



Challenges Around Capability Improvements in a System of Self-Managed Schools in New Zealand ▴

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Introduction

New Zealand (NZ), a small country of 4.3 million people, has a single national education system. Local authorities have no role in education in NZ, nor are there any school districts. There are four national government education agencies:

1. The Ministry of Education (MOE), established under the Education Act of 1989, is responsible for education policy advice to the government and implementation of government policy, including regulating the New Zealand Curriculum and the National Education Guidelines within which schools operate. The MOE allocates funding and resources. It has regional offices that monitor and advise schools, but that have no direct authority over schools unless clear breaches of legislation are evident.
2. The Education Review Office (ERO) undertakes independent evaluations of school and early childhood education center performance. It also develops national reports on issues of interest to government, drawing on data from its reviews. The 173 ERO reviewers have usually had teaching and school management experience (school managers, such as principals and deputy principals, must have teaching experience, and some continue to teach while holding school management responsibility).
3. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority sets and regularly reviews standards as they relate to school and post-school qualifications; administers national student examinations; accredits schools to assess against standards; and approves and accredits post-school courses.
4. The New Zealand Teachers Council registers (i.e., certifies) teachers, renews their practicing certificates, and approves teacher education programs that lead to registration.

New Zealand has the most decentralized system of school self-management in the developed world. Each school has its own board of trustees, primarily composed of parents elected by other parents to a governance role that oversees the principal and the school staff. Each school is accountable to the MOE and to its school community through the school charter it develops,

which includes the school's vision, values, and strategic plan for the next three to five years. Schools provide an annual report of progress in relation to their annual and longer-term strategic plans. For school staffing, there are national guidelines on appointments, which are made by each school individually. There are also national collective employment contracts negotiated with the country's two teacher unions (the New Zealand Educational Institute, which represents primary-level [i.e., elementary] teachers and principals, and the Post Primary Teachers' Association, which represents secondary-level [i.e., high school] teachers and principals), and with the Secondary Principals' Association of New Zealand.

Editor's Note

This is one of four case studies developed in mid-2009 for the U.S. Department of Education that focus on how countries other than the United States have been addressing the challenge of turning around their low-performing schools. The other three case studies focus on Australia, Canada, and England. This case study has not been updated since it was initially developed.

Curriculum and Assessment

While schools are self-managing, they operate within a framework of national regulations that they are expected to follow. Rather than being specific or detailed, these regulations provide broad guidelines that allow schools considerable scope to set their own programs, using the New Zealand Curriculum and the National Education Guidelines. The National Education Guidelines primarily focus on literacy and numeracy in the primary years. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) includes a secondary standards-based qualification framework called the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), which includes both externally examined standards and internally assessed standards, and which allows schools to design their own courses and decide what mix of external examinations and internal assessments they will use to assess the standards they decide to include in the course. Most schools also offer other qualifications from the NQF (mainly entry-level vocational qualifications). Some schools also use international examination systems. Primary (elementary) schools can choose their own assessments, with most using a mix of formative assessments and standardized tests. National literacy and numeracy standards for each primary year were introduced, controversially, in 2010. These standards rely on overall teacher judgments using a range of assessment information, rather than on a single national test. The government does not rank schools in terms of overall school performance, though local newspapers

compile rankings of secondary schools from NCEA results.

School Type

Most schools are within the state system (the NZ term “state” is equivalent to the U.S. term “national”). Approximately 83 percent of schools are state schools (government-owned). Thirteen percent of schools are state-integrated, operating within the same sets of regulations as state schools, but with nonprofit proprietors retaining ownership of the school property. The state-integrated category originated in 1975, when Catholic and other faith-based schools were funded on the same basis as government schools, other than for property ownership. This category includes faith-based schools and schools of “special character,” such as Steiner (Waldorf) schools. Four percent of NZ schools are privately owned (usually nonprofit). Private schools charge fees; teacher salaries are not covered by government funding, though these schools receive some subsidy of teacher salary costs. The private schools have more autonomy, but most primarily follow the New Zealand Curriculum. Private schools are also reviewed by the ERO, though less rigorously than other schools, and reports on these schools are not made public. Private schools can take part in national professional development programs, but they do not take part in national school improvement initiatives or government interventions. All NZ schools employ only teachers with a current practicing certificate or a temporary authority to teach.

There are 2,037 primary schools in NZ. These include some schools that

cover years 1–6, with students then going on to a two-year intermediate school or a years 7–13 secondary school at approximately age 12, and some schools that cover years 1–8. There are 353 secondary schools, most covering years 9–13, and 147 composite schools, which cover all schooling years. The average primary school has only 216 students, reflecting the large number of small schools in rural areas. However, most students attend urban schools.

NZ schools are comprehensive rather than specialist, although some have chosen to add areas of specialty, such as music or sports academies. Sixty-eight of the state schools are kura kaupapa Māori (i.e., Māori-language immersion schools). English, Māori, and sign language are the official languages of NZ. There are 47 special schools catering to students with special needs, but most students with special needs attend mainstream schools. There is also one correspondence school catering to students who cannot access a local school due to their remote location or other reasons, or who cannot access a particular subject at their local school.

School Resources and Funding

Government resourcing comes in two forms: entitlement staffing and operational funding. State and state-integrated schools are allocated a specific number of full-time equivalent staff based on a national formula, which is linked to the teacher-to-student ratios that differ by year level and school management roles. Teachers are paid individually by the central government.

Operational funding covers school management costs. It includes a base grant up to certain enrollment sizes and per-student funding. About 15 percent of the total government funding for schools' operational costs is linked to each school's socioeconomic profile, with the highest per-student rate going to schools serving the lowest socioeconomic communities.

Schools also raise money themselves (about 14 percent of their total resources in 2007) through voluntary parent donations, fundraising, and, in state-integrated schools, a school fee related to property costs. Operational funding from the government and these locally raised funds are used to pay for additional teachers, curriculum resources, professional development, school administrative staff, teacher aides, janitors, property maintenance, and property maintenance staff. Large capital costs are paid separately by the government for approved plans.

Student Population

At the start of the 2009 school year, there were 745,148 students in the NZ education system. In addition, nearly 3,000 families homeschool their children. Fifty-seven percent of NZ students are Pākeha/NZ European, 22 percent are indigenous Māori, 10 percent are Pacific Islands, and 9 percent are Asian. Approximately 10 percent of students come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken. Māori and Pacific Islands students' attendance and achievement rates are lower on average, and these students are more likely to come from low-income families. Sixteen percent of children live in low-income households.

