of the research findings were illustrated on a series of maps, created using a Geographic Information System (GIS), including the distances parents were willing to send their child to their preferred schools.

Estimates for the proportion of parents at the city level responding to certain survey questions were also calculated, including whether parents would want to change their child's school. To analyse the implications of children changing schools for school network capacity, estimates were determined for the absolute change that would occur to school rolls. Further, projections were made for the amount of movement that could be expected to occur between schools.

The research findings are presented in three sections according to each set of questions parents were asked during the survey. The main findings are described below.

CURRENT ACCESS TO SCHOOLS

Examining the relationship between where parents' live and which school they currently send their child to, the survey responses indicate that many parents are already exercising active choice—opting for schools different to their local school or the one they were zoned for.

Findings:

- With 95% certainty, 53% of parents do not choose to send their child to the nearest school to where they live, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 4%.
- With 95% certainty, 53% of parents do not send their child to the school they indicated that they were zoned for, also with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 4%.
- According to calculations completed with GIS, 46% of parents who live in a school zone do not send their child to the school that they are zoned for.
- With 95% certainty, 79% of parents responding knew at the time they moved to their present home that it was in the zone of the school they indicated that they were zoned for, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 4%.
- The median distance (calculated with GIS) travelled by children between home and the school they currently attend is 2.8 km.

BETTER ACCESS TO SCHOOLS (IF MONEY WAS NO OBJECT)

Parents were asked whether, given the opportunity, they would change their child's secondary school if they could choose any secondary school and money was no object. If they wished to do so, they were then asked which secondary school (that is, any state, state-integrated or private school) they would choose for their child.

By applying an analytic framework to the findings, tentative conclusions could be drawn about the expected patterns of pupils moving between schools. In this scenario (where parents could choose any school and money was no object), four distinct groups of schools would probably emerge. The research found that: five schools would be likely to experience a statistically significant gain in demand; another eight schools were shown

to experience a gain or loss, but the change was not statistically significant; ten schools showed a statistically significant loss in demand; while four schools showed no change.

Findings:

- If parents could choose any state, state-integrated or private secondary school in Christchurch, and money was no object, with 95% certainty approximately 26% of parents would change their child's school, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 4%.
- Stratified by household income level, with 95% certainty, 26% of low-middle income parents and 25% of high income parents would change schools, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 6%. The trend detected between income and choice was not statistically significant ($p = 0.249$).
- The main reasons why parents who would change their child's school preferred their favoured school were its values (95%) and reputation (91%), with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 5%.
- 78% of parents who would change their child's school in this scenario also indicated that they would be willing to pay some amount towards the cost of sending their child to their preferred school, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 5%.
- Of parents who would change their child's school in this access scenario, the median distance travelled by children between home and their parents' preferred school is 5.7 km.
- The total number of pupils estimated who would move between schools in this access scenario is approximately 4,200.
- The findings showed that if parents could choose any secondary school and money was no object, parents who would change their child's school would generally prefer to send their children to private or state-integrated schools under this scenario. These schools also experienced statistically significant gains to the size of their school roll. The school that would experience the greatest growth in demand for places is St Andrew's College.
- Generally, parents who would change their child's school were willing to send their child a greater distance to their preferred school than the distance to their child's current school.

BETTER ACCESS TO STATE SCHOOLS

Parents were asked whether, given the opportunity, they would choose to send their child to a different school to the one they currently attend. If they wished to do so, they were then asked which state school they would most like to send their child to. In this scenario, the analysis again showed four distinct groups of schools would probably emerge. The research found that: two schools would be likely to experience a statistically significant gain in demand; another fourteen schools were shown to experience a gain or loss, but the change was not statistically significant; three schools showed a statistically significant loss in demand; while eleven schools showed no change.

Findings:

- If parents could choose any state secondary school in Christchurch, with 95% certainty, approximately 10% of parents would change their child's school, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 3%.
- Stratified by household income level, with 95% certainty, 11% of low-middle income parents and 9% of high income parents would change their child's school, with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 4%. The trend detected between income and choice was not statistically significant ($p = 0.411$).
- The main reasons why parents who would change their child's school preferred their favoured state school were its reputation (87%) and values (85%), with an associated margin of error of approximately +/- 5%.
- Examining parents who would change their child's school, the median distance travelled by children between home and their parents' preferred state school is 5.3 km.
- The estimated total number of pupils who would move between schools in this access scenario is approximately 2,300.
- The findings showed that if parents could choose any state secondary school, parents who would change their child's school would be likely to send their children to one of two state schools with good NCEA performance. These schools also experienced statistically significant gains to the size of their school roll. The state school that would experience the greatest growth in demand for places is Christchurch Boys' High School.

