Children at the centre of the education system

The Ministry of Education is updating the Education Act 1989. As part of the process, they ran a public consultation until 14 December 2015. The Office of the Children's Commissioner prepared a submission that included the voices of children and young people. You can find the submission at http://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Publications/Education-Act-submission-Dec-2015-w-appendices.pdf

In this document we provide you with the raw material of what the children and young people told us and we summarise their views.

Concepts of education and achievement for year 7-8 students in a full primary school in Porirua

Below are selected responses from a focus group of twelve year 7 and 8 students at a co-educational, full primary school in Porirua.

The school is decile 1 and has 3 percent Pakeha, 43 percent Maori, 44 percent Pacific and 22 percent Asian students.

What is the purpose of education?

The children who took part understand that education serves multiple, related purposes. At its core, they think it should prepare them for their future lives and equip them with the skills and knowledge they will need to gain employment and thrive in their adult lives.

- *It's important for your brain so you can learn in the future.*
- *You develop social skills and get to talk to people.*
- *It helps prepare for the future and for life situations, and you get a better chance of getting a job. And it helps you to be confident and avoid conflict.*
- *You can get smarter.*
- *So you can get more knowledge for the future.*
- *If you don't learn anything then you're not going to get very far in life.*
- *It's cool – better than staying home playing Playstation or Xbox one.*

We want to encourage all individuals, and community and government agencies to listen to and act on the views of children and young people. Therefore feel free to use quotes from them to inform your thinking, to strengthen your submissions or proposals, and to strengthen your decision making. If you do use any quotes please reference the Office of the Children's Commissioner.

We asked what children thought they would need to know by the time they left college, and their answers ranged from core literacy and numeracy skills to self-confidence and civic participation:

- *Maths, reading, social skills, how to write and all of your spelling words.*
- *A lot, so that I can improve my life.*
- *If you don't learn when you're in college that's going to be hard for you. You have to get prepared.*
- *To show your skills and don't hide them.*
- *There's not a job that you do that you can't use maths in.*
- *Reading, and just like knowledge.*
- *How to defend yourself.*
- *In a job there's no such thing as no maths and no writing. Even with a computer you need to write on the computer. Even if you play rugby you have to count the score.*
- *Maths is the main thing to know because you use maths in everything.*
- *How to pay taxes., How to vote., How to use electronics., Science.*

How can schools help children achieve their goals?

We asked the children how school could help them to achieve their goals. They spoke of the need for encouragement, respectful relationships, providing basic skills, and access to a range of activities and opportunities:

- *[Schools can help us succeed by] cheering and encouraging.*
- *The teachers always want to be treated respectfully, but if they want to be treated respectfully then they need to model it to us.*
- *[School] helps get all your basics ready. When you go to get your dream job, you might need your reading and writing.*
- *School helps you to find something you're enthusiastic about. Then it can help you find activities related to that subject and get really good at those. The more you can participate, the more you can achieve.*
- *[Schools can provide] the things you need in the future, like sports, languages, and technology.*
- *Encouraging us more. Less telling off, more encouraging.*

What does achievement mean to children?

Our participants aspire to success and achievement, but define this widely. They talked about the importance of goal setting and working hard to achieve those goals, but did not define their goals in terms of particular qualifications. Motivating factors included wanting to work hard for their families, but also to achieve their own feelings of personal success:

- *It means a lot because my parents want the best for me: good job, good family, good life.*
- *It means knowing you can do whatever you want. You know it inside even if others don't know it.*
- *Something I can count on in the future.*
- *[Achievement or success is] for me, to make a friend. Because I have ADHD and not many people are like me… I want to get on with kids my own age and also little kids because when I'm older I want to be an ECE teacher.*
- *[Achievement is] when you're really happy because you were determined to do something, and you reach it. And then you set another goal and work hard.*
- *When you set a goal for you, in the future, and then you achieve it.*
- *When you're proud of something.*
- *[If I was successful] everyone would know who I was. I'd get mentioned in class.*
- *Taking a step forward to mean I can achieve more.*
- *Knowing you can do whatever you want.*

