



## **Privatising public education: are we there yet?**

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Much is changing in the educational landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand at present. In this editorial, we take a moment to pause and consider the position of some of these educational changes within an ongoing process of privatisation *in and of* public education. Recently, Thrupp and colleagues (2021) detailed political changes since the 1980s which continue to shift the State's role in education from governing to governance – that is, from delivering education, to governing the complex landscape of public and private (non-profit and for-profit) entities which deliver it. The reintroduction of charter schools represents the inclusion of one such entity under State governance. Fresh legislation amendments and a budgetary allocation of \$153 million in new funding have paved the way for the introduction of 50 charter schools whose express intent is to “lift declining educational performance” (Seymour, 2024). Charter school funding will be provided under a bulk-funding model with individual schools given full autonomy to allocate this funding as they see fit. Teachers within charter schools will be employed on individual contracts, meaning that they are not part of collectively agreed union pay scales and conditions. Notably, these teachers are not required to be qualified as teachers. Advocates argue that such measures enable opportunities for parental choice, culturally specific curricula, and spaces for business to succeed where educators have failed (cf. Hosking, 2024). Critics problematise the allocation of significant public funds to a select few schools rather than tackling a national issue of underachievement within the national institution of education. As well, they point to

[r]eports from the Ministry of Education after the schools were abolished by Labour in 2018 [which] highlight the lack of independent scrutiny and the success rates of the students, while teacher unions and principals are against the profit-taking model of charter schools by the privately-run sponsors or trusts. (Brettkelly, 2024, para. 15)

Yet how well founded are concerns over the potential privatisation of education as a result of the reintroduction of charter schools? And just how ‘public’ is a public education today?

Compulsory education in Aotearoa New Zealand is overwhelmingly provided by the State. Figure.nz (n.d.) reports 2023 statistics from the Ministry

of Education indicating that just over 700,000 students attend public schools, just under 95,000 students attend state integrated schools, and just over 33,000 students attend private schools. This means that roughly 75% of students attend state or state-integrated schools. By way of quick comparison, in Australia 64% of students attend public schools (Cassidy, 2024). Against such a backdrop, we can see that education across the motu is predominantly public. Yet how education is constituted as public has been under constant renegotiation in Aotearoa New Zealand since neoliberal educational reforms in the 1980s (Thrupp et al., 2021).

There are many non-state actors within public education in Aotearoa New Zealand that shape educational governance. Private professional development providers form an important part of the in-service education available for teachers. New school buildings are developed through public-private partnerships. Student management systems administered by companies, curriculum resources developed by businesses, and educational technologies are all embedded within public education structures. Consultants support individual schools in hiring new principals – the list goes on. In these realities, Aotearoa New Zealand is not unique. As Thrupp et al. contend, “[e]ducation or schooling privatisations need to be understood in the global context of widespread but gradual polity efforts over several decades to move from government to governance modalities” (2021, p. 35). UNESCO’s *Global Education Monitoring Report* for the years 2021/2022 illustrates that there is no education system in the world in which non-state actors are not involved (UNESCO, 2021). This exemplifies that, while concerns about the reintroduction of charter schools might centre on the privatisation of education from many quarters, privatisation in education is active at home and abroad.

Historically, 'charter' was a term which conveyed a form of mediaeval schools established by the bequest or philanthropy of various good burghers or groups of people like guilds. It held a positive overtone, one of legalistic charity. The charter movement gained its impetus in the United States during the period immediately after laws of desegregation threatened a way of life (Devine, 2004). Although the ordinary public schools were desegregated, parents could choose to send their children to specialist schools, thus bypassing the desegregation laws. Parents could argue for sending their children to schools specialising in Drama or Mathematics, or practically anything else, so long as its charter specified something beyond normal public education. The logical outcome was to concentrate in the public schools those children whose parents did not or could not opt for a special school. In the United Kingdom the tradition was slightly different: successful entrepreneurs were held to be more likely than educators to be able to ensure academic success. This experiment has achieved mixed success, but has enabled parents to bypass the comprehensive schools which, also, catered for all comers. Martin Thrupp's work (cf. Thrupp, 2005, 2008) demonstrated that even within the public school system in Aotearoa New Zealand, neoliberal market logic underpinning 'choice' created schools of essentially 'left-over' children whose parents could not afford (in time, money or other resources) to drive them further to more desirable schools. There can be no surprise if charter schools, originally designed precisely to achieve a form of *de-desegregation*, do exactly that.

