Chapter 1

School education in New Zealand

New Zealand has one of the most devolved school systems in the world. The 1989 Education Act established self-managing schools as Crown entities and gave responsibility for the administration and management of schools to elected Boards of Trustees. Average student learning outcomes are very good by international comparison, even though there are concerns about the proportion of students that are not performing well. The current priorities for the school sector are to lift student achievement in literacy and numeracy, enable all young people to achieve worthwhile qualifications and ensure that Māori students achieve education success “as Māori”. Evaluation and assessment are a key element in national strategies towards achieving these goals. Nationally, clear goals and performance expectations are set via the revised National Curriculum, the National Standards, the New Zealand Qualifications Framework, the teacher standards and indicators for school reviews. This is coupled with a strong focus on developing capacity for evaluation and assessment at all levels of the system.
This chapter provides background information that will help readers not familiar with the New Zealand education system understand the context in which evaluation and assessment takes place. The chapter provides a brief overview of the national context and key features of the education system.

National context

Demographic context

New Zealand has a population of 4.3 million people distributed over its two main islands. 76% of the population live on the North Island and the remaining 24% are on the South Island (including the Chatham Islands and Stewart Island). The country is sparsely populated with less than 15 people per km². More than two-thirds of the population live within the 16 main urban areas.

New Zealand has a bicultural Māori and European heritage; both Māori and English are official languages. Immigration has accelerated in recent years and the country is rapidly becoming more ethnically and linguistically diverse. In 2009, 68% of the population identified as New Zealand European and 15% as Māori, while 9% of the population were of Asian origin and 7% were of Pacific Island origin (Pasifika). Population projections indicate that over half of the school-age population will identify with multiple and non-European ethnic heritages within the next five years. The increasing diversity of the student body creates new opportunities and challenges for the delivery of high quality education in New Zealand.

Political context

New Zealand is a Constitutional Monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. Since the 1930s, the National Party and the Labour Party have dominated political life in a traditionally two-party system. In 1996, the electoral system was changed to a mixed member proportional representation system, which has increased the representation of smaller parties in the Parliament and government. At the time of the OECD visit 2010, the government was a minority coalition led by the National Party. New Zealand is a unitary State where local government holds only limited powers.

A particularly important document influencing governance arrangements in New Zealand is the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 by the British Crown and Māori chiefs. It is a founding document of New Zealand, setting out the obligations of the Crown and of Māori. Over the past 20 years, the public sector has reaffirmed its commitment to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. In the education sector, this is reflected in the provision of Māori-medium education and, more broadly, the development of education pathways that support and encourage Māori language and culture.

Economic context

The economic situation in New Zealand has reversed rapidly over the last three years. While the country benefitted from the past decade of global growth, it is now strongly affected by the impact of the global financial and economic crisis. The country underwent major structural reforms in the 1980s and 90s moving from an economic policy relying
on government regulation, protection and subsidies towards a liberalised and deregulated approach. Since the mid-1990s until 2007, New Zealand’s economy was on a strong upward course with an average 3.5% GDP growth per year. The long expansion was supported by major structural reforms during the 1980s and 90s, fiscal consolidation, rapid labour force growth (due to high net immigration), the expansion of export markets, booming commodity export prices and the availability of global capital (OECD, 2009). In 2008, the country entered a recession which was reinforced by the international financial crisis (OECD, 2009).

Main features of the school system

Structure

Levels of education

The New Zealand school system is organised in three levels and offers a range of different schooling options:

- **Early childhood education** (typical ages 0-5): Early childhood services are not provided or managed by the state. A range of different options, such as kindergartens, play centres and kohanga reo (Māori language learning settings) are available to children up to six years. In 2009, 59% of children aged 0-5 participated in early childhood education (ECE) and 95% of five-year-olds participated immediately prior to starting school.

- **Primary education** (Year levels 1-8; typical ages 5-13): Schooling is compulsory from age six, but most children start primary school at age five. Primary education lasts for eight years, with Years 7 and 8 mostly offered at “full” primary schools or separate intermediate schools.

- **Secondary education** (Year levels 9-13; typical ages 13-18): The most common form of secondary education covers five years (Year levels 9-13). But there are also secondary schools that cover Years 7-13 and senior high schools which provide only for the Years 11-13. Secondary schools deliver an integrated curriculum and do not distinguish between academic and vocational programmes. In the senior years of secondary education (Years 11-13) students can select from a range of courses including industry-based qualifications.