- Generally, parents who would change their child's school if they could choose any state secondary school were willing to send their child a greater distance to their preferred state school than the school their child currently attends.

The research presented in *Roll Play* therefore establishes which schools in Christchurch parents would really prefer to send their children to. The current education system distorts the real demand for popular schools because enrolment legislation limits how many pupils they can take each year. Further, the research has also found some evidence to suggest that parents in Christchurch have a reasonable working knowledge of which schools are better or worse than others. Parents are also willing to send their children long distances to access their preferred schools.

By examining the amount of change that could be expected to occur under an open enrolment scheme this research also examines how improving access to schools would affect school rolls in Christchurch. This allows some discussion of how capacity in the state sector would need to be managed under such a scheme.

The most important implication of the research, however, is that if many of the current restrictions parents face when choosing a school, like school enrolment zones, were removed, the amount of change to school rolls in Christchurch would be manageable. Although this research only considers the choices of parents whose children already attend secondary school—not how open enrolment would affect the choices of parents with children in their final year of primary school—in relation to the scenario where parents could choose any state school in Christchurch, the research examined how greater demand for popular state schools could be managed. Notwithstanding this issue, most school rolls across the state system would remain relatively stable.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In light of these findings, the following measures are suggested to help manage demand for schools in the state sector so that more parents have a greater opportunity to access the schools they prefer for their children:

1. Collect and make available information about schooling at the pupil and school level
 - (i) The Ministry of Education should expand the range of

information it already collects about pupils and schools, and make this information available to the general community.

2. Abolish school home enrolment zones

(i) The requirement in the Education Act 1989 that a school's enrolment scheme must define a home zone for the school should be removed.

(ii) The requirement in the Education Act 1989 that schools must be "reasonably convenient" for pupils to attend should be removed.

3. Grant schools more freedom to manage their capacity

(i) School boards should be able to set their school's maximum roll.

(ii) The requirement that school capacity should be managed subject to the "best use of the network of state schools in the area" in the Education Act 1989 should be amended.

(iii) The roll caps on state-integrated schools should be abolished.

(iv) The Ministry of Education should provide capital funding grants to schools that need to expand.

4. Allocate places at over-subscribed schools fairly

(i) Where schools experience greater demand than there are places for pupils applications should be decided by a random ballot.

5. Schools should have more freedom to co-operate

(i) Over-subscribed schools should be encouraged to form partnerships with schools that have excess capacity.

(ii) Successful schools should be encouraged to assist schools which are under-performing.

