

# Otago Daily Times

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## Schools a work in progress

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**Tomorrow's Schools is 20 years old. We need a full-scale review of education governance and schools policy, rather than simply further "tinkering", says Darrell Latham.**

The late David Lange likened the Tomorrow's Schools reforms as akin to doing a valve grind on a car while the engine was still running.

One would imagine that such a major task should have come with a written health warning recommending that school governance personnel not to try this on children, results uncertain and, do not under any circumstances progress further until such time as the political rhetoric is matched by the resourcing reality . . . all lessons soundly learned years down the track.



David Lange.

New Zealanders are well known for being artful creators with number eight wire and as a nation of do-it-yourself enthusiasts we should be proud of our ingenuity and can-do attitude.

The problem is that while the pseudonym is a credit to our ingenuity, the political reality has been the expectation from an educational resourcing perspective to make do and create a silk purse from a sour's ear.

Enough is enough.

Recent media headlines highlighting educational governance and school policy suggests that further "tinkering" with the system should cease until such time as a full investigation takes place to review the strengths and weaknesses and if that means a royal commission of inquiry is to held into the 20-year-old system of school governance then so be it.

Why? The reason is simple, those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Before we launch another major reform of school policy involving a new curriculum and the implementation of national standards let us first evaluate comprehensively the strengths and weaknesses of current reforms and learn from them.

Ten years after the implementation of Tomorrow's Schools in 1999 the Rt Hon David Lange noted that the model had been subverted by competition and described the Ministry of Education as "dysfunctional and unfit for the partnership between government and schools" - partnership of course being the key ingredient of the reform.

He talked about the original intention of Tomorrow's Schools, how he believed the Ministry of Education had been corrupted and, that the process of reinvigoration and hope in our society should start in schools.

Twenty years on what has changed? Clearly the call has been made that the education governance plans leaves much to be desired.

No, I do not think for a moment that Tomorrow's Schools has failed nor would I describe it as a runaway success.

Rather, a work in progress.

What is clear is that a systematic and comprehensive review of the reforms is long overdue.

Therein lies the problem of culpability - it must be equally shared by both major political parties.

Education Minister Anne Tolley will not be party to a review and so will continue with the rhetoric of the cry of the night watchman "one o'clock and all's well"! only for all concerned to discover later that their slumbers are disturbed by the clanging of the education fire bells.

Evidence suggests there is a need and widespread consensus for a comprehensive review or a royal commission of inquiry

into educational governance.

However, political expediency will never allow that to happen, for to do so is to admit to defeat and that would be counterproductive to the current roller coaster political agenda advocated for education.

While schools continue to call for an overhaul of Tomorrow's Schools they are currently facing initiatives related to the implementation of both a new curriculum and national standards.

The latest revelation that schools will have to wait months for the computer software required to process the national standards results is deplorable and the call by principals to hit the self-destruct button is not unwarranted.

It is simply unacceptable that in this technological age resourcing education continues to be based on number eight wire reasoning.

David Lange explained in his 1999 Key note address that Tomorrow's Schools was designed as a partnership between the school and its community on one side and the government on the other.

The school and community were to provide the best opportunity possible for children to learn and the government would provide the resourcing - each party having an equal stake in the success of each and every school.

Unfortunately, according to Lange, one of the partners lost interest.

Lange went on to explain that the Tomorrow's Schools model was subverted not long after its inception.

He said from his perspective that he wanted to make the decisions which were rightly those a politician should make but leave the schooling decisions to people who knew something about it.

According to Lange, a devolved scheme of school administration like Tomorrow's Schools did not allow for active intervention by the minister of education but, ministers have intervened and have tried to take control in a scheme where the result is a shambles of policy and performance . . . it is hardly surprising that "the ministry of education is dysfunctional", he said.

The timely editorial (*ODT*, 27.10.09) and comments by Otago Primary Principals Association president and Green Island School principal Steve Hayward (*ODT*, 24.10.09) is a reminder that decisions regarding education need to be premised on research about what works rather than political expediency.

When research from Cambridge University advocates the scrapping of national testing and endorses a broad based curriculum yet, the minister proceeds regardless, what conclusions can parents draw about the minister's motives?

As we acknowledge 20 years of Tomorrow's Schools the challenge is to improve learning and take it forward for the next 20 years.

However, as we approach 2010, the implementation of a new curriculum and national standards we all need to reflect on our journey to date, the issues that we have faced and the lessons that we have learned.

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