Based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) measures, in 2004 NZ was just above the OECD median for proportion of low-income households, with a rate similar to those of Germany, Canada, and Australia, and below that of the United States. NZ had higher income inequality than the OECD median, slightly above Australia and Canada, but lower than the United States (Ministry of Social Development, 2008).

Schooling is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16; the majority of students start on their fifth birthday. State education is free in terms of fees, but most schools ask for a voluntary donation. Parents can choose any state school for their children to attend. State-integrated schools usually have some enrollment criteria related to their special character, but enrollment is not restricted to these criteria. Around a quarter of state and state-integrated schools have enrollment schemes, which set out a physical zone from which they will take students. Students applying to a school from outside its school zone go into a lottery for any spare places in the school. Most students appear to be at their first school choice, with around a third bypassing their closest primary school and 40 percent bypassing their closest secondary school (Schagen & Wylie, 2009). About a quarter of parents of primary students and 12 percent of parents of secondary students use the publicly available ERO reports to inform their school choice.

Focus on School Improvement

Policy Context

When NZ moved to a system of self-managing schools in 1989, there were no direct mechanisms to improve schools or to turn around poorly performing schools (McCauley & Roddick, 2001). This major policy change was undertaken not because of public discontent with the quality of education, but as part of wide-ranging economic and public service reforms (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Wylie, 1995). Its main purpose was to shift decision-making to the school level so that decision-making and resource allocation would fit with particular school and student needs. Linked to this was the aim of improving student achievement, particularly for Māori and Pacific Islands students. The new self-management approach was intended to address equity issues and improve educational opportunity for the indigenous Māori and minority groups. Policymakers thought that schools would either self-improve in order to attract students (because each school's funding is reliant on the number of students enrolled) or close if they failed to attract a sufficient number of students to remain financially viable. However, this approach was based on three assumptions that were not borne out. First, it assumed that there was sufficient knowledge, capability, and capacity at each school to make changes in teaching that would better meet local student needs, and that these needs could be accurately identified. Second, it assumed that competition between schools was systemic, that every school would see itself as vying **↔**

for students with other schools, and that the response to perceived competition would be to provide high-quality education (Wylie, 1998, 2006). Finally, it assumed that school closure was politically easy.

Because NZ schools are self-managed and not under any higher authority, thought had to be given to how the quality of education would be monitored. Initially, it was proposed that school accountability would be monitored in the same way the wider public sector was monitored: through a “purchase agreement,” or contract, between each school and the government, in which the school’s “outputs” would be specified. However, this approach would have been unwieldy and demanding in terms of the government bureaucracy needed to negotiate and monitor such contracts, especially because the “outputs” of education are not easily measured. The charter approach that was eventually taken was less rigid (Spreng, 2005). Because the MOE was developed as a policy department — rather than as an agency designated to work with schools — government agencies did not take much notice of the school charters or, later, the school annual reports. ERO reviews became the main vehicle for monitoring the quality of schools. However, the ERO initially focused more on compliance with administrative regulations (e.g., health and safety regulations) than on the quality of teaching or student performance. ERO reviews — undertaken every three years if the school appeared to be functioning smoothly, but undertaken more often if the ERO detected problematic issues — were a prime mechanism to identify struggling schools.

Through these reviews, it became evident that some schools were having difficulty meeting their students’ needs and operating as self-managing entities. However, there was a gap in the policy because, although the ERO could identify struggling schools, it was not the ERO’s role to provide support to these struggling schools. Additionally, because the MOE was a policy department, it had no responsibility, and little staffing, to respond to the struggling schools identified by the ERO.

Schools Support Project

The government addressed this policy gap in 1995, when the MOE began the Schools Support Project, which developed a Safety Net intervention system to prevent at-risk schools from getting into deeper difficulty. The centrality of the school self-management ethos in the NZ system meant that these interventions were not considered “take-overs,” but customized attention and action to support school improvement to be undertaken by the school itself. At-risk schools were defined as schools in one or more of the following broadly defined situations: the safety and well-being of students was in jeopardy; the quality of education was below the expected minimum; there was concern about school governance or management; disharmony existed among the board of trustees, principal, staff, and community; or the school’s viability was at risk for reasons beyond the control of the board of trustees. Identifying these at-risk schools was often informally done through ERO reports and through sector groups (e.g., principal associations, teacher unions, or school trustees’ associations) working with the MOE. In 1996–98, the

ERO also released reports that were critical of the quality of education in three low-income areas. These reports prodded the MOE to better support at-risk schools in those areas and in others.

Most of the 242 schools (about 9 percent of all schools) that entered Safety Net intervention in the six years it operated did so at the lowest rung of the intervention ladder: Informal Action, which often used informal networks of sector groups to provide short-term advice. Formal Action, the next rung up the ladder in the intervention system, was used with 53 schools over the six-year period. Formal Action included a needs analysis and the development, implementation, and monitoring of a detailed action plan, usually funded by the schools. Next up the intervention ladder was Business Cases, which were developed for 16 schools with longer-term and more severe issues that made their viability questionable. A school for which a Business Case was developed would often receive additional money to carry out the correlating business plan. Finally, used for only 19 schools, was Statutory Action, an intervention in which the board of trustees was usually either replaced by a commissioner or directed to engage outside assistance. Statutory Action did not involve restructuring the school. No mandatory time limits were used for any of these four levels of intervention.

In 1996, an initiative called the Schooling Improvement Strategy was added to the Schools Support Project. This new initiative involved groups of schools — called “school clusters” — working with the MOE, and often community-group

partners, on school improvement efforts. By 2001, 16 clusters existed, ranging in size from 2 schools to more than 30 schools (approximately 300 schools total), or more than 10 percent of all NZ schools. Some of these schools were also involved in Safety Net interventions. However, not all schools in these clusters were considered “at risk,” since the clusters were often based primarily on geographic areas or similar interests (e.g., improving the education of Māori or Pacific Islands students). For instance, some school clusters involved innovative educational partnerships with the local Māori Iwi (tribal authority).