While students recognise the role their school plays in supporting them to achieve their goals, they identified some things they would like to change to make this even better. Their responses when asked what the one thing they would like to change is were frank and powerful:

- *Stop the bullying. Make schools a safer environment for kids to learn.*
- *If poor people can't afford lunch, provide lunch.*
- *Upgrade school equipment and classrooms.*
- *Treat disabled people better.*
- *If a new kid comes from another country, treat them with respect.*
- *More laughter and smiles in the schools. [Make sure] it's not all serious, so we can make mistakes.*
- *How are you supposed to learn if you keep getting punished?*
- *Nicer teachers with better humour. Most teachers don't have a sense of humour.*

Should the school day be more flexible?

Finally, we asked children their opinions about one of the more technical elements of the consultation – should there be flexibility about what time the school day starts and finishes? Here are some of their responses:

- *[The school day should be] 9.30am – 3.05pm because people always come late because they need to sleep in. Because they do all nighters and stuff.*
- *[The school day should be] 10am – 4pm because it gives us more time to get ready. It's hard to get up in the morning.*
- *[The school day should be] 11am – 2pm. [That] doesn't mean we don't like learning, [but] it would mean we have more time to do other things.*
- *Have the school open for 24 hours one day, and then you don't have to come to school the next day. Because I get tired from school but I don't like going to sleep.*
- *A shorter time so that people are not together so long, so there are not as many fights and disagreements.*

Schools can help mitigate against the effects of outside school factors

Some of the children's responses revealed interesting insights into factors in their home or family lives that have a bearing on their education. For example, the children's responses about the length and timing of the school day revealed that many go to bed late, find it hard to get up in the morning, and sometimes stay up all night.

School for some is a necessary respite or protective factor from volatile situations at home:

- *[It's important to go to school] to get away from your parents, because if you're together with your family all the time that's when things can happen. Drinking parties can explode. Also your parents can get a break to do their own things.*

Several others talked about the impact of bullying at school, including the encroachment of gang culture into their school life:

- *We have to stop bullying and gang signs. I am getting sick of it.*

The importance of having enough to eat in order to learn was also mentioned:

- *If poor people can't afford lunch, provide lunch.*

Responses like these indicate that, while schools cannot shift complex family dynamics or address outside school factors directly, they may be able to help mitigate the negative impact of these factors on children's educational outcomes if they are aware of them and have tools at their disposal to address them in the school (eg school food programmes, rest areas, and strong anti-bullying programmes).
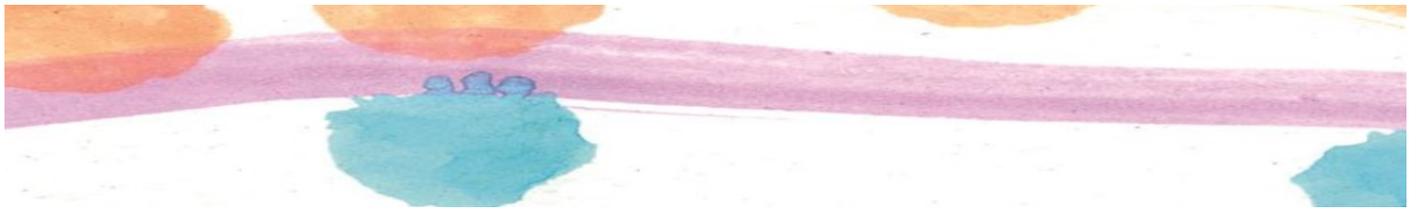
Concepts of education and achievement for year 9 students in a high-decile school

Below are responses from an in-class survey of 23 year 9 students at a co-educational state secondary school in Christchurch. The survey was initiated by Save the Children New Zealand, and delivered with the support of the classroom teacher.

