Fee paying education not in the interest of New Zealand

Dr Liz Gordon, QPEC spokesperson and educational researcher, today argued against proposals being aired in the media to allow state schools to charge fees.

“In 1877, in the middle of a long recession, New Zealand politicians passed an Act of Parliament stating that schooling should be ‘free, compulsory and secular’”, she said.

“The trade-off for requiring children to attend school was that the schooling, and if necessary transport to school, would be available at no charge”.

Dr Gordon notes that the right to free education has been eroded over the years. “Most parents now pay a fortune for school uniforms, stationery and, increasingly, capital items such as laptops and tablets”.

Successive ministers have done little to stem the rising costs of schooling on families, and Dr Gordon thinks that that New Zealand has one of the most expensive school systems for families in the world. “Educators in other countries are shocked that basic learning tools and materials have to be paid for by families”, she says.

“However, the ministry has ring-fenced the school donation, and over the past two decades has insisted that such donations be presented transparently to parents as a voluntary payment.

“It is true that schools have put pressure on families, denied students access to balls and the like, and tried to hide the donation as a fee in many ways. But the bottom line is that the spirit of the law is maintained by allowing parents to choose whether or not to pay any school donation”.

Dr Gordon notes that with 90% of families worse off than two decades ago (using Max Rashbrooke’s figures), and a quarter of children living in poverty, there is not much space in most family budgets for school fees.

“Auckland Grammar initiated this discussion but its families are getting poorer and are paying enormous mortgages to live in the area. There is not a lot of spare cash around”.

Dr Gordon says that the argument that Auckland Grammar makes, that its large voluntary donation makes up for the smaller amount of funding it receives than poorer schools, is not a strong one.

“High decile schools have a student population that carries huge educational capital. The OECD notes that the number of books in the home, education of mother and then father, amount spent on educational goods, home computer, number of bathrooms in the home, family income, classic books in the home, a desk at home for study and the monitoring of student progress by families are (in order) the main factors determining learning outcomes.

 “It is the lack of these factors that the decile funding system is provided for – to compensate for a lack of educational capital, not to compensate for inability to pay. Parents at Auckland Grammar and other schools should inquire whether the school grant is being spent wisely, and whether these large voluntary donations are required”.

Liz Gordon

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