These schooling improvement clusters originally received MOE funding for three years only, but in most cases funding continued for several more years, since it often took much of the original three years to build good working relations between the schools in the cluster; between the cluster and the MOE; and among the cluster, the MOE, and any community partners. The complexity of building strong working relations between schools, and between the cluster and the MOE, was particularly evident in the three low-income areas about which the ERO had published critical reports in 1996–98. On the one hand, the ERO reports had provided the impetus for these clusters to try new school improvement approaches. On the other hand, these highly critical ERO reports led to anger, mistrust, and defensiveness in both the community and school leadership (principals and board chairs), in relation to MOE involvement and support, which took time to work through.

McCauley and Roddick’s 2001 evaluation of the Schools Support Project noted the diversity of school experiences within the project. The evaluation also noted some tensions around the rapid growth of the project, particularly because the work to build school capability was often complex and time-consuming. The schools also shared some common issues with implications for “systemwide infrastructure or policies,” including inability to retain teachers, enrollment decline, lack of community resources, and lack of “assessment literacy.” The evaluation emphasized the need for a more systematic approach to identifying at-risk schools and undertaking a needs analysis. It also raised questions about the MOE’s capacity to provide support. It noted that because officials from the Schools Support Project helped the schools by ensuring that they were included in other MOE initiatives — such as professional development related to literacy — or by finding them other government funding sources, it was not possible to clearly define what role the Schools Support Project alone had played in improving the participant schools.

Recent School Support Practices

Since 2001, the MOE has paid increasing attention to identifying at-risk schools and implementing a greater range of interventions, including statutory intervention. Such interventions remain school- or cluster-specific; there are no predetermined interventions. School improvement clusters use common templates for needs analysis. There were over 30 school improvement initiatives, involving more than 600

schools, in the decade from 1998–2008, with half still in existence as of 2009.

The MOE briefing paper to the incoming government in late 2008 noted, “New Zealand’s system of self-managing schools has a number of strengths: schools have a direct relationship to the Ministry of Education, and school leaders have a high level of autonomy and flexibility compared to other OECD countries. However, sharing good practice or addressing poor school performance can be an issue” (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Addressing poor school performance became more of an issue after a recent Auditor-General’s report that was critical of the MOE’s schooling support systems (Office of the Auditor-General, 2008). The MOE is currently changing some of its policy approaches to school performance and school support as a result of this report and other studies that indicated the need for more systemic approaches. For example, in 2010, to help raise student achievement, the government announced new roles in MOE regional offices to work directly with primary schools whose annual reports indicated high proportions of students with low academic achievement. Such policy changes also reflect increasing concerns about the continuing lower performance, on average, of Māori and Pacific Islands students (though some recent gains are occurring). Effective school support is needed both for equity reasons and because these two student populations are growing faster than others, which has implications for overall future achievement levels. While NZ performs well on

average and has good proportions of students at the highest levels in international tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), it also has high proportions of students with the lowest achievement levels in these tests. About 30 percent of high school leavers have not attained NCEA level 2, which is seen as the basis for tertiary study or good employment opportunities.

These concerns about school performance and student achievement are not being addressed solely through specific schooling improvement initiatives or interventions. In the overall education system, there is growing assessment literacy and widespread use of new standardized assessments that provide more specific and timely analysis of student weaknesses, allowing teachers to identify what aspects to focus on next. These assessments have also been used in key MOE-funded national professional development projects in numeracy, literacy, and formative assessment. Underpinning its general emphasis on assessment literacy, the MOE developed an online suite of useful best-evidence syntheses of research¹ focusing on practices in teaching, leadership, and professional development that are linked with improved student outcomes.

Current ERO reviews address these concerns about school performance and student achievement and are less compliance-focused than in the past. They now contain

¹ See <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515>.

more specific recommendations related to student performance and engagement; teaching quality; and schoolwide processes to support assessment use, learning, and engagement. ERO review outcomes now include three categories: schools in the four-to-five-year review cycle, schools in the (normal) three-year review cycle, and schools that are deemed “in need of more frequent review.” Recently, the ERO has announced that the criteria for the four-to-five-year review cycle include evidence that Māori students are engaged in school and are progressing well. ERO has also provided schools with guidance on self-review, which emphasizes using inquiry processes; using evidence from student assessments and from student, staff, and parent feedback; and using both quantitative and qualitative information on student engagement and behavior, such as attendance patterns. For schools in the more frequent review cycle, ERO has begun to offer support with these inquiry processes and with the development of school plans to address poor performance.

Identifying Low-Performing Schools and Addressing Their Needs

The prime identification of at-risk schools or schools with chronically low performance now occurs through ERO reviews and through the work of the regional offices of the MOE. One of the most widely used indicators of low performance is whether the ERO decides, at the end of a review, that a school needs to be reviewed more often than in the normal three-year cycle — a decision called “supplementary review.”

In the past five years, approximately 16 percent of schools fell into this category. In 2010, the supplementary review figure approached 20 percent, probably indicating greater rigor in the ERO reviews. Schools that fall into this category are those that “give ERO cause for concern about the education and safety of students with regard to one or more of the following: student engagement, progress, and achievement; Māori student engagement, progress, and achievement; provision of effective teaching; leadership and management; governance; provision of a safe and inclusive school culture; and engagement of parents, whānau [family], and communities” (ERO, 2010).

Schools in this at-risk category of supplementary review are more likely to serve the lowest-income communities, have high proportions of Māori enrollment, be small, and/or be in rural areas (Springford, 2006). Provisional analysis by ERO staff in 2009 showed that 18 percent of all schools came into the supplementary review category twice since the mid-1990s, an indication that about a fifth of NZ schools struggled to improve and then maintain improved performance. Four percent (n = 96) of all schools came into the supplementary review category four or more times during that period, suggesting chronic low performance. Schools serving low-income communities and schools with very small enrollment are over-represented in this category. While about 70 percent of the schools that were in the supplementary review category twice had returned to the normal (every three years) ERO cycle after their most recent ERO review, only about 43 percent of the schools that were in the

supplementary review category four times or more during the period had returned to the regular ERO cycle after their most recent review.

