A Decade of Educational Reform: Are We Now Equipped for the New Millennium?

By Judith Aitken

The confidence of certainty

My Uncle Arthur, now in his early eighties, was educated in the 1920s and early ’30s at Lochiel Primary School in Southland.

When I was at primary school in the 1940s, he let me have his copy of Our Nation’s Story. As the dog-eared pages testify, I not only coloured in all the ‘o’s but cut out a number of the pictures to use in what were supposed to be highly decorated "projects". Along with the horrors of "mental" at nine o’clock each morning, projects were the deepest torment of my entire school life.

The text book had been published by Whitcombe and Tombs after the 1914-18 war as part of its Primary School History series. It was for the Standard VI pupils of that era.

It retailed at 2/3d "to meet the requirements of the [new] Primary school syllabus" and according to the publishers, it had been "compiled in accordance with the most modern methods of presenting the facts of history in an accessible and interesting manner".

Directly paralleling the official syllabus, the book’s ambitious 258 page coverage ranged imaginatively from the colonisation of New Zealand and other countries by European settlers through English literature, technology since the 15th century, the administration of the public sector, the key elements of our economy, to a final exhortative and improving chapter on civics.

Without doubt, the single most memorable characteristic of this textbook was the confidence with which it was written.

In the foreword to the new curriculum, the Primary School Syllabus was itself quaintly described as "suggestive" rather than prescriptive as to the knowledge to be transferred to the student. It was the textbook that translated this teaching opportunity into educational certainty.

The textbook writer was without hesitation or self doubt. He knew exactly where he stood, the proper perspectives of international history, the most important areas of knowledge to be summarised into a short space, the key ideas, most significant social and economic movements, the notable leaders, the contemptible villains.

His readers knew what they were supposed to know.

Neither Uncle Arthur’s primary school syllabus nor my own strongly advocated higher order thinking skills, research skills or problem solving as cerebral virtues for the young. Our confidence was reinforced by the authority of the text and the fact that our teachers gave it the weight of incontrovertible truth.

The desire for this sort of certainty, the longing to be sure that we are right, increased as the 20th century passed, and, in New Zealand at least, accelerated rapidly over the past decade. It battled, however, with an equally strong consciousness that we
can know little, can be sure of almost nothing, and can be certain only of the certainty of change.

We are torn between acknowledging and coping with the facts of entropy and simultaneously believing that we can rely on what we know, that the past is knowable and that the past is a reliable predictor of the future.

The decade of post 1989 reform repeatedly illustrates this ambivalence. It can be traced through several often contradictory themes:

Absolute certainty about the most appropriate instrument for managing the education of children (the traditional institution of a school) but considerable and unresolved ambivalence about the role of a school.

Political and bureaucratic ambivalence about the 1989 decision to allow parents to have more direct influence and greater local control over the administration of a school, the employment of school staff, and the provision of educational services.

Disagreement about the risks presented through a permissive rather than a prescriptive curriculum.

Widespread and sustained officials’ and professional teachers’ uncertainty about the propriety, validity, utility and availability of critical information about the quality of classroom teachers and the quality of student’s learning outcomes.

Changing patterns of political, public and professional debate about the scope and legitimacy of the two new State departments set up in 1989 - the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office.

Three unresolved issues emerge from the past decade with singular clarity:

the role of the school;
what counts as learning; and
the respective rights and responsibilities of parents, students, teachers and the wider community.

The reforms were premised on the view that the quality of teaching in New Zealand schools was high, and in international terms, excellent. The problems and inhibitions of education were regarded in the late ‘80s as the creature of outdated governance and administration systems. Therefore these were radically reformed.

What has been exposed with the gradual 10-year improvement in governance and administrative competence have been weaknesses in teaching and, in particular, major deficiencies in the structure, scope and quality of information about how well and what students actually learn.

The idea of risk

In a fascinating book entitled Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk, a modern American writer, Peter Bernstein, comments that:

"the revolutionary idea that defines the boundary between modern times and the past is the mastery of risk: the notion that the future is more than a whim of the gods and that men and women are not passive before nature.

