

SUBMISSION TO THE EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE COMMITTEE

Prepared by Maxim Institute Researcher Maryanne Spurdle

31 July 2024

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Education and Workforce Committee.

My name is Maryanne Spurdle, and I'm a researcher at Maxim Institute who focuses on education. I believe New Zealand's school system does not provide equitable access to the quality and the types of education that families want, and I have investigated the pros and cons of different methods to remedy this.

SUBMISSION

Overseas, independently operated, publicly funded schools have provided both better and more varied choices to families who would otherwise have limited options. Opponents of charter schools in New Zealand have not offered an alternative to charter schools that would be any better than the status quo—essentially accepting the largest difference between the reading skills of advantaged and disadvantaged students in the English-speaking world.¹ This also accepts that [half of all students](#) and only 23% of Māori students attend school regularly, and that more than [one third of 15-year-olds](#) struggle to read and write.

One of the most effective tools to rectify these gaps is better support for independently operated schools. OECD research shows that socio-economic stratification in schools decreases with more public funding of independently operated schools: “across OECD countries, 45% of the variation in stratification can be accounted for by the level of public funding to privately managed schools.”²

1 OECD, PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed (2019), 17.

2 OECD, Public and Private schools: How management and funding relate to their socio-economic profile (OECD Publishing, 2012), 7.

Charter schools have the potential to improve equal access to the kind of education that students from any postcode should expect. Here are the main reasons we believe this bill is supported by substantial international evidence.

1. CHARTER SCHOOLS OVERSEAS ARE POPULAR WITH PARENTS, AND STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PROGRESS FURTHER THAN IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

A [long-running study](#) of charter schools in the United States reached this clear verdict last year: “against a backdrop of flat performance for the nation as a whole, the trend of learning gains for students enrolled in charter schools is both large and positive.” The most encouraging take-away from this work by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) is that disadvantaged students are the ones who are most likely to do better.

2. CHARTER SCHOOLS WILL ENRICH OUR ENTIRE EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM.

Families who want schools with a special character—whether that’s a focus on sports, certain academic disciplines, religious or cultural traditions, or a teaching philosophy—will be more likely to have a local, affordable option.

The provision for designated character schools has failed to fulfil this role: the Ministry of Education applies this designation so narrowly that only 52 such schools exist. The majority of them serve Māori students (68% of all enrolments) and 9 were concessions to former partnership schools. The schools are excellent examples of what can be achieved with greater autonomy and community buy-in, however only 1% of the student population is served by them.

3. CHARTER SCHOOLS WILL EASE THE BURDEN ON OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM.

New charter schools will immediately take some enrolment pressure off of public schools that have run out of space. Charter schools can also better recruit teachers from other professions thanks to the ability to employ more staff with a LAT and their greater flexibility around contracts. This will reduce the current shortage of teachers, which is particularly chronic in secondary schools.

4. CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE LIKELY TO BE MORE COST-EFFECTIVE.

New charter schools must secure their own land and buildings, so the Ministry of Education’s capital costs per student will reduce. If they are even fractionally as efficient as charter schools in the US, the same per-student spend will provide a greater benefit to charter school students. In 2014, US charter schools were receiving [NZ\\$5,700 a year less](#) per student, on average, than public schools—while maintaining better outcomes. Tethering charter school funding to the per-student funding of public schools is a simple and fair way to encourage efficiency.

5. CHARTER SCHOOLS WILL BRIDGE SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAPS.

The quality of too many children’s education is dependent on the neighbourhood that their parents can afford to live in, as noted earlier. High property prices and over-subscribed schools in “good” zones have contributed to unequal educational access. Every additional school that admits all students, regardless of postcode, while committing to attendance and performance outcomes, contributes to a more level playing field.

[PISA studies](#) show “no automatic link between social disadvantage and poor performance in school,” and that education systems could be made to improve because “there was nothing inevitable or fixed about how schools

performed.” Lack of choice contributes to the link between social disadvantage and poor performance—and that is something any school system can change.

6. THE WORLD’S MOST EQUITABLE, BEST-PERFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS FUND INDEPENDENTLY OPERATED SCHOOLS.