The Auditor-General's 2008 report found that regional MOE staff used several means to identify at-risk schools: informal discussions with internal and external networks (e.g., principals, union officials, professional development providers), information from ERO reports, discussions with ERO staff, and monitoring of schools' financial performance. MOE staff did not systematically use school charters or analyses of variance in school annual reports (i.e., explanations for actual achievements for the year in relation to school-set targets), largely because there "is no requirement or policy for Ministry staff to assess the quality of the annual targets and achievement of these targets" (Office of the Auditor-General, 2008, p. 31), nor did the MOE regional offices use the School Support Factor (a risk-rating system produced by the Schooling Improvement section of the national office of the MOE) to identify at-risk schools. The School Support Factor uses 17 adverse indicators to evaluate school performance, including working capital or operating deficits; enrollment numbers; student suspensions and expulsions; staff turnover; and coded material from ERO reviews relating to teaching quality, teaching governance, and management quality. The report did not identify why the regional MOE staff were not using this system, but it noted that the system did not include student achievement information and was not timely. The School Support Factor system may not have been able to offer the regional MOE staff more or

better information than they felt they were getting from their own networks and review of information about the schools, including the ERO reports.

However, the difficulty of using ERO reviews to identify at-risk schools is that they only happen every three years for most schools. Additionally, financial information used by the MOE relates to the previous fiscal year. Thus, the Auditor-General's report concluded that more timely systems were needed to identify schools in need of attention and support and that the number of these schools was probably more than currently identified.

Current Nature of Statutory Interventions

Statutory interventions cover a range of actions that the Secretary for Education (the head of the MOE) or the Minister of Education can undertake to "address risks to the operation of individual schools or to the welfare or educational performance of their students" (Education Act of 1989, section 78H). These actions are not expected to be permanent; there are no "Ministry of Education schools" in which schools are taken over from school boards. The Auditor-General's report described financial issues, poor ERO reports, and personnel management problems as the main triggers for statutory intervention. "Other evidence of risk included inadequate planning and policies, poor community relationships, and a failure to comply with legislation" (Office of the Auditor-General, 2008).

Between late 2001 and the end of 2005, 230 statutory interventions were initiated. Just over half of the 55 statutory interventions initiated in 2005 arose from requests to the Secretary for Education from school boards themselves. Often, the MOE had given some informal advice related to the issue or issues that the school was having difficulty with beforehand. In 2007, just under half of the statutory interventions involved a limited statutory manager, usually a private contractor that took over some board powers and dealt primarily with employment issues (often related to the principal or principal/board relations) or financial management (Minister of Education, 2007). Other interventions required a board to engage a specialist adviser (23 percent of the 2007 interventions) or required the board to dissolve and put a commissioner in charge of the school, with the aim of resolving issues before the election of a new board (28 percent of the 2007 interventions).

Decisions on statutory interventions involve regional and national MOE staff, who indicate the issues of concern, the type of statutory intervention needed, and the statutory intervention goals. Regional MOE staff make the preliminary case for statutory intervention, which is then peer reviewed and approved by national MOE staff. The Secretary for Education or the Minister of Education makes the final decision. The statutory intervention ends when the original goals are achieved; there is no specific time limit. After the statutory intervention is complete, the MOE informally monitors the school through ongoing analysis and file notes. Because there is no formal follow-up process, the MOE has little

information on the long-term success of its statutory interventions. However, only 3 of 227 schools had a second statutory intervention. While the MOE undertook little ongoing review of the lessons learned from statutory intervention work and its outcomes, MOE staff did identify three key factors to a successful statutory intervention:

- » Implementing a number of statutory interventions simultaneously, rather than, for example, just requiring the school board to engage specialist help without also requiring an action plan;
- » Working directly with school boards, rather than imposing support or intervention from the outside; and
- » Getting the right contractor “with the appropriate skills, knowledge, and personality to fit the particular situation” (Office of the Auditor-General, 2008, p. 41).

Actual statutory intervention work with schools is usually done by contractors who are paid from school funds. Issues have existed with contractors’ availability, and the contractors’ quality and credibility vary. Contractors include former principals or board chairs, particularly those with financial, employment, and strategic planning skills. The contractors often have consultancies with other schools. The MOE has recently established a pool of preferred providers with demonstrated experience and skills to provide support for school governance and to be considered for statutory intervention work. The MOE now also provides training, preparation, and support for statutory intervention work at the regional level,

suggesting closer working relationships with schools than before.

Research undertaken in one of the four MOE regions showed that most statutory interventions lasted at least a year (Manion, 2008). Employment issues were the main reason for intervention in just over half of the schools. These included issues relating to principal employment (principals are appointed and employed by their school board, and they are also a member of the school board), and the mishandling of employment-related matters involving school staff (e.g., not abiding by national collective agreements or not following due process in appointments). Fifteen percent of the statutory intervention schools had multiple issues, and 8 percent had financial issues or were not abiding by the legislation relating to school governance (e.g., trustees were not properly elected). Manion notes that, while employment was the lead issue in many MOE statutory interventions, ERO review concerns relating to the same schools were more focused on teaching and learning.

Schooling Improvement Clusters

Schooling improvement clusters were one of the main policy vehicles for schooling improvement. They are currently being phased out, as the MOE is focusing more resources on improving literacy and numeracy through professional development and on the new Student Achievement Function officers starting in MOE regional offices.

Most schooling improvement clusters were based on a geographic

area, and sometimes shared issues within that area. They identified shared needs through analysis of assessment data showing lower-than-average student performance (though not necessarily for every individual school within the cluster). Cluster members could be identified by the MOE or by schools themselves. ERO reviews often played a role in how clusters were formed, but less dramatically and publicly than a decade ago, when the ERO published the critical reports on three low socio-economic areas. Declining enrollment and staff instability were also factors that led schools to form improvement clusters. Cluster goals in recent years were more sharply focused on student achievement than they used to be, when cluster goals were wider and less achievement data was collected in a systematic way. There has recently been a much greater emphasis on gathering and analyzing student assessment data to evaluate cluster progress and to use the results to change classroom practice.

Clusters worked with MOE schooling improvement staff to develop a business plan. Clusters received additional funding from the MOE in return for regular reports on progress toward mutually agreed-upon targets. Much of this additional funding was used to contract a professional development provider (sometimes from a university, sometimes from a private firm) and to provide school staff with time to work together to improve their understanding of student needs and how to better meet those needs. Membership of schooling improvement clusters

was voluntary, and individual schools could exit at any time.