The Government's broad justification for charter schools steers clear of a project to further privatise education. Rather it rests upon a stated intent of raising academic performance. Yet, Associate Minister for Education David Seymour's contention neglects to mention the extraordinary and incomparable achievement occurring in kaupapa Māori educational spaces. In these publicly administered and Māori imbued contexts, ākonga Māori (Māori students), and others are thriving. Rawiri Wright, the chair of Te Rūnanga o ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori, explains that Seymour has welcomed kaupapa Māori education, including Kura Kaupapa Māori, Kōhanga Reo and Kura ā Iwi into the charter school initiative. However, Wright emphasises that the philosophy of charter schools stands in opposition to the founding principles of kaupapa Māori, and, therefore, they are not likely to jump on board (Mateariki & Porter, 2024).

What might all of this mean for teachers' work? There are two immediately evident implications. First is the requirement for charter schools to hire teachers outside of collective agreements brokered by teaching unions. Robertson and Dale contend that the "private' in education is increasingly constituted out of market relations. This, in turn, redefines the nature of individuals, and their relationships to each other and to institutions" (2013, p. 427). As teacher pay and conditions are withdrawn from collective agreements, teachers are required to leverage themselves within market dynamics to secure better pay, and better conditions, for the work that they do. Fracturing collective agreements redraws teacher relations with each other, and their schools, holding significant potential to exacerbate inequalities within educational outcomes rather than reduce them. Does a teacher choose to work in a disadvantaged setting if they intend to apply for promotions, or negotiate higher remuneration? What might this mean for collaboration? Or for teachers of minority identities?

Secondly, by enabling charter schools to hire unqualified teachers, structures are created which bypass requirements for teachers to secure qualification through Initial Teacher Education (ITE). In this, charter schools are only one mechanism which accelerates the privatisation of previously public spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand. Education Minister Erica Stanford recently announced an increase of \$53 million in funding for teacher training and recruitment. Funding for teacher training within this package circumvents established ITE providers. Rather, it "will go towards programmes that place and train new teachers in certain schools as opposed to courses at teachers' colleges" (RNZ, 2024, para. 1). Alternative ITE providers such as those following a Teach for All model, a global network of teacher training providers in which elite university graduates complete two years of service in underprivileged schools and secure teacher registration at the conclusion, are clearly favoured in the Minister's announcement. Such programmes have consistently come under criticism abroad and at home for perpetuating a meritocratic myth underpinning social inequality (Crawford-Garrett et al., 2021). As well, the assumption that teacher education revolves solely around trainee teachers copying established practice found in schools reifies a false theory/practice binary (Couch et al., 2022), and risks de-professionalising teaching (Locke et al., 2024; Morgan, 2024). Few would suggest that other professionals such as doctors or lawyers should supplant tertiary education with an apprenticeship model. As Locke and colleagues (2024) demonstrate, teaching successfully requires more than a handful of teaching practices and classroom management skills. Stanford's

announcement, however, side-steps public university pathways into teaching and further opens up ITE provision to private non-profit and for-profit providers.

Hosking dismissed the critics of charter schools as being ideologues. “Ideology is one of the greatest problems of all,” he contends. “It should not rule education” (2024, para. 8). As readers of *Teachers’ Work* well know, all education is located within political ideologies. The current policy moves are located firmly within a neoliberal market-based ideology, throwing open public education to market interest and embedding government’s role in education as governance. Writing of the tertiary space, Lewis and Shore (2019) describe neoliberal models of unbundling public institutions to open them up for market interests and privatised profit. It seems that such unbundling of our public compulsory education sector is afoot. Privatisation *in* public education continues. Privatisation *of* public education is at the door.

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