The school is decile 10 and has 82 percent Pakeha, 10 percent Maori, 1 percent Pacific, 3 percent Asian, 1 percent other ethnicities, and 3 percent international students.

What is the purpose of education?

The students understand that the function of the education system is to prepare them for their adult lives. For many, this is expressed in terms of preparing them for employment:

- *So you can get a good job and be able to succeed in life.*
- *It sets you up for your adult life and work place.*
- *To get you ready for a job and just give you the tools to get a new job and income.*
- *To give us knowledge and education to help us with jobs and finance in the future.*
- *To teach the students so we get a good job and have a good life.*
- *To learn things.*
- *It is a system that is supporting children/adults/teens through school.*
- *To teach us.*
- *To teach us lots of things so we can get a good job.*
- *To educate people properly.*
- *The family get a job that earns you lots.*
- *The purpose of the education system is so that we can learn and become smart. So we can get a good job.*
- *To give us knowledge and education to help us with jobs and finance in the future.*

While employment was important, many also expressed an expectation that the education system would provide a more holistic range of skills and knowledge to prepare for adult life beyond employment:

- *To prepare children for the outside world.*
- *To set us up for life.*
- *To teach children life skills and knowledge that they can use for life.*
- *The purpose of the education system is so that we can learn and become smart.*
- *To turn the students into young people who can take over.*
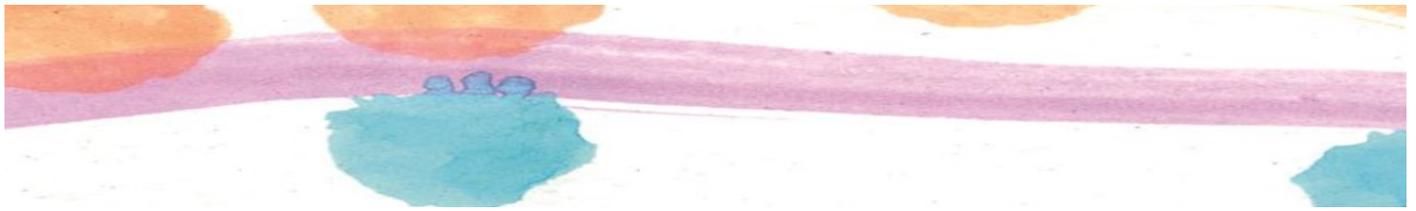
What does achievement mean to students?

When asked what achievement means to them, students consistently responded in terms of setting and attaining goals:

- *When you have a goal and you get it done that is an achievement to me.*
- *Achievement to me is the achieved goals people have set.*
- *To reach a goal or aspiration.*
- *Achievement means to me, that you achieve your goals. SO for example if you want to beat a score from a previous maths test, and you beat it, you've achieved your goal.*
- *Achieving something important.*
- *That you have completed it or a goal.*
- *It's a goal that you want to achieve.*
- *Completing a goal/task.*
- *Something that you have completed which is admirable.*
- *Doing something right and properly. Goals.*
- *To achieve a goal or to pass an exam. Something that makes you proud of what you've done.*
- *Achievement means to me, that you achieve your goals. SO for example if you want to beat a score from a previous maths test, and you beat it, you've achieved your goal.*

Completion of something to bring satisfaction was a strong theme in the responses:

- *When you have finished something to the best of your ability.*
- *Something that you have completed which is admirable.*
- *The completion of doing something well.*
- *To achieve a goal or to pass an exam. Something that makes you proud of what you've done.*

With the exception of one mention of passing an exam, and another of beating a score in a maths test, the students did not explicitly talk about achievement in relation to attaining particular qualifications or specific educational milestones.