Eighteen schooling improvement clusters, involving 200 schools (8 percent of the total number of NZ schools), worked with researchers and the MOE between 2008 and 2010 to develop more evidence-based, inquiry-led approaches to identifying school priorities, improving teacher work, and assisting with the work of school support providers (in and outside the MOE) and policymakers. This project, Building Evaluative Capability in Schooling Improvement (BECSI), found that there were some signs that students in the clusters were making faster progress, particularly in early literacy, and it developed rubrics that schools could use to review their evaluative capability in relation to student achievement goals (BECSI, 2010). These rubrics have been used as the basis for a set of self-review rubrics related to the introduction of the National Standards in literacy and numeracy, which are available to all schools on the MOE website, a prime mechanism for providing schools with advice (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Current and Future Changes

There are strengths in NZ's general approach to schooling improvement, particularly a respect for individual school contexts and a desire to tailor interventions and improvement initiatives to those contexts, rather than using blanket or bureaucratic formulae or punitive public labeling. However, current challenges to the existing approach to school improvement and school turnaround include:

- » Finding ways for a much greater number of schools to use well-researched, inquiry-based approaches likely to improve the capability of self-managed schools. This would involve more concerted work across the separate government education agencies and external providers to ensure that there are sufficient staff with the curriculum, assessment, and educational leadership expertise to work with schools. The MOE provides extensive material online, but direct outreach is also needed. Government action is also needed to tackle issues that are beyond the capacity of individual schools to manage (e.g., attracting and retaining good quality teachers and leaders), which makes it difficult to sustain strong cultures of ongoing change in at-risk schools (e.g., schools in low-income communities, schools serving high proportions of Māori students, rural schools, and small schools).
- » Finding ways to embed a more rigorous approach to literacy and numeracy within the NZ curriculum, without narrowing that curriculum.
- » Ensuring that the current limited education funds are used to address issues where there is an existing strong evidence base, while also supporting ongoing inquiry that will identify new effective approaches to school improvement.
- » Developing a more systematic approach to identifying schools at risk of decline and to ensuring that capable people work with them to prevent decline into chronic low performance.

- » Rebalancing school self-management to ensure that schools use effective improvement strategies and to prevent schools' decline into chronic low performance. Currently, the education system is too dispersed, with few systemic ways for knowledge to coalesce in timely and useful ways. No one outside of each individual school has a clear, full picture of its performance or the ongoing responsibility to support and improve its performance. For example, principal accountability is divided between the school board, the ERO, and the MOE. The board has authority as the employer, but usually insufficient educational authority. The MOE and ERO have some authority, but even with current refocusing of some roles in regional offices — including paying greater attention to school charters and student achievement data in annual reports and providing advice to schools with low performance — the MOE has insufficient capacity and capability to use its limited authority. This means that NZ does not have the “pressure-support” fulcrum in the right position either to keep schools from falling into chronic low performance or to make major gains at a national level. (Wylie, 2007a, 2007b)

Research Review

Most of the research undertaken on turning around persistently low-performing schools in NZ has been through MOE-funded evaluations of schooling improvement clusters. In some of these evaluations, the MOE and schooling improvement

clusters have partnered with university researchers and others to design interventions and analyze their effectiveness. In other cases, researchers did not design specific interventions, but instead identified and discussed relevant issues with school clusters and the MOE to support turnaround work. MOE-funded research has also provided some summative accounts of schooling improvement changes and the factors that supported them. Also relevant is information from case studies on the impact of schools needing a supplementary ERO review and on their responses to improve their reputation, enrollment number, and quality of education, which give some indication of what schools can do on their own.

Much of the schooling improvement research is about clusters as a whole, which can include schools that would not be categorized as low-performing (i.e., schools that the ERO deemed in need of a supplementary review). This research also includes some charting of the journeys that schools have made to improve their performance and the academic achievement of their students. NZ does not have experimental studies on schooling improvement using control groups of schools. While some of the research on school clusters includes examples of schools that also had statutory interventions, there appears to be no research on either the short- and long-term effects of statutory interventions or the school conditions in which different interventions are more or less successful.

Criteria for “Low School Performance” and Interventions

In most cases, the definition of “low school performance” in the NZ research is based on whether a school meets any of the following criteria: receives an ERO supplementary review or a series of them (not necessarily sequential); has falling enrollment numbers, leading to loss of staff; achieves relatively low secondary-school qualification rates; has low student retention; or has high principal turnover. Attendance information, as a signal for student engagement in learning, is also used as a criterion for low school performance. Because these criteria disproportionately identify rural schools, small schools, and schools serving low-income communities, some have questioned whether it is the schools per se or the social and cultural capital of their students and their communities that are being judged as “low performing” (Thrupp & Smith, 1999).

The criteria used to identify low school performance in the research are not identical to those that have been used by the government agencies. For example, employment issues that end in statutory intervention occur both in schools with good student attendance and achievement and in schools where attendance and achievement need considerable improvement. As the Auditor-General’s 2008 report suggests, some persistently low-performing schools may be slipping beneath the policy-support radar and may not be receiving timely attention.

“Turnaround” is not a term widely used in NZ. Indicators of a school’s

return to regular performance are usually based on the original trigger for schooling improvement or statutory intervention work, or on the goal set for that work. Thus, evaluations of schooling improvement clusters have referred to proportions of schools “returned” to the regular ERO three-year cycle. Statutory interventions end when sufficient progress has been made in relation to the goals for that particular intervention. However, the end of statutory interventions does not mean schools have become “high performers” in terms of student achievement or teacher practice; it just means they no longer cause concern to the MOE in relation to their originally identified triggers.

A recent study provided a powerful set of predictors of school decline, but also showed that some of these predictors (e.g., high teacher loss over a short period) cannot be used in a bureaucratic checklist without closer investigation of the actual school site (Hawk, 2008). Hawk identifies “the complexity and interconnectedness of influencing factors” in school decline that relate to the nature of the school community, the way the school works, and the principal’s leadership:

- » Several community factors are associated with school decline, including school communities that are in a low socioeconomic area, have a declining number of school-aged students, or have a local population with radically divided values or conflicts.
- » Several institutional factors can also lead to school decline, including declining enrollment, ineffective internal management systems, inadequate principal

appraisal, inadequate management of poor staff performance, poor teacher or principal appointments, ineffective conflict resolution, insularity (i.e., unawareness of alternative ways of doing things and no interest in looking beyond the school for new ideas), and lack of professional development opportunities.