There are also two school forms that fall in between primary and secondary education: Composite schools provide education from Years 1-13 (mostly in rural areas) and junior high schools deliver education for Years 7-10. Figure 1.1 provides an overview of schooling options.
Education settings

Semi-private and private schooling

While the vast majority (85%) of New Zealand students attend state schools, 11% of students attend state-integrated (semi-private) schools and 4% attend private schools. State-integrated schools are state schools that follow the national curriculum while retaining a “special” character. About two-thirds of the state-integrated schools are Catholic schools. 95% of the students in state-integrated schools must come from families that adhere to the special character (normally religious) of the school. Private schools usually offer either religious education or a particular education philosophy (such as Steiner or Montessori schools). It is not compulsory for private schools to follow the national curriculum.

Māori-medium education

The 1989 Education Act made provisions for Māori communities to set up and govern their own schools, which facilitated the establishment of a Māori-medium sector. About 3% of New Zealand students are enrolled in Māori-medium schooling. The Māori-medium sector provides a range of learning pathways from early childhood education through to university. The sector includes full immersion schools as well as immersion or bilingual units in English-medium schools. It aims to provide education in an environment where the values of Māori teaching and learning philosophies are promoted and Māori is used as the language of communication. Providers are often closely connected to a local Māori community or iwi (tribe).
Other education options

A number of Pasifika-medium education options (bilingual or immersion schools) are available in New Zealand. Less than 2,500 students (0.3%) were in Pasifika-medium schools in 2009.

It is possible for parents and guardians to educate their children at home. Almost 6,700 students (0.9%) were homeschooled in 2009. Homeschooling needs to be approved by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and must be of the same standard that children would receive at a registered school.

Distribution of responsibilities

New Zealand has one of the most devolved school systems in the world. As part of a major administrative restructuring, the 1988 Tomorrow’s Schools reforms centralised policy decision making to the national level, eliminated the administrative structures for primary schools and devolved responsibility for the management of individual schools to elected Boards of Trustees.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for national education policy and provides most of the funding for state schools. It also develops the curriculum and assessment standards and sets minimum standards for becoming a teacher. Teacher and principal salaries are negotiated at the national level every three years with the respective unions. The Ministry is also in charge of overall system monitoring and has the power to intervene in failing schools. The Ministry of Education has 4 regional offices and 16 district offices that are supported by a number of local offices across New Zealand.

The Ministry is supported by three key agencies at the national level. The Education Review Office (ERO) is the main accountability agency responsible for evaluating and reporting on the quality of education, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) ensures that qualifications obtained in New Zealand are robust and credible and the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) provides professional leadership for effective teaching and teacher education.

The 1989 Education Act established self-managing schools as small Crown entities. Responsibility for the administration and management of each individual school was given to a Board of Trustees. The Boards typically consist of elected members from the school community, the principal, a staff representative and a student representative (in secondary schools). Boards of Trustees hold a wide range of responsibilities including strategic management, school self-review, appointment and employment of staff, finance, property, health and safety and compliance with legislation. Boards of Trustees have to deliver on government policies. They are accountable both to the government and to the local communities.

The school’s management team is led by the school principal and is accountable to the Board. In smaller schools, management and educational leadership tend to be combined in the position of the principal. The 1989 Education Act defines the school principal as “professional leader” with three main functions: executive (implementing the Board’s policy), instructional (leading the school’s staff) and reporting (providing information on the school’s achievement) (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007). A number of Board responsibilities, such as selecting and appointing teachers, are usually delegated to the principal.
**Policy development**

Policy development at the system level is characterised by a strong tradition of consultation with key agencies and stakeholders. Participation of stakeholders in policy development takes various forms such as working parties, advisory groups, organised consultation and pilot studies. This process is intended to ensure buy-in and a sense of ownership from those who will implement and manage the changes. The key groups that are consulted in matters concerning education policy include the School Trustees Association (NZSTA), the Council for Educational Research (NZCER), representatives of specific types of schools (such as the Association of Intermediate and Middle Schools [NZAIMS] and the Catholic Education Office [NZCEO]), the teacher unions, principals’ associations, professional organisations, as well as business and cultural stakeholders.

**Financing**

Schools receive funding from the Ministry of Education in the form of teacher salaries and operational grants. Teacher salaries are negotiated at the national level between the Ministry of Education and the respective unions every three years. Operational funding is calculated on the basis of student numbers, year levels offered, socio-economic status of the community (based on a decile system from one to ten) and school location (degree of isolation). Boards of Trustees have full discretion on how to spend operational grants in line with their budget and plans. In addition, the government provides certain in-kind resourcing such as ICT support and broadband access. To complement government funding, schools usually also raise some funds locally (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2010).

