

## ***The New Zealand District High School: A case study of the conservative politics of rural education***

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*From the late 1860s, when they were established in New Zealand, the district high (now area) schools have sought to provide academically able rural youth with the opportunity to study a high status, abstract, examination-oriented curriculum. This curriculum enabled them to pursue clerical and professional careers in the towns and cities. However, much to the annoyance of the Department of Education, its Directors and successive Ministers of Education who expected these schools to offer rural-oriented, practical, vocational courses leading to employment in the local economy, the district high schools instead adhered to an academic curriculum that was indistinguishable from that of the urban secondary schools. Their purpose was to provide the means for academically able pupils to improve their life opportunities.*

*Unable until the mid-1940s to reach any consensus regarding the type and extent of curricular reform required in the post-primary schools in general, and the district high schools in particular, the district high schools remained relatively isolated, ambiguous if not problematic institutions (being neither primary nor secondary per se). Notwithstanding their restricted staffing and teaching capacity, rural communities knew that the route to their children's economic, occupational and social advancement was closed to those without the all-important academic examination credentials. Predictably, they steadfastly resisted any proposal that hinted at abandoning high status, abstract, academic examinable knowledge. In short, the demand was for access rather than reform. This was something that educational bureaucrats and administrators have had to learn to accept, albeit grudgingly. The current Minister of Education (Trevor Mallard) has yet to grasp this reality at a time when many small rural schools throughout New Zealand have been threatened with impending closure.*

*Finally, the lesson to be learned from exploring and analysing the historical development of rural schooling in New Zealand (and elsewhere) is that the community perception of what constitutes 'worthwhile education' for*

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*youth, in almost every instance, will win out over the official view(s) of educational bureaucrats, administrators and politicians.*

### ***Introduction: The Early Years***

Prior to the introduction of the 1877 Education Act, which ushered a state-funded national system of free, secular and compulsory primary schooling into New Zealand, the colony had been divided into separate provinces, each with its own elected provincial council (i.e., local government). These provincial councils had wide-ranging powers, including responsibility for education, but because they differed markedly in terms of their philosophies, practices, resources, and the value of their various educational endowments, educational provision throughout the colony remained extremely uneven. Furthermore, there were clear and growing disparities emerging between the South and North Islands by the early 1860s, owing to the rising economic fortunes of the former. (Butchers, 1932; Campbell, 1941; Ewing, 1970; Mackey, 1967)

From the outset, the provincial education systems reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, existing educational practices in England and/or Scotland during the first half of the nineteenth century. In the case of the Otago settlement, with its strong Scottish Presbyterian origins and flourishing economy (the result of the discovery of gold), experienced primary school teachers were actively recruited from overseas, many of whom had been trained in, and certificated by, Scottish Normal Schools (McKenzie, 1973).

In keeping with the traditional Scottish enthusiasm for education, local communities began to approach the Otago Education Board with a view to obtaining the board's permission (and funding) to establish schools modelled on the Scottish parish system, where schools would be required to provide instruction in almost any secondary school subject on payment of a very modest fee (Thom, 1950). The first of these schools opened in Tokomairiro (Milton) in April 1856. After a somewhat unpromising start – the school closed briefly in 1861 owing to a lack of pupils – Tokomairiro District High School's future became more certain in 1869 when the (Otago) Grammar Schools Ordinance was passed which reconstituted the school, along with three others (Lawrence, Oamaru and Port Chalmers), as a grammar school (Thom, 1950). As academic institutions specifically designed to provide a very small number of ambitious scholars with the opportunity of undertaking

advanced (secondary) school studies, these four schools offered courses in English (including reading, recitation, and grammar), Latin, Greek, French, Euclidian geometry, Algebra, British history, and World Geography (Devaliant, 1964; Thom, 1950).