"Until human beings discovered a way across that boundary, the future was a mirror of the past or the murky domain of oracles and soothsayers who held a monopoly over knowledge of anticipated events..."
Bernstein sees the capacity to manage risk, and "with it the appetite to take risk and make forward-looking choices" as key elements of the energy that drives economies and societies forward.

Nonetheless, as Bernstein and most of us here would agree, there is a "persistent and unresolved tension between those who assert that the best decisions are based on quantification and numbers, determined by the pattern of the past, and those who base their decisions on more subjective degrees of belief about the uncertain future..."

It boils down to whether one is convinced that the past determines the future or believes that we can and should rely on patterns of the past to tell us what the future will be like.

Certainly there is no one right answer.

Over the past century we can observe the impact of the notion of risk and application of the laws of probability on public education systems - and the tensions this has generated.

*The school as the dominant delivery model*

For instance, schools are among the very few institutions that have remained almost entirely unchanged for most of this century. A school classroom today is much more like its early 20th century counterpart than is true of, say, a hospital theatre.

The durability of the school is presumably explained, at least in part, by public, political and professional confidence in the probability that it is the best organisational arrangement for adding value to the minds of the young and, to some extent, socialising them to be fit for customary purpose.

Yet despite its near organisational monopoly, we have seen two developments since 1989 that signal less than universal certainty about this service delivery model.

The first is the growth in numbers of homeschoolers from less than 300 ten years ago to over 5500 today.

The second is the startlingly recent move to consider using modern communications technology as an alternative to location-bound schools.

*Compulsory schooling*

In New Zealand we have chosen to handle the risk that parents will decide against enrolling their children in State registered schools by making school enrolment compulsory for the total population aged between 6 and 16.

Neither the law nor any other mode of public policy offers any compensatory guarantees as to the outcomes of this mandatory attendance.

We have a longstanding historical attachment to the notion of schooling in this country.

Our Education Act explicitly requires children to attend school.

Some jurisdictions require that young people be educated, but do not specify that this is synonymous with schooling. Others do not make any form of education compulsory - although as in Singapore the school attendance patterns are similar to those in New Zealand.

For instance, the British Education Act of 1996 states that
"The parents of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable
(a) to his age, ability and aptitude; and
(b) to any special educational needs he may have,
either by regular attendance at school or otherwise." (S.7)

Section 9 of the revised Act goes on to state that:
"In exercising or performing all their respective powers and duties under the Education Acts, the Secretary of State, local education authorities and the funding authorities shall have regard to the general principle that pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents."

adding primly
"so far as that is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure".

The wishes of parents are certainly not given the statutory prominence they enjoy in Britain, although since 1989 parents have had unprecedented opportunity to influence local governance and employment decisions in their role as the electors and trustees on over 2700 school boards.

New Zealand’s education law demonstrates our historical confidence in and preference for institutional and structural solutions for public policy issues.

Our law both justifies and reinforces a complex historical amalgam of political and industrial interests associated with the institution of "a school".

But are we clear about the role of a school? Do we acknowledge that it does have a real educative function, or do we hobble this by our own uncertainty and lack of good information about the benefits to students of attending school?

The role of a school is nowhere defined in law. Authorities and teachers often give confusing messages about the primary purpose of operations. In particular they may claim, as the communications manager for the NZQA did in April, that the academic achievements of senior school students should not be seen to reflect either the quality of a school or the quality of its teaching.

The central purposes of schooling

If senior students’ academic achievements cannot with any confidence be attributed to the quality of a school or the quality of teaching, why have successive Parliaments approved the expenditure by Ministers of Education of some $32 billion on schooling since 1989?

In New Zealand we still have no reliable, nationally consistent information about how well school students are learning in the context of the New Zealand curriculum.

So what persuades Governments to risk massive investments in enterprises that do not have a demonstrable range of outcomes? Why continue to invest in schools that are allegedly unlikely to generate positive educational outcomes for students who come to school from economically poor backgrounds?

