

## **Underachievement is about more than attitudes**

### **Martin Thrupp**

Garth George's recent opinion piece 'Lets not leave any child behind' (20 November) raised a number of problems the incoming government will face in education. The most important one will be deciding where to focus its efforts in trying to address the so-called 'long tail' of underachievement amongst New Zealand children and youth.

It was good to see George providing a generally sympathetic account of teachers. By and large they are not the problem. While the quality of teaching can always be improved, the Labour government put too much faith in this approach to addressing underachievement.

However it is also too easy to lay blame at the door of parents. George's assumption seems to be that if we could bring about a change of attitude amongst what he calls 'indifferent' parents, we could address underachievement. We cannot assume children underachieve simply because their parents don't care.

Unfortunately the problem goes deeper than attitudes. Poverty, the resources parents can bring to their children's schooling, and the aspirations and expectations held by both parents and their children all count. Research carried out by the NZ Council for Educational Research has shown that parental income during the early years of childhood continues to affect children's achievement throughout their primary schooling. Another New Zealand study has suggested that able children from professional family backgrounds are about 1.5 times more likely to enter university than are children of similar ability from low socioeconomic families.

The fundamental nature of the problem means that education policymakers need to avoid confusing what US academic Jean Anyon calls educational 'small victories', such as the introduction of a new teaching technique, for 'large victories' with effects that are sustainable over time. Large victories in education will require policies that reduce poverty. The answers lie as much in social assistance, health and housing as in the education sector itself.

Meanwhile, back in schools, National's proposed national standards suggest it will increase formalised assessment and reporting as a means of pushing up achievement. However unless the national standards provide information that teachers can use, they are likely to be pointless. Weighing a pig doesn't fatten it, however well you weigh it. More assessment against targets also often has a

downside. There is a loss of authentic learning when teachers end up jumping through required hoops instead of responding to the learning needs of the particular children they teach.

Ironically, the title of George's article 'Lets not leave any child behind' is close to 'No Child Left Behind', the heavy handed testing and target setting regime for schools the USA has had in place in recent years. Rather than helping the poor, this policy has had many adverse effects on poor and minority students and the schools which serve them.

While I share Garth George's hope for the potential of all New Zealand's children, more than hand wringing will be needed. Our incoming government needs to steer clear of populist but ineffective or even damaging answers to New Zealand's educational problems.

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