By 1877, the district high schools in Otago could justifiably claim that they were providing low-cost access to post-primary schooling to those youth who already had demonstrated their academic potential – potential deemed ripe for further development. Teachers such as John Stenhouse, Rector of Lawrence District High School, knew that there were few employment opportunities in depopulating towns with stagnant or declining economies, and consequently he began preparing his students for future government, office and commercial work in the towns and cities. In other words, rural residents fully expected the district high schools to provide upward social, economic and vocational mobility for their youth. As Thom has observed, “the dominating idea was that of getting out [of rural areas] to get on....[E]ducation was often a way out – an escape from the rigours and limitations of the life of the farm labourer...” (p. 8). Clearly, because school authorities were highly attuned to the demands of their local communities, formal statutory protection of the existing academic curriculum in the secondary departments (‘tops’) of the district high schools was considered necessary to preserve the all important equality of curricular offerings between urban and rural high schools. The 1877 Education Act provided this assurance to rural New Zealanders.

### *The Education Act, 1877*

Drafted by Charles Bowen and John Hislop, the Education Act of 1877 not only gave the government full responsibility and control over primary education in New Zealand but also granted statutory recognition to district high schools – i.e., the Act allowed each of the regional education boards, upon receipt of an application in writing from a school committee and with prior approval from the Minister of Education, to convert any public primary school into a district high school (Education Act, 1877, Sections 54, 73). Furthermore, the Act prescribed a curriculum that was familiar to district high school teachers and pupils. It read:

[Pupils were to study] all the branches of a liberal education comprising Latin and Greek classics, French and other modern

languages, and such other branches of science as the advancement of the colony and the increase in population may from time to time require. (Education Act, 1877, Section 56)

If the claim that the founding purpose of the district high schools was to equalise opportunity between town and country, and to facilitate the rise of scholarly talent, is indeed accurate, then one would expect to discover a high degree of similarity between the curricular offerings of these schools and their town (secondary school) counterparts. In point of fact, the historical evidence strongly supports this contention: the Education Reserves Act, 1877, allowed endowed secondary schools to provide instruction in the "usual branches of al liberal education consisting of the English language and literature, Latin and Greek classics, French and other modern languages, Mathematics, physics and other branches of science" (The Education Reserves Act, 1877, Section 2). Thus, the district high schools could justifiably state that they offered genuine equality of educational opportunity by modelling their curriculum on traditional academic lines so as to provide schools with the opportunity to gain precisely the same examination qualifications as offered in the exclusive fee-charging secondary schools. It was a situation that they were understandably keen to preserve. (*Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives [AJHR]*, E-1B, 1902, pp. 94-95; E-1, 1909, pp. 40-41; E-6, 1909, p. 9; E-2, 1910, p. 144)

### *The District High Schools post-1877*

The growth in the number of district high schools established in the years immediately after the passage of the 1877 Act was disappointingly low. Over the period 1878-1899, the number of district high schools established increased from five (all in Otago) to 14 (five in Otago, seven in other South Island areas, and two in the North Island) with a combined roll of 313 pupils in the secondary departments (Thom, 1950, pp. 9, 13). The fate of the district high schools therefore appeared to hang in the balance owing to three factors that, taken together, were not conducive to any developments in post-primary education provision.

First, because the district high schools were funded from the ordinary primary school capitation grant (£3.15s per pupil per year) and because the cost per pupil was higher owing to the better salaries paid to teachers in the secondary departments, the schools could only grow at the expense of their primary base. In fact, the Wanganui

education board was shocked to discover that the cost per pupil in the district high schools was more than twice that for pupils in the primary schools (*AJHR*, E-1, 1884, p. 67). Furthermore, given the urgent need to cater for escalating primary school enrolments post-1877 – the primary school rolls more than doubled over the decade 1878-1888 – most of the district high schools' secondary departments were very poorly staffed and resourced.

Secondly, politicians could not have foreseen the forthcoming major world wide economic depression that lasted throughout the 1880s and early 1890s, and which led to decreased educational expenditure (Thom, 1950, p. 9). In light of these financial exigencies, the future of the district high schools (and the urban secondary schools), at least for the time being, remained uncertain (McLaren, 1970).

Thirdly, the historical record clearly demonstrates that the post-primary sector itself was deeply divided over the 'proper' roles of the district high and secondary schools. For their part, the secondary school authorities regarded the rural high schools as interlopers; that is, as rival institutions that competed directly for a scarce commodity in a very exclusive segment of the post-primary school marketplace (*AJHR*, H-1, 1879, pp. 316-319; Thom, 1950, p. 11).