6. Make it easier to establish alternative schools to regular state schools

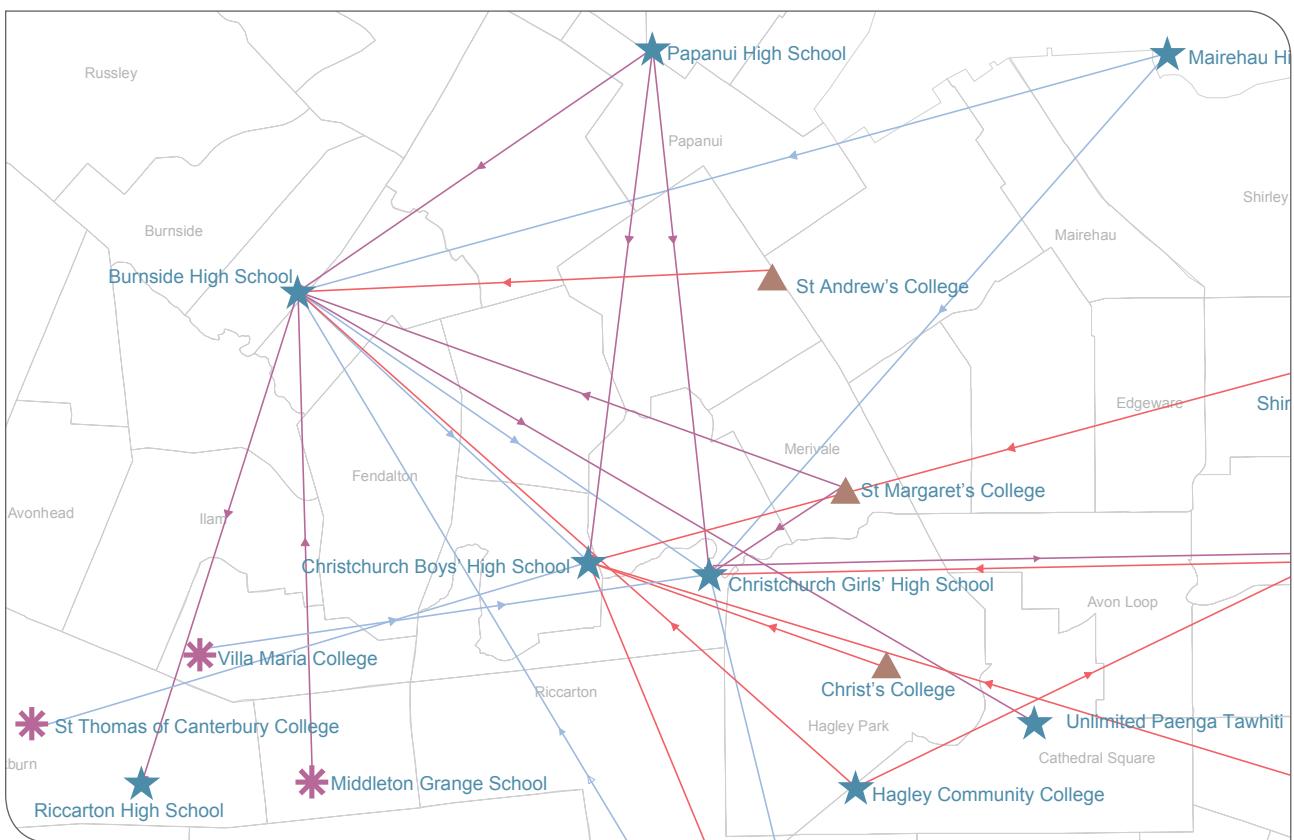
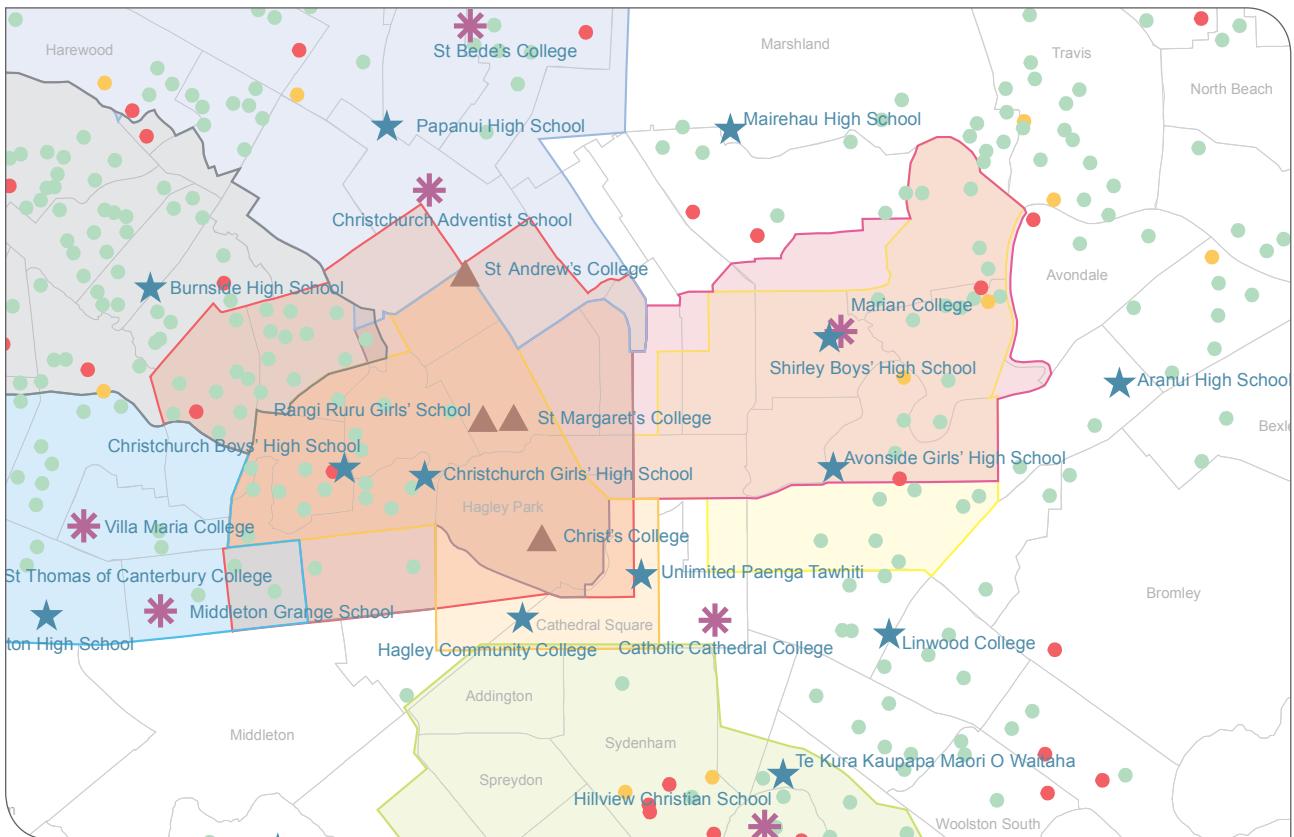
(i) The power of the Minister of Education to decide whether designated character schools can be established should be reduced.