**National Education Guidelines**

The National Education Guidelines (NEGs) set the direction for schools. The NEGs include: a set of overarching goals; the national curriculum; National Standards; and a set of administrative guidelines (National Administration Guidelines [NAGs]). Schools are required to include the NEGs and NAGs in their charters and show how they will give effect to them.

**Curriculum and Standards**

*The national curriculum*

The national curriculum for New Zealand schools includes two aligned curriculum documents: *The New Zealand Curriculum* for Years 1-13 is used in English-medium settings since 2010 and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* is used in Māori-medium settings since 2011. Both documents set out the valued learning objectives and expected performance for each curriculum level. The two documents are not direct translations of each other. *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* was developed based on Māori principles and philosophies.

*National Standards for primary education*

For primary education (Years 1 to 8), there are two sets of standards that are aligned to the curriculum. National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics were introduced in 2010 in English-medium schools. Parallely, *Ngā Whanaketanga*
Rumaki Māori te Reo Matatini (reading, writing and oral Māori language) and Ngā Whanaketanga Rumaki Māori Pangarau (mathematics) were introduced in the Māori-medium sector. The National Standards set out clear expectations for student achievement and progress in the core subjects. They are supported by literacy and numeracy progressions for Years 1 to 10. Teachers are expected to assess student performance against the standards and report to parents regularly on their children’s progress in relation to the standards. Boards of Trustees are required to set targets related to the National Standards in their charters. From 2012/13, schools will have to report on their students’ results in relation to standards in their annual reports to the Ministry of Education (Chapter 3).

National Standards for secondary education

National Standards for secondary education are provided through the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), a register of all quality assured qualifications covering both secondary and tertiary education. The main qualification in secondary education is the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), in which students are assessed against a range of national standards specifying knowledge and skills. Years 11, 12, and 13 of upper secondary education typically correspond to NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3, but it is possible for students to take NCEA examinations earlier in their secondary schooling. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is responsible for ensuring the quality of assessments for qualification. Students gain NCEA by accumulating credits from different parts of the NZQF. Student achievement information from the NCEA is also fed back to individual schools for their self-review processes and collected nationally to analyse patterns of performance and inform policy development. The information is also published (Chapters 3 and 6).

Principles of equity and inclusion in education

New Zealand has a highly inclusive education system. All education in the state school sector is free of charge. The development of the education system has emphasised “the right of every student to expect a similar standard of education regardless of school location and size” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). The New Zealand Curriculum states its commitment to strong equity principles, including (1) Ensuring high expectations for all students, (2) Respecting the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural foundations of New Zealand, and (3) Valuing cultural diversity and inclusion of all students in a non-sexist, non-racist and non-discriminatory way. The school system is comprehensive from primary through to upper secondary education and few distinctions are made between academic and vocational programmes in upper secondary schools.

Most special education students participate in regular school settings. The Education Act provides that state and integrated schools are obliged to enrol all students in their local area, regardless of their level of impairment or educational need. In 2009, only 0.4% of New Zealand students were enrolled in schools specialising in teaching students with certain types of disabilities. Schools enrolling students with moderate special needs are supported with targeted funding and access to specialists, while students with high needs receive additional individualised funding or support.
**Education outcomes**

According to results from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009, the performance of New Zealand students towards the end of compulsory education is significantly above the OECD average in all areas assessed (reading, mathematics and science). However, while on average New Zealand students are among the top performers in the world, the dispersion of achievement scores is particularly large. Among the high-achieving countries, New Zealand had the widest range of scores between the bottom five percent and the top five percent. Performance differences were most pronounced within schools rather than between schools. While some Māori and Pasifika students showed high performance, Māori and Pasifika students were over-represented at the lower end of the performance distribution. New Zealand’s results in international student assessments have been relatively stable over the past decade showing consistently high average performance, coupled with a wide dispersion of achievement scores.

**Main policy developments**

The national agenda sets clear objectives and expectations for the education system. The key priorities for schooling outlined in the MoE’s Statement of Intent (2010-2011) relate to lifting student achievement in literacy and numeracy, achieving worthwhile qualifications and ensuring that Māori students achieve education success “as Māori”. The Country Background Report prepared by the Ministry of Education for this study specifies that current education priorities relate to reducing the achievement disparities within and across schools, particularly for Māori and Pasifika students, and improving education outcomes for all New Zealanders (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). These objectives provide a clear focus for the education system to direct attention towards improving student learning outcomes, both with regard to overall performance and equity in outcomes of different student groups. Recent policy developments are expected to contribute to reaching these aims.

**Implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum and consequent changes to NCEA**

*The New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) was revised in 2007. From the beginning of 2010, all schools’ curricula are expected to align with the new curriculum. The NZC sets out key competencies and achievement objectives rather than prescribing curriculum content. Within these national achievement objectives, it is the role of school Boards of Trustees, together with the principal and school staff, to develop and implement the school curriculum. While each school’s curriculum is expected to encompass the principles, values and key competencies of the NZC, schools are given large freedom and flexibility to design teaching programmes that fit diverse learner needs. A stronger focus has been placed in recent years on basic skills in literacy and numeracy (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011).

The implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2010) covering Years 1-13 also has implications for standards contributing to the NCEA in upper secondary education. As part of an ongoing programme to enhance the quality and credibility of the NCEA, the Ministry of Education and NZQA have engaged in a review of the standards. A key purpose of this standards review is to ensure that curriculum-based standards are aligned to *The New Zealand Curriculum*. The review also aims to address issues of
duplication, credit parity, consistency, fairness and coherence for all standards on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF). The standards aligned to the national curriculum are being rolled out progressively between 2010 and 2012. To ensure that the standards are used effectively, assessment materials and exemplars are being developed by the Ministry of Education.

**Introduction of National Standards, but not national testing, in primary schools**

National Standards were introduced in 2010 to complement the NZC and provide clear expectations as to what students should achieve in mathematics, reading and writing in different year levels. The Standards are essentially a set of learning progressions designed to help teachers make overall teacher judgements on student achievement and progress based on a range of assessment evidence. Unlike in many other countries, the National Standards are not assessed through full-cohort national assessments. Rather, the New Zealand strategy aims to build teacher capacity and provide teachers with an extensive test bank they can draw on to make their own professional judgements about student performance. In a context where there is a general consensus that national testing should be avoided in primary education, the introduction of National Standards is seen as an alternative way to make information about student progress more consistent and comparable. This is expected to avoid some of the potential negative consequences of high-stakes testing such as curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test.

**Development of a Student Achievement Function within the Ministry of Education**

The introduction of the new national curriculum and the National Standards is seen by the Ministry of Education as an opportunity to engage in closer collaboration with schools to work towards lifting student achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy. While the curriculum sets achievement objectives and the National Standards provide schools with information on students needing additional support, the Ministry also aims to provide better support for schools in interpreting such information and providing targeted support to students. Developments are currently underway to set up a “Student Achievement Function” within the regions of the Ministry of Education to work directly with schools. The intention is to create a small central team and to appoint Student Achievement Advisors who are based in the regions and work directly with schools (New Zealand Ministry of Education website).

**Youth Guarantee**

Reducing the proportion of early school leavers also figures among the priorities of the New Zealand Government. In 2008, the Government launched the Youth Guarantee programme, an initiative to improve the educational achievements of 16- to 17-year-olds. The programme provides targeted students with opportunities to participate in a range of vocationally-oriented courses linked to 1-3 level qualifications of the NZQF. The courses offered through Youth Guarantee have a focus on literacy, language and numeracy embedded in the course content and provide students with knowledge and information on vocational pathways.
Implementation of Registered Teacher Criteria

There has also been a focus on developing and refining professional standards for the teaching profession, as a lever to guide and improve teaching practices. Registered Teacher Criteria were adopted in 2010 and will be progressively implemented in the period 2010-2013. They describe the criteria for quality teaching that all fully registered teachers should meet and serve to guide the learning of provisionally registered teachers. The Registered Teacher Criteria place a strong focus on student learning outcomes, including teachers’ analysis and use of student assessment information and emphasise the bicultural context of New Zealand (Chapter 4).

An increased focus on building school capacity for self-review and improvement

Capacity building for school self-review has been promoted as an important way to raise student achievement. Since 2008, ERO has been conducting the Building Capacity in Evaluation Project, a process focused on building the capacity of ERO reviewers, Boards of Trustees and school leadership staff. The project focuses on understanding the importance of self-review for the external review process as well as building knowledge of assessment tools and processes. In 2009, ERO introduced a differentiated review approach where schools facing difficulties are visited more often than high performing schools, so as to best tailor external reviews to individual school needs. In addition, ERO is currently implementing a longitudinal review methodology to work more closely with schools facing difficulties (Chapter 5).

References


OECD (2009), Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments: First Results from TALIS, OECD, Paris.