- » Principals' actions can also contribute to school decline, including ineffective management of change and appearing to favor certain staff.

Findings from Research on School Conditions

The synthesis in this section and the following section draws particularly on research studies that followed schooling improvement clusters or individual schools over time, providing evidence of improvements in student achievement, student engagement (including attendance), school leadership and management (including returning to the normal ERO review cycle), and enrollment numbers or enrollment stability. Some research-based evidence relates to professional development, particularly in the literacy domain.

From examining the studies, there are some consistent patterns in the evidence about NZ school conditions that allow low-performing schools to “turn around.”

School Leadership

The NZ research indicates that it is difficult for a persistently low-performing school to make real headway unless the principal is convinced that improvement is

necessary and that the school is able to address the relevant issues. The principal's support needs to be addressed early in the school improvement process. Sometimes, this means using evidence to work with principals. At other times, it means hiring and supporting new principals. For example, the early schooling improvement clusters, particularly those in the three areas that had highly publicized, negative ERO reports in 1996–98, had high turnover of principals. Often the first action taken by schools in statutory interventions or schools improving of their own volition is finding a new principal. In these cases, particularly with inexperienced principals, there is often a need to provide timely support from outside the school as the new principal grapples with the inherited issues, which may not have been initially apparent to him or her when applying for the position.

In NZ's self-managing schools context, it is important that school boards are also convinced of the need to make improvements and are supported to take action if they need to address the quality of principal performance. The school boards should be competent in their role as employers and should be supported in making good appointments and keeping good principals. School boards can also help school turnaround through informed discussion of issues with the school leaders and by keeping the school community informed of positive changes, which helps strengthen community trust and school enrollment.

In school improvement efforts, it is important to have stable school leaders, particularly in small schools or

in schools where professional learning communities and schoolwide systems are in a fledgling state. Principals who lead turnaround schools should be highly energetic, focused, and knowledgeable (or open to acquiring new knowledge and using it well); able to set high targets; and respectful of their students, communities, and teachers. School leaders should also be alert to MOE-funded professional development programs that support their school's targets, and they should ensure that their schools are included in these programs. They should also build networks of expertise and sources of support, particularly sources of additional funding or voluntary input, such as local service organizations and business.

Unfortunately, not all principals are successful in their school improvement efforts. Some principals burn out. Others take on too many professional development offerings or too many projects for their school to work with at one time, which can dissipate efforts and make it difficult to consolidate new knowledge into new practices. Sustained school turnaround is unlikely if principals do not build strong leadership teams within their teaching staff. To sustain school turnaround, they should also improve school systems and processes to focus closer attention on teacher performance and its impact on student engagement and achievement.

School Climate

School climate is often addressed in initial school improvement action, particularly where enrollments have dropped to very low levels or where the community has

lost respect for the school. School leaders often focus on making the school a more welcoming place that demonstrates school pride, changing the physical appearance of the school by keeping grounds and buildings clean, revitalizing school entrances and buildings, displaying student work on walls, and remodeling or rebuilding once enrollment levels start to improve and the school funding improves. School leaders also work to improve student behavior and improve the ways staff interact with students and each other. The community is invited more often to school events, generating more occasions to inform, discuss, and celebrate. Parents are made welcome in classes and supported to work with students, both in and out of school. Some schools provide a community hub through school/community projects that are meaningful to the local community, underlining the value of education and the school in the process. They also develop and maintain useful links with local health providers and social services.

Instructional Practices

School turnaround rarely occurs without some changes in instructional practice. Particular gains have come from clusters and schools working with researchers and professional development providers, testing and refining new approaches as they evaluate the changes in schools. Some school performance improvements have come from participation in national professional development programs. National initiatives in information and communication technology (ICT) professional development, the provision of ICT equipment, and Internet access

have been effective in rural clusters with widespread members — opening access to more resources, creating ways to store and analyze data, and providing a mode of communication with staff at other schools. For example, Māori concerned with the retention of their language and culture have used expanded Internet access to share curriculum resources.

Sustaining initial gains and continuing to make gains in student achievement means changing the way teachers work together and embedding these changes in school processes so that the changes can survive staffing and leadership changes. The following are two strong examples of systematic changes to instructional practices.

The first example involves a rural cluster of five schools, serving a total of 120 students, that achieved sustainable gains in student achievement that brought them to national averages or above. To achieve this, one of the schools' principals worked as a full-time mentor/coach to principals and staff in the other schools, helping them learn to effectively use assessment data to inform teaching practice. The improvement in student achievement and the changes to teaching practice and school systems continued after the lead principal's departure from the role (but not from the cluster) (Gorinski & Fraser, 2007).

The second example of effective changes to instruction involves a research-cluster partnership with widespread schools from two low-income urban clusters and one rural cluster. The partnership used a research-based approach focused on building school capacity for

evidence-based inquiry in literacy. This approach builds on previous work with schooling improvement clusters and the Best Evidence Synthesis on professional development (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). It also builds on the positive working relationships and trust remaining after the researchers' and clusters' previous work together. It involved intensive work that started with analyzing the schools' own assessment data, using the researchers' external expertise as well as school knowledge to identify changes in teaching that would meet the needs identified, and checking to see whether the application of this knowledge brought improvements in student performance through both within-school and across-school professional learning communities.

After implementing this approach, the three clusters showed marked and sustainable gains in student achievement that have raised previously low student average scores close to or to national averages. The schools have developed effective professional learning communities and have connected school processes and accountabilities, such as ensuring that reviews of teacher performance include evidence about how teachers have identified student needs and acted to improve student achievement, and schoolwide tracking of individual students to improve their achievement. Several years after the end of this intensive work, these learning communities and processes are now part of the schools' regular routines (Lai, McNaughton, Timperley, & Hsaio, 2009).

External Support

All of the research available indicates that some external support was needed for school improvement in this system of self-managing schools. This external support includes funding — few schools made major progress without access to additional funding beyond what they received through their normal enrollment-based operational funding.

Research indicates that the most effective and efficient forms of external support start with accurate identification of individual school needs and timely matching of external expertise and resources with those needs. Quite often, external expertise also plays a key role in the identification of needs, including collecting, analyzing, and discussing with school leaders the student achievement data, and in gathering students' views of their school experiences to give school staff a fresh and sometimes challenging perspective (Hawket al., 1996; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003).