Presumably the answer lies in the field of belief rather than rationality.

It may be that our patterns of expenditure, unsupported by reliable information about the efficacy of schooling in terms of student learning outcomes, are simply another
example of Kenneth Arrow’s observation: that "our knowledge of the way things work... comes trailing clouds of vagueness...". Ministers and others prefer a "distribution of impressions" to the risks of looking for greater certainty.

The primary purpose of schooling
The formal guidelines provided for boards of trustees by the Crown since 1989 further illustrate our unease with anything too prescriptive, anything, perhaps, for which we might be held accountable.

It is instructive to look briefly at the changes in the core elements of the charters signed by each board with the Minister of Education.

The primary purpose of schooling was stated without ambiguity in 1989. This clarity was clearly far too risky, and major changes took place as different stakeholders assessed the risks to them of the 1989 and succeeding statement.

1. In May 1989 the charter template contained the following statements in the Guiding Principles set out for boards:

"Paramount Principle
The needs of children and their learning shall be paramount.
Therefore, the boards of trustees will ensure that all students are given an education which respects their dignity, rights and individuality.
This education shall challenge them to achieve personal standards of excellence and to reach their full potential.
All school activities will be designed to advance these purposes."

2. Less than one year later, in a letter from "the Chief Executive of Education" (sic), boards were advised of some significant changes to the charters.

In future there would be no Paramount Principle. The reference to the paramount needs of children and their learning was dropped altogether.

The explanation given was as follows:

"Legal advice is that the use of the term "paramount principle" may have the effect of negating or modifying other aims in the charter. This of course is not intended and could lead to much litigation if various other aims of the charter were argued to be invalid by certain groups who were opposed to such aims."

The statement that now appeared was as follows:

"The board of trustees will ensure that all students in any school or schools under its control are given an education which enhances their learning, builds on their needs and respects their dignity.
This education shall challenge them to achieve personal standards of excellence and to reach their full potential. All school activities will be designed to advance this purpose."

The explanation for these changes was as follows:

"The notions relating to the original paramount principle as included here and are given prominence by their placement. "Rights and individuality" are deleted here as guiding principles because it may provide a means of challenging aspects of the curriculum (for instance) which a parent or pupil does not agree with. The sentence also recognises that some boards of trustees govern more than one school."
3. Three years later a further significant change was made to the charters. The 1990 National Education Guidelines (NEGs) were revised and deemed to be part of the charters.

The NEGs superseded all previous wording unless boards decided to retain them and boards were still able to incorporate their own local objectives. The NEGs comprised
- the National Education Goals,
- the National Administration Guidelines and
- the national curriculum.

The intentions of the NEGs were set out by the Ministry as follows in the Education Gazette of April 1993:

"The revised National Education Guidelines have an enhanced emphasis on learning and achievement. They contain a statement of goals for education in New Zealand as well as curriculum and administrative requirements. The new guidelines will form a major part of the contractual arrangements boards of trustees have with the Crown. As such they will be a significant part of the basis for audits and reviews conducted by the Education Review Office."

In only four years from 1989 to 1993 we had moved from an apparently confident conviction that the paramount purpose and primary function of schooling was promotion of the learning needs of children to a much more diffused, less prescriptive, more risk-averse set of assertions and requirements.

The 1993 NEGs did not restate the learning needs of children as a paramount purpose.

But the Education Review Office did. Its populist slogan became "the child is the heart of the matter".

In echo of the initial principle of the first charters, ERO has for over six years explicitly identified that its primary test for the merit and worth of school-based education is the quality of the individual student’s educational experience, achievement and enjoyment.

In other words, the needs of children and their learning.

ERO’s reviewers seek answers to two disarmingly simple questions:
- what do you (the board and professional teachers) expect the students to learn, achieve and enjoy in the time they are enrolled with you; and
- how do you know when that happens?