When asked what skills and knowledge they thought they would need by the time they left school, mastery of core subjects, especially English, Maths, Science, and Social Studies was mentioned by several students. Others mentioned specific subjects they would need for their chosen careers:

- *Graphics, to be a photographer.*
- *Art NCEA.*
- *Most things that I will need is high grades in English, PE, Health, Maths and everything hospital wise.*
- *Art, English, SOS [social studies?], Graphics. To be a photographer.*
- *English, Maths and people skills.*
- *To be able to know math, English, science etc. and to be able to know skills that will help us.*
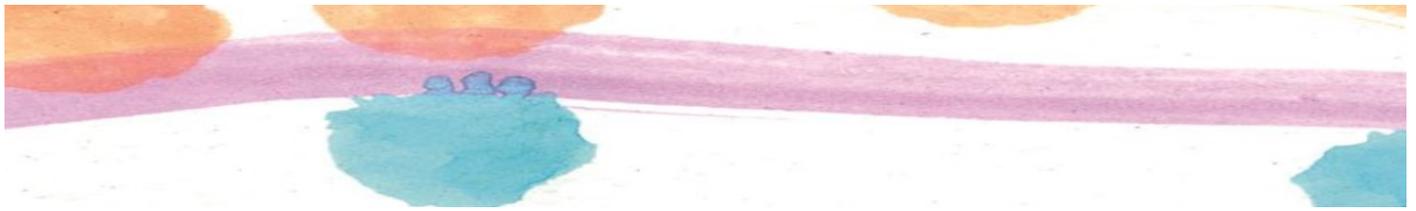
Variations on the theme of "people skills" were also important to a number of students:

- *How to get along with people and to be able to listen/following instructions.*
- *The knowledge and skills of working with other people that we may not know.*
- *When I leave school the skills and knowledge I will need is the skills on how to work well with others if we like them or not.*
- *Team work. Negotiation. Responsibility. Being fair. Respect.*
- *You will probably need social skills.*

Several others also expressed a desire to know about and be able to operate in the "real world"

- *Knowing about taxes, money, jobs and what life is REALLY like.*
- *How to manage money.*
- *Common sense.*

How can schools support students to achieve their goals?

The most common responses here were variations on "teaching them the skills and knowledge they will need." Other common threads concerned providing a wide range of educational opportunities, and designing learning programmes based on what individual children are interested in and want to learn:

- *They could ask people what they want to achieve and make a programme or something to help those people.*
- *Schools can support students to achieve their goals by doing activities based on what they want to learn and how it's helpful to after school.*
- *Schools can support students to achieve their goals by asking what they want to achieve in life, like I want to become a professional athlete, so the school could get me a coach so I could achieve my goal.*
- *Teaching them the skills and knowledge they will need.*
- *By tutoring, and teaching us what we need and want to know.*

Support through challenges and encouragement were also important factors in these responses:

- *Support them. Make sure by the time they leave they have everything they need. Pushing them to achieve.*
- *Offering a good education and encouragement.*
- *Help them through problems at school.*
- *By making them feel welcome.*
- *Most people say encouragement but I say support and having goals on what they like because support encourages and helps people along the way.*

The students were also asked about the specific roles of teachers, Principals, and Boards of Trustees in supporting them to achieve their goals.
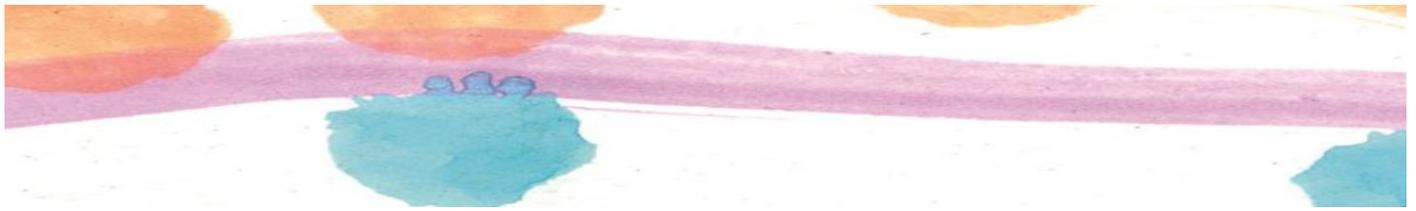
They saw the role of the teacher as chiefly one of imparting knowledge in the classroom, incorporating making lessons memorable, interesting, and maintaining classroom discipline (*"keep [students] under control"*).

