

Govt silent on failing charter school

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One of New Zealand's first charter schools is failing, abysmally, and the Ministry of Education must stop dodging questions.

Last year, the first batch of five brave pioneer charter schools began operations. Four received excellent reports from the Education Review Office (ERO).

School number five, Te Kura Hourua ki Whangaruru, however, has been embroiled in trouble almost since the first school bell sounded in February last year.

An early ERO report released under the Official Information Act from an April visit to the school showed problems across the board. A governance facilitator stepped in and the school was reported to be facing problems with management infighting, bullying, drug use, poor teaching, curriculum delivery and student engagement. Over the year, the school roll fell from 61 to 47. It's difficult to know what that fall was due to, but those figures hardly indicate success.

Opponents to charter schools have been quick to jump on Whangaruru and use it as a whipping boy. Labour's education spokesman, Chris Hipkins, said: "This is a failed model. It was supposed to be about giving kids a better chance, and this school is clearly failing and the Government isn't doing anything about it."

Hipkins was wrong on one point but right on another.

He is wrong that charter schools are a failed model. Four of the five schools are doing exceptionally well. A mark of 80 per cent may not be quite an A+, but it's still an A in my books. And the fact that this school is failing actually shows the model is succeeding. That's a little counter-intuitive, but let me explain.

The success of the charter school model is predicated on eliminating failure. Schools are given much more rope. They innovate and try new things to improve learning and serve their students. But the corollary of that is sometimes they will hang themselves with that rope.

Thomas Edison, in his numerous failed attempts to invent the lightbulb, created the lightbulb. Failure is an inherent and necessary byproduct of innovation and progress.

The Cato Institute recently reported on its research into charter schools in Texas. Initially, charter schools performed worse than traditional schools. Over time, ineffective charter schools were closed and the remaining charter schools ended up with superior results compared with their traditional school counterparts.

David Farrar, reflecting on the Cato research, noted on Kiwiblog that failure is the critical component of the charter school model. "A charter school that performs badly will close. Non-charter schools that perform badly rarely close. Even when students flee them, nearby schools are allowed to expand to allow more students in, so students are forced to keep going to these badly performing schools."

While Hipkins was mistaken to point to one failed school out of five as evidence of the whole charter school model failing, he could be correct on another point: the Government doesn't seem to be doing anything about this failure. It is supposedly working with Whangaruru to resolve issues, but there is very little transparency.

ERO extended its assessment period to August for Whangaruru to give the school time to turn things around. The Northern Advocate tried to get access to the report in September and was told it would be released "imminently". The ministry's website says once the school has responded to the ERO review, the report will be released.

In December, there was still no sign of the report. The president of Te Tai Tokerau Principals Association, Pat Newman, challenged the Government to release it.

It's now more than halfway through January and the start of the school year is nearly upon us. Where is the ERO report for Whangaruru school? It may be true that the school has come under unfair scrutiny and that the media have exaggerated the problems, and indeed it may be resolving what problems it has, but if there is nothing to hide, the report should be released. And if it is failing, the Government must be cruel to be kind: the school should be closed.

Almost six months ago, Education Minister Hekia Parata was asked in a Radio New Zealand interview whether she would close the school. She dodged the question and noted that public schools also fail. "We do have these observations, by the way, being made by ERO of other schools. We don't throw the towels in with them. We work with them because we're focused on how do we give these kids a chance to be successful."

But that is the whole point of charter schools: innovation is a good thing as long as failure is acknowledged and eliminated. Of course, we want to give the kids a chance to be successful, but their best chance may be at a school that is actually delivering a good education.

Our lightbulbs work today because Edison eliminated 10,000 lightbulbs that didn't work. But the Government seems to be very quiet about Whangaruru.