The most useful external support varies by school need and the particular point in each school's turnaround journey. For example, sharing expertise with school leaders on how to resolve performance issues and how to counsel poorly performing staff out of the school in ways that minimize cost is likely to be more important at the start of the turnaround journey than later in the process. This needs-based identification of the kind of expertise that would be most useful to a school and the ability to locate that expertise are an iterative part of the turnaround process and serve as one indicator that a school is

making progress in its improvement efforts.

In addition to schools working with individual external support, schooling improvement in NZ has seen partnerships between school clusters, researchers (usually from universities or educational research organizations), and the MOE. These partnerships have usually spanned at least three years, and have taken an iterative approach, using research evidence as the basis for decisions on changes in focus as priorities shift.

This tripartite acknowledgment of shared responsibility began with the seminal Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO) project (Timperley & Phillips, 2003; Timperley & Robinson, 2001; Robinson & Lai, 2006). The Mangere-Otara area is low-income and was the subject of the ERO's first critical area review of school quality, which sparked the need for the government to take action.

The SEMO project has had a major impact on school improvement and other policy, as well as on the schools involved. For example, it identified shortcomings in teachers' ability to identify students' needs and to share assessment information with parents (teachers tended to be protective, so parents were not finding out that their children were performing at low levels until their children reached secondary school). These identified shortcomings led to targeted professional development in the SEMO schools that was evaluated in terms of its impact on both teacher and student achievement. Findings informed the development of the next generation of professional development approaches, such as

the major national MOE project on the use of assessment information. The findings were also one of the impetuses for the MOE's funding of development of more useful standardized student assessments that teachers could use, including some "what next" guidance. Over its lifetime, the SEMO tripartite partnership reduced the proportion of the 45 schools involved that were not in the regular ERO review cycle from 42 percent in 1996 to 10 percent in 2002. As an indication of the resourcing needed to make this shift in school performance, SEMO cost NZ\$8.3 million between 1997 and 2002. This was 2.7 percent of the total government resourcing for these schools, which covered staffing as well as operations funding (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

"Cottage Industry" Developments

One of the key architects of the SEMO project described the NZ policies around school improvement as "formative," with little stringent evaluation of their effectiveness or efficiency (Annan, 2007). These policies grew out of NZ's self-managing framework, which mitigates against large-scale mandated reform programs, instead fostering "cottage industry" developments involving researchers, educators, MOE officials, board members, and sometimes community members in different clusters and schools. These developments offer useful insight into how outside partners can work effectively with schools to enlarge their horizons, while still respecting the schools' self-management structure. They have also contributed to policy and resource development, as with the SEMO project previously **■**

discussed. Annan makes a convincing case that NZ must do more to capitalize on the insights gained from these developments, and that this is best achieved through “inter-connected learning” focused on instructional improvement, rather than through trying to replicate or scale up a specific program.

Exemplar School Cluster: AIMHI

The Achievement in Multicultural High Schools (AIMHI) cluster was started in 1995 and is still active (Hill & Hawk, 1999, 2003; AIMHI, n.d.). It is of particular interest because it is composed of secondary schools serving low-income, multicultural urban areas and includes some schools that had struggled with major issues for several years before the cluster began, without making much headway on their own. The AIMHI cluster began at a time when there was no national policy to support struggling schools, and its development is an example of the “cottage industry” approach. The cluster has demonstrated some success in tackling whole-school change through collaboration with other schools and using external expertise. It has shown both some relatively quick changes (i.e., within two to three years) and some changes that have taken much longer to achieve and need ongoing attention. Student engagement and achievement levels, as evidenced by secondary school qualification levels, have improved. The schools’ enrollments are no longer declining.

Origins

The AIMHI project arose from a 1994 MOE strategic plan for the

education of Pacific Islands students in which one of the main aims was to raise Pacific Islands students’ achievement levels. In 1995, the MOE invited eight schools (a ninth joined later) with high proportions of Pacific Islands and Māori students to take part in the AIMHI project, offering additional funding to each school. These schools were all serving low-socioeconomic communities. Six schools had low enrollment, and three had received very negative ERO reports and were labeled “very fragile” (this led to their receiving additional funding as MOE Business Cases). However, two of the schools had positive reputations and were somewhat reluctant to join the cluster, lest they be seen as failing schools. The other schools in the cluster were concerned that these two schools would compete against them for student enrollment.

The initial development of the cluster in 1995 was not easy due to changes in leadership of five schools (prompted by the public spotlight on some schools after their negative ERO reports) and tensions from Pacific Islands community spokespeople who were invited to support the cluster, but who had few existing connections with the schools. The MOE was also still developing its own processes around schooling improvement clusters and their resourcing. To overcome these initial hurdles, the principals in the AIMHI cluster organized a leadership retreat (funded by a large company) and worked out a structure to give the schools more autonomy as a group, while also retaining partnerships with the community (through the participation of school board chairs) and with the MOE. By that

time — late 1997 — the five new school principals were in place and were more open to collaboration than their predecessors.

Despite these difficulties in developing the cluster, it won competitive contracts from other branches of the MOE around home/school liaisons with Pacific Islands families and formative assessments. The formative assessment contract was the first of a series of professional development programs focused on changing teaching in the cluster schools. The cluster chose professional development providers by their reputation, eventually choosing a Coaching in the Classroom program for all of the AIMHI schools. The program was supported by resources available on the AIMHI website.

The two university researchers contracted by the MOE to work with this cluster collected baseline data on student achievement and on school organization. These data and analyses of the issues impacting student achievement in the AIMHI schools helped the cluster identify its own needs and provided the groundwork for a different approach to teaching. Between 1996 and 2001, the researchers provided formative evaluation to individual schools on specific issues. The researchers also evaluated the effectiveness of each school’s action plan, which was developed with the MOE in return for additional funding.

From the start of the cluster’s development, the schools had an interest in developing a deeper understanding of the issues confronting them, including evaluating each school’s organization and approach to education. The cluster was willing to

use external expertise to inform its understandings and to suggest different approaches. The regular progress reports in relation to the cluster goals probably also helped to focus activity. While each school made its own decisions about its organization, informed by the voices of its own students, each school's decisions were also informed by evidence from other schools in the cluster and by the results of trials in other schools.