ERO’s position is that a school should at all times act as though the needs of students and their learning are paramount, and be able to demonstrate the effectiveness with which the teaching programmes have realised this principle.

The status of the Charter

In publishing the 1993 Gazette statements, the Ministry of Education explicitly reinforced the controversial proposition that the relationship between the Crown and local boards of trustees was contractual in nature.

The 1979 version of the charter had stated that the document was "a legal agreement between the board of trustees and the Minister of Education".
The amended version hastily promulgated in 1990 stated new wording without explanatory comment. The charter was now
"a legal undertaking by the board of trustees to the Minister of Education".

Something was happening to the notion of partnership between parents and Government, community and Minister, as seen by Lange, Picot, Ramsay and the 1989 reformers.

It had taken less than a year for the perceived risks of a legal agreement between partners (the much-publicised basis for the 1989 governance reforms) to be reduced to an undertaking by the service provider to the Crown, with no explicit reference to any mutual agreement between partners.

The 1993 Gazette reinstated the notion of a contract - but without allowing the normal principles of contract law to apply or bind either party, one being the Crown, the other a Crown entity.

**Managing staff performance risks**

Ambivalence about stating our expectations has characterised many developments since 1989. For instance, the revised 1989 Act explicitly provided for the Secretary for Education to promulgate guidelines for boards about how to manage their professional and other employees.

Given that most boards comprised trustees with little if any experience in employment or, more importantly, performance management, the need for such guidelines was rightly foreseen in 1988-89 as imperative.

In the first year after the passage of the revised Act, the State Services Commission published a comprehensive primer on staff management called *Employment in Education*. Whatever training, marketing or use occurred, so far as ERO reviewers could establish, it was not nearly enough.

The protracted absence of effective support for boards as the legal employers of all school employees was repetitively reported by the Education Review Office between 1990 and 1996.

The legal fact that locally elected trustees were teachers’ employers was robustly denied by august persons like Sir John Anderson, at one stage the chair of the Schools Consultative Committee.

It was jeopardised by the fact that all significant contractual arrangements and agreements were (and still are) negotiated far above the heads of local boards by central agencies (initially the SSC, and from 1996 the Ministry of Education) and the large teachers’ unions.

The voluntary employers’ group - the New Zealand School Trustees Association - was virtually silent and impotent in these negotiations.

It took until 1997 for official guidelines to be defined and promulgated by the Secretary for Education.

What good reasons could there be for such protracted official ambivalence about how teachers’ professional work should be managed, especially when we are so assertive about regulations on school floor space, the height of windows and the suspension of students?
Curriculum

On another front, we can see that the international development of relatively permissive, non-dogmatic school curricula has constantly been challenged by demands for highly prescriptive, explicitly specified teaching programmes accompanied by prescriptive textbooks and standardised testing.

This represents two quite different approaches to managing the risks of what students might and should learn at school.

These are high stakes matters, especially for those who claim that the learning outcomes of schooling are the key to our economic development, social cohesion and cultural tolerance.

Earlier in the century, in the days of Our Nation’s Story it was possible to describe the curriculum as "a selection from the culture". There was little anxiety over which culture was intended.

However, the complexity of a plural society, the challenge to those of European descent from the culture of indigenous Māori, the intrusion of American cultural imperialism and the difficulty (let alone the merits) of sustaining cultural dominance in an increasingly international community served to make our curriculum designers highly risk averse. The effects of their uncertainty are transferred indirectly to the student.

Large scale testing

The design and use of large scale testing systems and statistically normed assessment techniques for measuring and predicting changes in students’ behaviour or cognitive growth have gained or lost ground as political, professional and parental views on their validity and reliability have shifted.

The utility of testing is unambiguous - self-evident, even - to those who consider that past performance is a robust guide to the future. It is much less persuasive for others who feel more comfortable with Kenneth Arrow’s clouds of vagueness.

The probability that certain interventions will or are more likely to produce desirable results, and concepts like "normal distribution", are not only subject to popular debate and professional controversy amongst teachers.