They saw the role of the Principal as chiefly one of school leadership, including managing teachers, discipline, and setting direction for the school:

- *The role of the Principal is to make the school the best it can be.*
- *To make sure your school is under control and if there is problems they change it.*
- *To teach about pride in our environment.*
- *The role of a Principal is to make sure that I and the rest of the students achieve our goals.*
- *To help the school run properly.*
- *To keep the school going.*
- *To keep everything in order.*
- *To manage teachers.*
- *To make sure the school is running well and kids are getting the education they need.*
- *To look over the school and make sure everything is going smoothly.*
- *To lead and represent the school well.*
- *To be the head of the board of trustees and have a very strong influence on the students and teachers.*

Interestingly, many students either skipped or answered the question about the role of Boards of Trustees with a version of "don't know," indicating they know little about the current role and function of school governance boards. Among those who gave substantive answers the most common response was that boards should focus on fundraising.

- *To fundraise for school necessities/trips.*
- *To fund trips and buy important things we need to learn.*
- *Being the ones who find the funds for events.*
- *Fundraise money for equipment that benefits the school.*

Other thoughts about the role of boards included:

- *To make sure the principal is doing things right.*
- *To make their school a safe and joyful environment and place.*
- *To manage the schol's money.*
- *Organise and decide the fate of the school.*
- *To make sure the kids are where they should be.*
- *Give the school guidance and money.*
- *The role of the BOT should be to see if the school needs improving and to make change.*
- *I wouldn't know?*
- *To change stuff.*

- *Decide where money goes.*
- *To approve of anything the school needs.*
- *Don't know.*

How should schools engage with parents and families?

Finally, we asked students how schools should engage with parents and families. The most common responses were through parent/teacher interviews, email and in person. Telling parents how they can support their children's learning was an important factor. One student said they didn't think schools should have to engage with parents "unless the child was being bad."

- *Tell the parents how well their child is going every now and then.*
- *Interviews every term. Emails home.*
- *Talk orally.*
- *I don't think they should have to unless the child is being bad.*
- *Don't know.*
- *By telling them how their student is working and how they can help their learning.*
- *By having class meetings like parent teacher interviews but all the parents at the end of each month.*
- *By sending them emails to tell the parents how their son/daughter are doing or what to do to improve their learning.*

Concepts of education and achievement for ten Youth Ambassadors

Below are selected responses from ten of Save the Children's Youth Ambassadors aged 14-18 years. The responses were supplied via an online survey delivered by Save the Children. The Youth Ambassadors cover a wide range of ethnicities: African, Afghani, Asian (Indian, Sri Lankan, Burmese), Maori, Pakeha and Pasific.

What is the purpose of the education system?

The students consider the purpose of the education system is to prepare students for their future lives. For this group, future preparedness was not defined in terms of employment, but rather in terms of gaining skills, fulfilling potential, and learning to learn.

- *To teach children about the real world and the skills you need.*
- *To help children develop so that they have a bright future ahead of them.*
- *It is to provide the best possible ways of learning for students.*
- *To help students in best way to learn and to help them achieve their goals and dreams.*

What does achievement mean to students?

The students have a wide conception of achievement incorporating ideas of personal satisfaction, mastering new skills, and attaining goals. None mentioned particular qualifications.

- *Learning a new skill.*
- *Receiving praise at the end of a long time spend studying.*
- *To give all your effort and to do your best to get where you want to be.*
- *To complete something that makes me happy to the best of my abilities.*
- *State of satisfaction.*
- *Reaching my goals and knowing that I've put 100 percent in everything I do.*

When asked what specific skills and knowledge they thought they would need by the time they finish schools, they listed a range of skills and attributes. The most common responses related to social skills and life skills, as well as literacy and numeracy.

