

Vote Education 2013: Toward a Pass-Fail economy

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Vote Education 2013 is, sadly, yet another lost opportunity to do something meaningful for the 270,000 children living in poverty in Aotearoa.

As Mike O'Brien observed, Budget documents reflect their authors' views of both the economy and society. In Vote Education 2013, as has been the case for several years, the view of the child is that of a book-keeper's cipher, not a living person or a social being. Ciphers appear here as pass or fail entries in a ledger. The purpose of Vote Education 2013 is to improve national schooling ledger outcomes (standards, credentials) not to ensure that the most disadvantaged children in our society have their self-esteem, mana, well-being and agency enhanced through socially just educational interventions.

This year, the litmus test for the government was whether or not it would fully fund a school food programme to replace the very limited recognition to date by the state that poor children are all too often hungry children and that hungry children cannot develop and learn (cognitively or affectively) as well as they otherwise might. The Government signally failed this litmus test. The Minister of Finance's only comment was, effectively, to 'watch this space'. When questioned afterwards on this omission from his Budget speech, the Minister was quite clear: It is the parents' responsibility to feed hungry children. Beyond that it's a community responsibility, it's a charitable responsibility, it's a business responsibility but it's not in any way a Government responsibility. Blame the feckless parents but do not feed the hungry child.

Clearly, it would be anathema to the current Minister of Finance to give the least impression in a National-led Budget statement that Government holds any responsibility to act as a safety-net for poor, hungry children. For, no doubt, he too is aware that Budget documents reflect their authors' views of society as well as the economy.

The status quo remains, then: A limited fruit in schools programme funded by the state (inherited from the previous administration), charity (e.g. KidsCan), corporate niche marketing (Fonterra and Sanitarium), and the unwillingness of teachers, schools and communities to stand by while some children go six or seven hours without anything to eat.

In 2013-2014, Vote Education totals \$9.73 billion or 13.4% of Core Crown expenses. In his summary of the 2013 Budget as a whole, the Minister of Finance claims that Education (including Vote Tertiary Education and Vote Education Review Office) includes \$202 million new spending, or 16% of total new Government spending.

This summary, like much of the Vote Education document itself, is smoke and mirrors. (Indeed the figures announced by the Minister are typically four-year total funding commitments, not the single-year figures I quote here). Most of the announcements of 'new money' from the Minister of Finance and the Ministers of

Education are 'line-by-line-savings' from discontinued programmes, or 'reprioritisations'. As Susan St John has pointed out, it is extraordinarily difficult to work out what is being spent where in these Estimates and Appropriations, and one is left with the impression that the positive narrative is riddled with officials' spin.

In fact, Vote Education 2013 represents a nominal increase of only \$101million over Vote Education 2012, or +1.05%. Government's economic outlook is that inflation will be + 1.9% in 2014 (2.0% in 2015 and 2016). This means that even to keep up with forecast inflation, the 2013 Vote Education appropriations would probably need to be in the region of \$9.8 billion. So Education funding is effectively going backwards, despite all those claims to 'new funding' by the Government. (The projected Vote Education estimates through to 2016-17 also fail to keep up with forecast inflation each year.)

Within the three sectors funded through Vote Education 2013, Early Childhood Education receives an increase of \$65.5 million (+ 4.6%). However, Primary Education receives \$29.9 million less (- 1.07%), and Secondary Education \$57.5 million less (-2.8%). While these reductions may be nominally justified in terms of forecast reduced student rolls, numbers of teachers and ACC employer levies, they serve to put in context Government claims that schools' operations grants are being increased in line with inflation. This is not 'new money', in fact, merely a line saving or reprioritisation.

The claim of \$202 million new education funding also needs to be put in context. The Government will allocate an extra \$51 million alone to Ministry of Education Capital Expenditure -buildings and assets - in 2013-2014 (+9.1%). It will spend more money on information and public accountability reporting technologies which have only a distal relationship with teaching and learning. For example, the School Managed Network Funding is a new initiative costing \$11.5 million in 2013-2014. In the same year school furniture (presumably inedible) is increased by \$3.9 million, +16.0%.

