

13 February 2012

NZEI Te Riu Roa Submission to Education and Science Select Committee

Thank you for inviting NZEI Te Riu Roa to present an oral submission here today. It's important that teachers' professional voices, parents' voices, and students' voices are heard in this debate.

People have asked "why not try?" charter schools.

In our submission, NZEI, like many in the profession, the public and academics, has instead asked "why?"

1. Why - when there is no electoral mandate?

Charter schools have been nick-named the "1% policy" because they were a result of a "cuppa tea" deal, not the declared policy of either National or Act. Voters did not know about charter schools, nor did they vote for them in the last election.

2. Why - when there is no parental demand?

The vast majority of parents are satisfied with their local school and the NZ's legislative framework already offers far more flexibility for diversity in schooling than most other countries.

3. Why - when there is no evidence charter schools lead to "system shift"?

NZ students do better than most in the world but we know there is always room for improvement. But there is no evidence that charter schools have improved education systems in the countries where they have been established. In fact in Sweden, the US and England where charter schools have been established longest, there has been a worrying decline in student achievement. For example Sweden has gone from 9th to 19th in literacy and 17 to 24th in maths in the PISA league tables. It is not good enough to proceed on the basis of conjecture, ideology or the adoption of failed overseas models when our children's learning is at stake.

4. Why - when there is no evidence the Bill addresses the needs of vulnerable learners?

The Government's stated priorities are accelerating achievement for Maori, Pasifika and special needs learners. However the Bill places no requirements on charter school applicants to enrol or specifically focus on meeting the needs of these students.

The most recent list of interested parties made public under the OIA listed the Maharishi

Foundation, a group of existing fundamentalist Christian private schools and centres and an outdoor adventure provider, for example. These may be well-intentioned groups but there is no evidence they provide culturally appropriate or more innovative or better teaching and learning for the Government's priority groups.

Insultingly, the Coalition agreement on charter schools referred to South Auckland and Christchurch as likely areas for charter schools because of "educational underperformance" being the norm. But schools are arguably the success story of South Auckland, not the problem. Schools cannot be a band-aid fixing all social problems. But schools in South Auckland succeed for most children in spite of deprivation, poverty, dysfunction, violence, ill-health and the social inequity those students face. And schools are at the hub of their communities, as we have seen in Christchurch, providing social cohesion and a range of services for the wider families and whanau of many children.

We know from research that teacher and school effect is much less significant overall than what a child brings to school. In asking **why charter schools**, one answer perhaps is that it is a convenient diversion from addressing the real solutions to poverty and inequality.

5. Why the secrecy and the rush if they are such a good thing?

Professional accountability by educators is essential to a high trust education system. Taxpayers deserve to know their money is being well spent. NZEI is very concerned that charter schools will not be covered by the Official Information Act or the Ombudsmen Act and that there will be less fiscal transparency than in state schools.

After the Novopay and PPP Hobsonsville school experience, we believe it is patently obvious that commercial contracts are a poor cipher for the rich accountabilities provided by genuine transparency, professional trust and parental involvement in governance.

Treasury has noted that there are risks to quality if schools are introduced quickly without proper consideration. It is inappropriate that the NZ Model of a Charter School working group has pre-empted your Committee's deliberations and Parliament's prerogative to determine legislation by trying to speed up the process of introducing charter schools with an inappropriate "indications of interest" process. The latest CREDO study from Stanford University affirms that "more haste less speed" may well apply to the introduction of charter schools. Its research found that the vast majority of charter schools did not improve their performance over time. It concluded that ensuring schools were excellent to begin with was essential.

6. Why, when the risks to the taxpayer are unquantified?

The cost of integrating Wanganui Collegiate may look like chickenfeed if charter schools fail and the taxpayer has to pick up the bill.

The main risks identified in other countries have included providers without education experience and secrecy around the profitability of companies running schools. To these we can add Treasury's list of risks:

- Over investing in capacity and poor financial management or inadequate financial accountability mechanisms
- Performance risks for nearby state schools if rolls and funding drop
- Increasing stratification and inequity if nearby state schools decline while children are "creamed off"
- Lack of robust standards for authorization or selection of charter sponsors, leading to school failure.

Basically, market forces do not function well when it comes to education. As an early childhood teacher, I know from our sector that there are risks to the taxpayer and to the quality of our children's education if companies see education as a gravy train. Low quality providers are both costly and hard to remove, not least because parents and communities feel far more strongly about their local school or ECE centre than they do their supermarket or petrol station disappearing.

7. Why, when Treasury and the Ministry of Education have advised against central tenets of the legislation?

We ask "Why", for example, Treasury is sceptical about any positive benefits charter schools will bring. Moreover, both Treasury and the Ministry of Education strongly recommended charter schools be consistent with the "quality teaching" goals of the Government and therefore employ qualified registered teachers.

Parents also overwhelmingly want registered teachers. A UMR poll last year found 85 percent disapproved of charter schools having unregistered teachers.

8. So what does NZEI want?

As teachers, we know what makes a difference: relationships; engagement; and treating every child as an individual with unlimited potential.

Instead of experimenting in communities that have never asked for tax payer funded private schools and putting children's learning at risk, we should be building on what we know works here. We need more investment in learning that works for every individual child, not bigger class sizes and competition between teachers and between schools.

Our Tomorrow's Schools system gives us community control over our schools through locally elected Boards, and gives schools the ability to provide locally responsive curricula. The Education Act allows for Maori medium instruction and schools of special character. What we don't need is "schools without rules" that mean unqualified teachers, performance pay and schools that do not comply with important things like the right of children with special needs to attend their local school.

There is no evidence that charter schools will improve the education system as a whole. They haven't increased innovation or creativity in terms of teaching and learning – things that we are justly proud of in our public system.

So how are charter schools going to affect what all schools do? They aren't. The children that need the most help are in all schools; charter schools won't lift overall achievement. This country desperately needs investment in education, staffing and resources - it doesn't need another mode of schooling!

We didn't vote for them, we don't want them and we don't need them.