In point of fact, such competition was now impossible to avoid given the considerable curriculum overlap that existed between the district high and urban secondary schools; an overlap that provided some guarantee that the district high school authorities would continue to offer genuine equality of educational opportunity in terms of access to public school examinations, alongside urban secondary schools (*AJHR*, E-1c, 1901, p. 3). As the Southland Education Institute perceptively observed in 1910, "the effect of an examination common to a group of schools was to lead to their programmes of work being similar" (*New Zealand Journal of Education*, 1910, p. 54). From the public perspective, examination results therefore came to be synonymous with high quality academic instruction, efficient and effective teaching, and enhanced economic, social and vocational mobility (Lee & Lee, 1992, pp. 1-6, 21-30).

Although only the bravest of district high school teachers would have dared to challenge the educational demands of a conservative rural community, some critics argued that the time was now ripe to introduce a practical, agricultural bias into the district high school curriculum, in place of the traditional academic offerings, because it was assumed

(erroneously) that male pupils would most likely take up farming work upon leaving school (*AJHR*, I-4B, 1904, p. 26; Lee & Lee, 1992, p. 2; Thom, 1950, pp. 13, 21). As early as 1885, no less a person than the Minister of Education and Premier, Sir Robert Stout, argued in this vein (*New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* [NZPD], 1885, p. 115). Thereafter, the annual reports of many school inspectors noted that the district high school curriculum was overly academic and lacked a special bias towards agriculture (*AJHR*, E-1B, 1906, p. 26; E-2, 1910, p. 144; E-5, 1914, p. 33; E-6, 1914, p. 23-24;).

### **THE HOGBEN ERA: 1899-1915**

The newly-appointed Inspector-General of Schools, George Hogben, also questioned the need for the district high schools to teach traditional secondary school subjects and for them to imitate the fully-staffed secondary schools by modelling their programmes "on the false assumption that the majority of their pupils intend to proceed to the university" (*AJHR*, E-1c, 1901, p. 3). Somewhat defiantly, he declared that a pupil's general education did not always have to be grounded in academic instruction: rather, it could be obtained through practical, manual studies (*AJHR*, E-1c, 1901, p. 3; E-12, 1912, pp. 44, 711; E-12, 1912, p. 57). However, given that the district high schools were supplying the *same* academic credentials as those available in the town secondary schools, attempts by Hogben and others to persuade the district high schools to embark upon more 'practical' forms of schooling were regarded with great suspicion. Practical subjects, particularly those that were non-examinable, were destined to occupy a subordinate position in the district high curriculum (*AJHR*, E-1B, 1908, p. 38).

The low status assigned to non-academic (and therefore non-examinable) subjects was highlighted in Otago in 1891 when the Committee of the Palmerston District High School asked the Otago Education Board to instruct the school's headmaster to offer pupils "a broader view of higher education" rather than to continue preparing pupils for public examinations (*Otago Daily Times*, 1891). However, both the Board and the headmaster steadfastly refused to comply with the Committee's request on the grounds that it would be impossible for the school to prepare pupils for examinations at the same time as providing an alternative curriculum for non-examination, short-stay pupils (*Otago Daily Times*, 1891).

By 1900, the nation's 14 district high schools had embraced the academic curriculum to such an extent that they regarded any move by administrators to modify their programmes along more practical lines as being nothing more than a hostile attempt to deny country children the opportunity to compete alongside city children for marketable examination qualifications (Lee & Lee, 1992). Official and national recognition of this reality finally came in 1901 when the Inspectorate and Rectors of district high schools met in conference in Wellington. After much discussion, the Conference agreed that the district high schools should be allowed to continue with their long-established practice of preparing their pupils for recognised examinations while also providing other pupils with a "good general education bearing directly upon the practical work of life" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1902, pp. 94-94).