Performance Gains and Cluster Learning

Between 1997 and 2001, the AIMHI cluster schools received over NZ\$4.5 million in additional MOE funding. Almost half of this funding was spent on curriculum and teaching, 16 percent on improving governance and management (most spent in 1998–99), some on health and safety, and some on improving school/community relationships. The AIMHI cluster was able to show gains in all four of these areas by 2001. This section describes several specific cluster initiatives that resulted from this funding: implementing school organizational changes, providing holistic student support, using formative assessment, and addressing poor teacher performance.

Some of the school organizational changes in the AIMHI cluster came from checking student and teacher assumptions about the value of certain processes. For instance, the researchers asked students about their educational experiences, and teachers used this information to try different ways to maximize learning time. One organizational attempt at maximizing learning time involved three AIMHI schools that

implemented extended lesson times, which improved learning in classrooms that had effective teachers but did not improve learning in classrooms that had ineffective teachers. As a result, the schools gave the less effective teachers additional professional development and coaching.

Another organizational change involved most of the AIMHI schools moving from a structure in which one teacher was the “form teacher” (for administrative purposes) for a group of students from all year levels to a structure in which such groups were composed of students from a single-year level. This change came as a result of checking the teachers' assumptions that cross-year groups would foster older students' support for younger students. The younger students were asked what they thought about this method of grouping, and it became clear that, in fact, the older students were mentoring the younger students in negative approaches to school, rather than helping them with learning. An evaluation of the change to a single-year group showed that it has helped year 9 students transition into secondary school, and has also helped year 13 students transition after secondary school.

Schools in the AIMHI cluster have also created both collective and site-specific ways to provide more holistic support for students, so that students will be less likely to “slip through the cracks” of adult attention. One example of this student support is the Healthy Community Schools initiative, which employs school-based specialists who focus on non-classroom issues that impact teaching and learning: attendance, student health and well-being, relationships, and

social issues. This AIMHI initiative may have contributed to MOE policy development that led to the placement of social workers in schools serving low socioeconomic communities. Some of these social workers are part of each of these schools' Learning Support teams, which meet at least weekly to support students exhibiting at-risk behavior and students in danger of failing. Another example of holistic student support involves three of the AIMHI cluster schools providing an extended tutor period in which each staff member works with up to 15 students. Additionally, most of the cluster schools have adopted or updated uniforms and have improved their physical environments — changes that the researchers reported had given students more school pride and deepened their identification with their schools.

As described in the previous section, the AIMHI cluster was awarded MOE funding to implement professional development on formative assessment. However, this professional development did not significantly change schoolwide practice until schools gave it greater priority. Giving greater priority to formative assessment involved including more assessment details in all unit planning, sharing assessment criteria with students, and using student self-assessments. Teachers also collaborated on developing appropriate assessment tasks, and the resulting processes were taught in new-teacher inductions. Hill and Hawk (2003) found that in order to embed a new schoolwide approach like formative assessment into teachers' everyday practice, the new approach had to be given priority for at least three years (partially because of teacher turnover). ■■

Hill and Hawk (2003) also found that for principals to deal effectively with poor teacher performance, outside advice and practical support were important, such as contracting credible professionals to undertake departmental or individual reviews. Principals found that it was better to lose poor teachers than to fear that the teachers could not be replaced or that it would affect the morale of other teachers. Principals also found that it was useful to comprehensively tackle a number of teacher competency issues that could impede school progress.

Reflecting on the numerous initiatives and reform efforts implemented by the AIMHI cluster, Hill and Hawk (2003) concluded, “It is important to recognize that much of the groundwork — stabilizing the schools, strengthening the leadership, addressing teacher quality issues, putting sound systems in place and building community confidence — had to be done first in order to establish a strong base on which more intensive classroom change and development could take place.”

Outlook

Funding for AIMHI cluster activities is currently uncertain. The cluster recently moved from receiving schooling improvement funding to winning a competitive contract through another program, but that program is now ceasing. The MOE expects that the cluster should be able to fund its own programs as the programs became part of “business as usual.” However, the cluster has voiced doubts that it can fund its own programs. The cluster has also wondered about how to deal with

issues of teacher supply and teacher quality that are beyond its control.

The AIMHI cluster schools continue to see value in working together. The schools appear to have embedded key understandings about the needs of its students into their teaching practices. The schools have also developed expectations for those teaching practices — teachers now have greater accountability to colleagues and school leaders than before.

The AIMHI cluster is proud of the changes it has made, and it has offered some of its professional development sessions to staff from schools outside the cluster, wanting other schools to benefit from the cluster learning. Its use of student feedback and its inquiry-based approach to education offer particularly valuable paths to school improvement, which are consistent with the recent emphasis on school self-review evident in both the ERO and the MOE. However, there are no systemic connections or networks that might allow the AIMHI cluster to work with other schools.

Overview of the Lessons from the NZ Research

In some senses, NZ is like a whole system of charter schools that must be carefully positioned to ensure that all schools receive adequate ongoing support to improve performance and to avoid becoming low performing. Self-managing schools need to have affordable access to well-researched instructional and educational leadership approaches (which also means providing more government support for developing school leaders) and to useful

advice on employment matters. NZ’s schools need to operate within carefully designed systemic accountability processes that support real and ongoing school — and policy — development as part of “business as usual.” It will also be beneficial for NZ to find more ways for its schools to effectively work together and learn from each other. Working together toward mutual goals also needs to become “business as usual” for NZ schools to keep developing and for struggling schools to move ahead.

Implications for Other Nations

Other countries can learn from NZ’s approach to school improvement for two rather different reasons. First, NZ’s educational system is more fluid and less strictly regulated than most systems. This means that it does not have mechanical indicators for what constitutes a struggling school, such as an arbitrary cutoff point on a measure of student achievement, and it does not have mechanical interventions. This willingness to customize has led to real gains where it has been used to pinpoint actual student and school needs and respond to those needs with well-informed attention and with strategies that make teaching and school leadership more sophisticated and coherent.

Second, NZ’s approach also demonstrates the complexities involved in a system of autonomous schools in which there are not ongoing relationships of accountability and shared responsibility for school improvement between school and government agencies, and among schools in

a particular locality. These complexities can mean that improving schools is sometimes challenging and can take longer than it should. A school self-management approach has much to offer, but the NZ experience would suggest that it also limits the pace and opportunity for school improvement if it is taken too literally.

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