They are also the continuing focus for ever-more complex theoretical analyses of the nature of risk, how people manage it, and how such matters relate to education.

Phenomena like "ambiguity aversion", identified in 1961 by Daniel Ellsberg (of Pentagon Papers fame), show that people prefer to take risks on the basis of known rather than unknown probabilities - in other words, information matters.

Without wishing to make too pretentious a claim, it could be argued that the increasing demand for ERO reports by individual parents selecting a school for their children (now over 10,000 requests a year) supports this theory.

Many school teachers and their professional leaders take what they appear to see as a low risk approach, declining to accept the burden of a causal relationship between teaching and learning, preferring to transfer responsibility for students’ learning back to the socio-economic context for which no school or individual teacher could reasonably be held accountable...
Choosing a school ... but not an education

Attempting to account for such responses to risk and uncertainty, two American writers, Kahneman and Tversky, concluded that "theories of choice are at best approximate and incomplete... choice is a constructive and contingent process. When faced with a complex problem, people... use computational shortcuts and editing operations". (in p 281 Bernstein)

This can be illustrated by the way parents identify and manage the risks associated with their choice of school for their children. They are typically highly influenced by such shortcuts and symbols.

They employ apparently risk-controlling considerations like the fact that they or other members of their families attended a particular school, the school is within walking distance of their home, the school has an attractive uniform that will publicly confirm their selective choice, the fact that the school has repeatedly produced good pass rates in senior school examinations, and so on.

Managing critical information about risks to student learning

On the other hand, how do parents behave in respect of far greater potential risks with which they might be preoccupied: the risks associated with what their child will learn and how they, the student and the teachers will know what, when and with what degree of depth and enjoyment learning occurs.

It appears that few parents ever inquire about the basis for, scope and nature of the school curriculum.

I doubt whether any but a handful of principals have ever had to discuss with prospective school parents the theoretical basis, the selection of knowledge fields, the particular cognitive and other skills, the preferred attitudes and values set out in New Zealand’s national curriculum.

We know that few trustees elected to school boards ever ask such questions, yet those trustees are accountable in law for the delivery of the curriculum to and in the best interests of each individual student in our schools.

How are we to explain this apparently indifferent stance on the part of parents and trustees in respect of the curriculum, which is the central element in the provision of schooling services?

Is it reflective of well-founded confidence in demonstrably reliable information they already possess?

Does it tell us that there is in the community a high level of certainty about what the curriculum is, on what theories of learning, knowledge and the transferability of skills it is based?

Issues here relate not only to what is to be taught but who is to teach.

Before enrolling their child, or after doing so, do any parents ask for information about the qualifications, experience, professional development and recent performance assessments of the teachers who will be responsible for the students’ education?

Parents may be interested in the gender or ethnic mix of a school’s staff, and clearly some parents place considerable store on any heroes, like ex-All Blacks, a school may employ.
Perhaps it is simply assumed by parents that professional teachers will be up to some sort of unidentified standard, some officially mandated quality level on some formally endorsed scale of capability. Perhaps registration is on its own sufficient reason for parents.

There are a number of possible explanations for this seeming indifference to matters of critical significance in the formal education of the young.

**The costs of inquiry**

One is the transaction costs - the parental effort that would be required to weigh the probabilities of different providers generating more or less acceptable experiences and outcomes for a particular child, even if such information were obtainable, is considerable.

**The risks of inquiry**

Another explanation may derive from a parental perception that it may not be lawful, let alone appropriate or polite to seek such information. Many parents (and, indeed many school trustees) are uncertain as to whether they may ask the principal of a school about the educational programmes, or the subject and knowledge content and cognitive and other skills to be addressed.

Furthermore, we already know that many parents worry that such questions will have an unintended backlash on the child who is seen to have pushy or interfering parents.

Parents and many of the trustees they elect are still not sure that it is acceptable or legitimate to ask about the qualifications, experience and professional training of teachers employed in a school. And, indeed, what sort of reaction might a parent expect if she or he were to ask these questions?