### *The District High School Free Place Regulations, 1901*

Hogben's vision of agriculture embedded as a core subject in the district high school curriculum was seriously compromised by the Seddon (Liberal) government's decision to introduce 'free place' post-primary schooling. In January 1901, the education boards were offered a grant of £30 per annum for each district high school having 12 or more pupils taking a full secondary course, along with an additional annual capitation payment of £2 per pupil (*AJHR*, E-1, 1901, p. 109). It was further provided that where no fees were charged the government would contribute an additional £4 per pupil (p. 109). Thus, the total amount payable to the boards for each district high school pupil was £6 in addition to the standard £3.15s statutory primary school capitation grant. These allowances were paid subject to four conditions being met: first, capitation would only be paid for those pupils who had passed the Standard 6 Proficiency Examination; second, pupils were to be taught in separate classrooms by properly qualified secondary school teachers; third, the allowances were to be paid as salaries to the secondary school teachers or as additions to the salaries of those teachers in charge of the secondary classes; and, finally, all pupils were required to include English and arithmetic in their course, and at least three other subjects chosen from a list comprising Latin, French, mathematics (algebra, euclid, trigonometry), elementary mechanics, physics, chemistry, botany, mechanical drawing, book-keeping, shorthand, agricultural chemistry, and physiology (p. 109).

Having seriously underestimated the public enthusiasm for the free place system – the scheme was expanded to include the urban secondary schools in December 1902 – Hogben also failed to grasp the reality that the free place legislation would further entrench academic instruction in the district high schools (McLaren, 1987, pp. 80-81). Thus Hogben's prediction that the majority of district high school pupils would now opt for the manual-technical and agricultural subject options laid down in the 1901 regulations bore no relationship to market reality. Clearly disappointed with the district high school authorities' response, Hogben included the following 'note of warning' in his annual report for 1901:

There is too much tendency at present...to give the [secondary] pupils a little Latin or French and a little elementary algebra or Euclid, and to avoid science and commercial and manual training. The aim in view in establishing district high schools will probably be gained if these schools give the pupils...a suitable course of manual work or of commercial work where local conditions demand it.... There is no reason why any of our district high schools...should take as their model the lower forms of an old English grammar school. (*AJHR*, E-1c, 1901, p. 3)

Hogben, along with several prominent school inspectors, persisted with the view that there was a large and attractive labour market for rural school leavers trained in agriculture. It was a message that he felt compelled to repeat when asked to address the Hawke's Bay meeting of the Farmers' Union in 1904.

#### *The Farmers' Union Speech, 1904*

Opening his address with a stinging attack on the overly academic nature of the district high school curriculum, Hogben observed that because "agriculture and rural pursuits engaged the efforts...of far more people than any other single trade, business or manufacture...[and] of more individuals than all other productive occupations put together", a system of "properly organised instruction in the principles of agriculture" was therefore urgently needed (*AJHR*, I-14B, 1904, pp. 24-26; Roth, 1952, p. 122).

Having extolled the merits of agriculture in general and rural education studies programmes in particular, in terms of their singular

contribution to New Zealand's future economic prosperity and security, Hogben then expressed his disappointment that the district high schools were keen to offer instruction in typewriting and shorthand rather than in agriculture and dairy work (*AJHR*, I-14B, 1904, p. 24). However, he stopped short of advocating *compulsory* agricultural education in rural high schools, arguing instead that the Department of Education, through its general regulatory powers and the special capitation grants it offered to education boards, provided sufficient encouragement to schools to introduce "such instruction as is most suited to the district" (p. 26). Hogben also suggested that rural communities should "use their influence" to "move the local education authorities and local public opinion in the desired direction" of providing rural education programmes in their schools (p. 25). Clearly, Hogben believed that persuasion was infinitely preferable to legislative intervention and compulsion; a stance endorsed by George Fowlds, Minister of Education in the Ward government (1906-1912) (*AJHR*, E-6, 1909, p. 9).

#### *The Tate Report, 1904*

In criticising the district high schools for offering an academic curriculum, Hogben seriously misread the intense market demand in rural New Zealand for courses of study (and examination qualifications) that enhanced school leavers' employment opportunities. But he was not alone. At the same time as Hogben was advocating agricultural education in rural schools, Frank Tate, the respected Director of Education in Victoria, Australia, was compiling his own special report on the New Zealand education system. Tate found himself in complete agreement with his New Zealand counterpart when he reported that the New Zealand district high schools "devoted too much attention to what are usually called high school subjects" and scarcely any attention to agricultural training (*AJHR*, E-14, 1904, p. 12).

