



## EDITORIAL - Promises, Sweeteners and the Teacher Vote

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 5, Issue 2, 63-64, 2008*

---

### JOHN O'NEILL & PAUL ADAMS

Joint Editors

Every three years politicians make a special effort to be nice to teachers. 2008 is no exception. It's election time and teachers are once again part of the solution, not the problem. We should enjoy the respite while we may.

According to the Teachers Council, there are currently 86,000 registered teachers in New Zealand and a further 3,000 with limited authority to teach. The Ministry of Education reports a 2007 total of 12,750 full-time equivalent academic staff in public tertiary providers. Teachers as a group, then, constitute around 3.3 percent of the country's 3.1 million eligible voters.

In 2005, the difference in the proportion of votes secured between the two major parties which had a realistic chance of forming a government, National and Labour, was 2 percent. For the minor parties, 3.3 percent would have meant the difference between being in parliament and, possibly, membership of a coalition government, or not. 'Teachers matter', as they say. So how is the teacher vote being courted in 2008?

*Labour* stands on its record of increasing overall teacher numbers by 6000 since 1999, increasing pay and investing in career and professional development. *National* aims to review teacher education, encourage schools to collaborate in order to disseminate successful teaching methods, celebrate 'top-performing' teachers and reduce class sizes in new entrant classes.

*New Zealand First* would, among other things, increase funding to decile 1-3 schools to reduce class sizes in the first three years, undertake a review of teacher workloads and reduce bureaucracy, develop a non-adversarial pay and industrial relations framework, improve ICT provision and introduce 'para professionals' to schooling. The *Green Party* intends to work for class sizes of no more than 20 in schools and increased teacher child ratios in early childhood services. The *Act Party* promises simply to 'increase the role of teachers and opportunities open to them'. The *Maori Party* wants to increase the supply of 'quality teachers', lower adult:child ratios and expects service providers to become more 'culturally competent and appropriate' through teacher professional development. *United Future* wishes to see the introduction of values and civics education and reduced teacher pupil ratios to 1:15 in year one, 1:22 in years two and three and 1:25 in years four to eight. The *Progressive Coalition* is committed to securing additional resources for low decile areas, more teachers, including specialists, and more resources for teacher professional development.

For the most part, in election years, politicians have learned to focus on what people want to hear. Politicians are adept at tapping popular anxieties and aspirations in equal measure. What, then, do these election promises collectively tap into among teachers?

Actual class sizes experienced by teachers continue to bear little relation to official ratios funded to their institutions. One assumes that if class size ratios were a national standard, politicians would by now want to hold someone to account for having failed, for so long, to meet that standard.

There is too in these policy statements an implicit acceptance by the parties that the nature of teachers' work is considerably more difficult in disadvantaged communities, thus more resources and lower teacher:pupil ratios would tangibly help to improve education for those at the bottom of the social and economic heap – it's obviously not just about the benchmark achievement outcomes that dominate politics in non-election periods. Similarly, there is a growing recognition that investing proportionately more in early years education helps mitigate learning and social difficulties that manifest themselves in later stages of compulsory schooling.

In addition, there is a notably consistent emphasis on teacher professional development. Teachers, the parties all tell us, need to be supported as learners over the course of their career in order to be able to do their job well.

Politicians, on the basis of what is in their party education policy statements, certainly know how to sweet-talk teachers. The proof of their political sincerity though, is what actually happens in the years between elections. So, in 2011, will we be able to look back on a three year government term in which education resources have both been increased overall and proportionately redistributed to better meet the needs of the youngest and most disadvantaged in our society, and their classroom teachers? What evidence will we have that teachers, not just their votes, really do matter to politicians?