(ii) School boards should be given the freedom to grant leases or licenses so that alternative education providers can establish schools using their premises.

7. Make transportation to schools more accessible

(i) School boards should be responsive to the needs of parents whose children attend their school, or who are seeking to attend their school, by providing transport if necessary for children who live further away.

Examples of two maps contained within the report



Improving families' access to schools has the potential to make every state school a better state school. It is also fairer than the current rigid education system that reinforces elitism and privilege. An open enrolment system that allows families greater opportunity is fairer to lower socio-economic status (SES) parents especially, as it breaks down the power of income and residential choice as the primary determinants of access to schools. The research detailed in *Roll Play* shows that were access to schools in Christchurch to be improved, the change to the size of school rolls would probably be small enough that school capacity could be managed across the city, allowing time for schools to adjust to parental demand for schools under an open enrolment scheme.

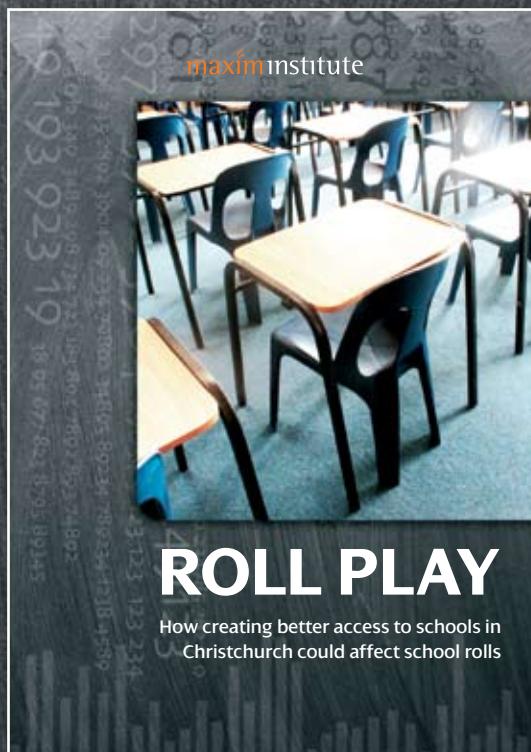
* The Survey Research Unit was not responsible for commissioning the survey or for any interpretations made from the analysis and the findings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Steve Thomas is a Researcher at the Maxim Institute. He was educated at the University of Canterbury, graduating with a Master of Arts with Distinction. Steve's background is in political science; however, he also researches and writes in a number of areas, including New Zealand education, regionalism, New Zealand politics and local government. He is the author of two of Maxim Institute's award-winning Fisher Memorial Prize series of *Parent Factor* reports, *Information for parents* and *Access to education*, and has also been published in the journals, *Asia Pacific Journal of EU Studies* and *Urban Policy and Research*.

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