Most OECD countries now provide the majority of independently operated schools’ funding. New Zealand, meanwhile, is barely ahead of countries like Mexico and Greece in its lack of support for non-state schools. A [2010 OECD report](#) summarised the trend this way:

Many of the world’s best-performing education systems have moved from bureaucratic “command and control” environments towards school systems in which the people at the frontline have much more control of the way resources are used, people are deployed, the work is organised and the way in which the work gets done.

Andreas Schleicher, who helped develop the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), [characterises the shift like this](#):

The past was about quality control; the future is about quality assurance. The challenge is that such system transformation cannot be mandated by government, which leads to surface compliance ... The past was about public versus private; the future is about public with private.

As this bill is shaped, we encourage consideration of the following:

1. Charging property maintenance fees at charter schools that don’t use Crown-owned facilities is reasonable, however those fees will create barriers for the very students who would most benefit from greater choice. This could be mitigated by allowing schools in the lowest EQI quartile (or some similar designation) to accept state funds of a similar amount to maintenance fees. In return, they would forego the ability to charge fees. This would encourage charter schools to operate in the areas they are most needed, and allow access to be truly universal.
2. Evaluation of students in both charter schools and state schools must provide enough evidence of student progress to inform parents and the public how comparable students are progressing in each. This is essential both for adequate accountability and truly informed parental choice.

Maxim Institute welcomes the government’s introduction of schools that have high accountability for outcomes and greater autonomy over their operations. As a [2017 OECD report noted](#): “Innovative change cannot happen in hierarchical and bureaucratic power structures that reward only conformity to rules and regulations.” The ideal conditions, rather, include “school autonomy, teacher professionalisation and school choice for parents.”

We reject the persistent claim that charter schools previously “failed” in New Zealand. The same schools continue to operate today, successfully, most as publicly funded designated character schools. The disestablishment of the partnership school model in 2018 was, rather, an ideological choice made without reference to how well children were being served.

Why, then, should we not simply advocate for the Ministry of Education to widen the criteria for designated character schools, and allow them to multiply publicly funded, independently operated schools? Raewyn Tipene, principal of Te Kāpehu Whetu in Whangārei, provides compelling evidence that the designation does not provide adequate school autonomy or the professional independence that teachers have outside the state system.

Te Kāpehu Whetu was one of the original partnership schools. [Raewyn told RNZ](#) that her experience running a charter school was “one of the first times I have experienced what freedom felt like. You were given resources, you were told, ‘Here’s what you need to achieve, how you do that’s your business,’ and we overachieved.”

Te Kāpehu Whetu is now a designated character school. Raewyn calls returning to the state system and its bureaucracy “horrendous”—“Largely it’s a different environment working in the public sector.”

For those attempting to politicise our education system, it’s worth noting that support for the charter school model is not exclusive to one side of the political spectrum. From US [President Barack Obama](#)—a Democrat—to the [Māori Party](#) of 2017, charter schools have a range of supporters:

Whether created by parents and teachers or community and civic leaders, charter schools serve as incubators of innovation in neighborhoods across our country. These institutions give educators the freedom to cultivate new teaching models and develop creative methods to meet students’ needs. This unique flexibility is matched by strong accountability and high standards, so under-performing charter schools can be closed, while those that consistently help students succeed can serve as models of reform for other public schools.

(Barack Obama, 2012)

The Māori Party supports charter schools. There are high levels of transparency and accountability in place for how Partnership Schools/Kura Hourua spend their funds. This includes: the requirement for audited financial reports to be made public; financial performance standards and ongoing monitoring from the Authorisation Board and the Ministry of Education.

Only one of the 10 Partnership Schools/Kura Hourua is a for-profit entity. This school, Vanguard Military School, has achieved outstanding academic results, and has been particularly effective for Māori Students.

Partnership Schools/Kura Hourua are delivering strong NCEA results despite working with students that have been previously underserved by the state system.

(The Māori Party, 28 July 2017)

Rather than defend the educational status quo, we hope that our educators, parents and communities will take this opportunity to build something better.