- *I feel like I will need the skills and knowledge on how to get on in life. This includes understanding how to plan and set out, or organise everything so that I can have a stable living environment in the future.*
- *Self-determination and social competence is needed the most.*
- *To be able to read, write, communication skills and being able to get along with everyone.*
- *An idea of reality, time management skills, confidence, understanding world affairs and politics, understand how to get a job and live a sustainable life, basic maths and English knowledge, how to work with other people, ability to create and achieve goals.*

How can schools support students to achieve their goals?

According to this group, schools can support students to achieve their goals by listening to what their students want to know and are interested in, and tailoring learning opportunities around them, as well as encouraging, supporting, and making learning fun and interesting:

- *By being positive about what the students are interested or disinterested in [...] By paying attention to the strengths of individuals, [students] are most likely to achieve their goals.*
- *Have teachers encourage us more, add more fun into our learning to keep our interest, help us set goals and also help us to achieve them.*
- *By having different strategies of helping students to find learning easier because everyone learns differently.*

One student mentioned the importance of teaching and learning methods keeping pace with changes in society and technology:

- *Change the outdated teaching methods to cater to students in the 21st century.*

This group of students had clear ideas about the respective roles of teachers, Principals and Boards of Trustees in supporting students to achieve their goals.

The teacher should use multiple methods and strategies to engage and involve students with different interests and temperaments. They should also be someone who inspires and empowers the class:

- *To accommodate every student and be able to develop a relationship with the student in a way that will motivate their learning.*
- *In the 21st century, the role of the teacher has changed. For young students, and older ones still, the role of the teacher needs to be to teach, but they also need to encourage students to find their own information. Students work differently, as they are all individuals, and teachers need to realise this.*
- *To teach, to inspire, to inform, to encourage, to empower.*
- *To fuel the students' passion to learn, teach them the basics but also teach them the stuff that matters, make it interesting and relatable, give the student the drive to educate themselves.*

The role of the Principal is one of leadership, with important functions including to set the tone and direction for a school, listen to students' voices, and to motivate and empower teachers and students:

- *To oversee all teachers and to listen to students to hear what is working in the school and what is not.*
- *Principals need to be there to support and listen to their students. They need to seriously consider students' experiences.*
- *Providing motivational atmosphere for the teachers and students.*
- *To empower others to become leaders. Their higher goal is to work themselves out of the job so that if they are not around, the organisation functions just as successfully as when they are.*

This group of students were uncertain about the current role and function of Boards of Trustees, so found it difficult to answer what they should be doing:

- *I am not sure, as I am still unsure what exactly the Board of Trustees does.*
- *Quite frankly I don't even know what the role of the Board of Trustees is. All I know is that they have so much power and control over our school when in fact they have no relationship with the students who are attending the school. It's stupid.*

Those who had ideas about what the Board of Trustees should be doing thought listening to student voices was very important:

- *To help the school become better keeping in mind the voice of the students and teachers.*
- *To listen to what students want and try and help them achieve their goals.*

Other suggested roles for Boards in supporting student achievement were providing funding opportunities and scholarships, making decisions about where money is spent, ensuring the school is a safe environment, and upholding children's rights:

- *To understand what students are needing to be able to stay focused and love learning. To ensure that no rights of children are being breached and work towards governing the school in an equal and fair manner.*

How should schools engage with parents and families?

Finally we asked the students how schools should best engage with parents and families. They suggested a range of options including the conventional parent teacher interviews and emails, to more innovative ideas such as informal social gatherings, daily updates, and involving parents in all aspects of school operations. One student summed up the importance of good engagement:

- *Help parents and families be interactive with the students' learning, give them the tools they need to understand what kind of education they need, and the schools using the parents and families to understand what kind of education the child needs.*