**The providers’ perception of sufficiency**

What do officials, school managers and professional educators regard as appropriate information for parents?

What do they consider to be a sufficient level of certainty and confidence amongst the parents and communities that have a stake in a school?

How much information do principals and teachers consider that parents and students should seek in order to minimise the risks of a poor choice of school?

It is sensible for schools to try to establish how much information parents and other stakeholders can handle and how customised such information might be.

But this must be established, not assumed. School principals and teachers should identify - and often revise - the type and quality of information that will help parents and others assess the risks and potential or actual benefits to their child.

Yet we find that there is in fact a substantial loss of student-related information in the transition process as a child passes from one institution to another.

Pre-school centres and schools from which a child graduates very often complain that the new host schools shows little if any interest in what is already known about a student and behave as though each new entrant was a tabula rasa. This is odd behaviour
for those who already face significant risks with every new entrant.

Relying on impressions

As Barbara Tuchman pointed out in her rueful study of woodenheadedness, *The March of Folly*, history provides not only occasional instances but repeated patterns of irrationality, inconsistency and incompetence in the ways human beings arrive at decisions and choices when faced with uncertainty. We typically rely on what has been called the "distribution of impressions" rather than any historical probability distributions.

Infuriatingly for the pure of mind, it appears that we may not act rationally but we prefer to act as though rationality prevailed. Thus comfort can be found by both the students of the bell curve and the advocates of chaos theory. We do have some well-tested means to manage risk, but we do not always choose to use these tools.

Are we prepared for the new millennium?

We have 10 years’ experience with one of the most devolved systems of school governance in the world. We know a great deal about what works well and what creates uncertainty, unexpected risks and costs in managing the relationship between central Government, local school communities, the board, the parents elect and the principals and staff the trustees employ.

We have a better understanding of public accountability than we had before 1989 when there were so many historical and custom-bound opportunities for different versions of what Heclo and Wildavsky called the private government of public money.

We are learning some hard lessons about the outcomes of neglected policies and policy vacuums. Entrenched behaviours, unchallenged expectations, unjustified historical privilege of access and influence, dogmatic retention of customary position, closed networks for the exchange of information - these were the reasons for the 1989 reforms; where they remain they are the enemies of successful adaptive change.

There is at least one area where we still have to make progress.

It is a critical area for innovative leadership if we are to manage risk and increase certainty in the benefits of formal education for children in the 21st century: what do we still need to know about the outcomes of a child’s school-based education?

This not only involves what the student learns, and the cognitive and other skills the student has acquired or developed.

It also includes positive attitudes of mind, an appreciation of the social benefits of ethical conduct, self-confidence, an ability to share in a spirit of generosity, a willingness to trust and love others, enduring curiosity, respect for the law and thoughtful discrimination in the exercise of tolerance.

We risk students’ growth in all these respects because we do not have good information about whether our expectations are being met. We do not have:

- information obtained and presented in a way that is acceptable to the best of our principals and classroom teachers;
- information that can be used by teachers, parents and students themselves to compare children’s achievements and understandings as they grow and move from one
phase of their education to the next;

information that can be used to evaluate the reasons why students present different patterns of achievement and understanding, often associated with factors such as gender, ethnicity, cultural association, age or the source of prior education;

information that can be used in planning and self-review by schools to review their teaching arrangements and methods, review the resources they have used in the past, and modify any of these if that appears necessary;

information that can be used, once suitably aggregated, by education service providers such as teacher trainers, resource publishers and manufacturers.

I stated at the outset that the very success of the reforms had exposed the nature and extent of weaknesses and uncertainties in areas about which we had previously been quite confident, if not complacent, such as the quality of classroom teaching and pre-employment teacher training.

Being prepared to move into the next century means reducing the risks we generate for children to deal with, and making better use of all the information we can assemble to help deal with those matters about which we feel least certain.

We have come some way over the past decade, but it is the next ten years and beyond that will justify the national decision we took in 1989 to create schools for tomorrow.