There are some increased funding initiatives that are directly focused on teaching and learning, of course. Notably, the secondary-tertiary interface (including the expanded private sector trades academies and ITOs) receives an increase of \$27.8 million, +120%. However, this is largely a reprioritisation from the state school Secondary Education line. Interventions to target student groups are increased by \$6.5 million, + 2.5%. And, as announced by the Minister of Education prior to the Budget statement (and applauded by the sector), Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) is to receive \$14.5 million in 2013-2014.

As is to be expected from politicians, every Vote contains some ideological 'pet projects'. In this instance, the more controversial ones have been carefully hidden. Separate to the Budget statement, Associate Minister of Education Banks revealed that \$19 million had been allocated to the establishment of a handful of Partnership Schools Kura Hourua (charter schools). Moreover, hidden in the standard Primary and Secondary education lines are the ongoing consequences of the National-led government's decision in 2009 to remove the previous

government's 20% subsidy cap on funding to private schools. Since then, private schools have received a public funding subsidy equivalent to 30% of that provided to public schools for state school students, at a cost of \$10 million per annum (and the independent schools' lobby is apparently seeking to have the subsidy increased to 45%).

It really is the deepest and most bitter irony. This Government is quite prepared to subsidise 'nice to have' smaller and more socially exclusive classroom experiences for the 31,000 privileged children of the wealthy who attend the 95 or so private schools in the country at an annual cost of \$10 million (including more than \$5 million each year to the two elite private schools attended by Mr Key's own son and daughter).

However, at the same time, it is adamantly opposed to providing, say, \$1 a day for 'must have' food for the 230,000 children who attend 1,000 decile 1-4 schools.¹ If budgets are all about values, priorities and choices this one contrast provides a stark and shameful insight into the present Government's priorities.

So what else can we discern about the National-led Government's priorities in Vote Education 2013. From my point of view there are three consistent trends in this ideologically driven move towards a pass-fail schooling economy.

First, there is a clear view of the child as a pathological learner (collectively, the cohort of unsuccessful students who purportedly act as a drain on national economic growth). To address the problem of identifying, measuring and reporting on these 'at risk' students, there are significant appropriations for measurement systems and technologies such as the Network for Learning and the Progress and Consistency Tool. The Government is also quite prepared to tackle the inevitable classroom behavioural consequences of inequality, disadvantage, and anomie (e.g. PB4L) but not its underlying systemic causes. It wants to ensure that secondary school students make the 'correct choices' by appointing mentors (presumably in much the same way that beneficiaries will be supported to make the correct choices by their case managers). It will also target ECE attendance subsidies to groups such as Māori and Pasifika where participation is low and children arrive at school 'unprepared' to meet Government-mandated literacy and numeracy standards.

Second, the Budget contains both overt and covert privatization strategies in the form of privately owned charter schools for the poor established with 100% public funds, and privately owned (and state-integrated) elite schools run for the wealthy heavily subsidized by public funds. More generally, this Government is committed over time to eliminating the differential funding 'subsidies' provided to public and private education providers. Indeed, the secondary-tertiary interface initiative is yet another example of the determination to create a senior secondary school marketplace in which entrepreneurial public and private providers compete for limited and partial subsidies from Government.

¹ At an annual cost of \$40m. The Children's Commissioner has called for a mixed public-private model of provision at an annual cost to Government of \$10m.

Finally, we see further evidence in this budget of the withdrawal of the state from the social contract according to which education is regarded as a public good and its provision an obligation of Governments of all political persuasions. Parents, not Government are responsible for ensuring that poor hungry children are fed while at school. New public funding for early childhood education is to be limited to children who are at risk of future educational failure, and the gap between what the State will fund, and what is needed to ensure a worthwhile schooling experience is to be funded and provided by parents, charities or community NGOs, venture philanthropists, so-called corporate social responsibility, for profit corporations and private equity speculators – anybody but Government.

And today, and the next day and the next, hundreds of thousands of children in Aotearoa will almost certainly go to school hungry, leave school hungry and as a direct consequence have their learning harmed for no morally justifiable reason. All this for want of \$1 a day and a new permanent line item in the Government's Vote Education 2013 appropriations and estimates.