#### *The Hegemonic Status of the Academic Curriculum*

Whereas Hogben and Tate had failed to grasp the significance of the rural-urban population shift on school-based agricultural education programmes, Stout had understood this dynamic as early as 1886 when designing the Junior Civil Service Examination as a dual purpose qualification for selecting candidates for entry to civil service cadetships and for certificating primary school teachers (Lee, 1987). Shramka's case

study of Petone High School amply demonstrates that the school's academic, examination-oriented course provided a route to economic, social and geographical mobility (Shramka, 1985). In 1908, the school had offered two distinct courses – a general examination-oriented course (comprising English, Latin, French, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, History and Chemistry) and a commercial course (comprising Book-keeping, Shorthand, Freehand drawing and Brushwork) but three years later, the school notified its community that it intended offering an alternative programme of technical and rural instruction (Shramka, 1985, pp. 123-124). This announcement incensed the school's predominantly working-class community and led the Editor of the *Hutt and Petone Chronicle* to declare that "[Petone] pupils desiring government positions must be able to sit for competitive examinations" (pp 124-125). Finally, after much debate, the Wellington Education Board intervened and instructed the school to retain the general (examination-based) and commercial courses and to offer an additional rural course that included elementary agriculture and botany. However, the rural course soon proved unpopular – the general course continued to attract the greatest proportion of pupils – and was eventually abandoned in 1917 (p. 126). In short, the majority of pupils and parents did not want Petone school to broaden its curriculum because, as it stood, it was doing precisely what they wanted it to do.

This situation, however, was not unique to Petone. In fact, many of the inspectors' annual reports attest to the fact that the district high schools had joined the credential race along with their urban counterparts by the early 1900s. For example, the Westland inspector, A.J.Morton, in his report for 1905, observed that the great majority of primary school children in his district who went on to the local district high school did so with the express intention of passing the Junior Civil Service Examination in order to gain appointments in the civil service, in offices, banks, and as pupil-teachers (*AJHR*, E-1B, 1906, p. 45). That same year, Henry Hill, the Hawke's Bay inspector, noted that the wide range of subject options available for the Junior Civil Service Examination made it "easily adaptable to the varying wants of each district" and therefore an ideal qualification to which all rural high school pupils should aspire (p. 23). He concluded that:

It appears to me that the time has arrived for all district high school pupils to be tested through the channel of the public examination... The Junior Civil Service and Matriculation [Examinations] should be

the objective of every pupil. These examinations would supply a suitable leaving certificate, besides insuring in the schools systematic training and preparation. (p. 23)

### ***The Increasingly Problematic Status of Agricultural Subjects and Courses***

Given such official encouragement, it is not surprising that the district high schools should have attached little importance to Hogben's vision that they should become centres of education for pupils who would live and work in the rural community. Nevertheless, Hogben, seemingly blind to the reality that rural residents regarded agricultural instruction as interfering with the academic work of their district high schools, clung to the view that rural youth should follow a practical curriculum with a distinct agricultural bias. With a strong sense of purpose, Hogben gave legislative effect to his convictions in 1909 when he offered a special capitation grant of £5.10s annually to each education board for each pupil in their district high schools who took an approved agricultural education course (*AJHR*, E-6, 1911, p. 12; Thom, 1950, p. 28).

Hogben's initiative achieved some success. By 1912, rural courses had been established in the Temuka, Waimate, Tokomairiro, Lawrence, Mosgiel, Tapanui, Palmerston and Alexandra district high schools in Otago, and in a number of secondary and technical high schools throughout the South Island (Watson, 1949, p. 20). As a general rule, however, South Island post-primary schools were slower to introduce rural courses than those in the North Island (Thom, 1950, pp. 28-30). Nevertheless, Hogben's rural education vision appeared to be materialising.

But all was not well. Considerable difficulties were being experienced in obtaining staff capable of teaching agricultural subjects at the post-primary school level (Thom, 1950, pp. 41-45). A further obstacle, already mentioned, was that most pupils who undertook rural subjects or a rural course also were preparing for national examinations. Like Hogben, the Minister of Education, George Fowlds, was equally convinced that school examinations exerted too great an influence upon the district high school curricula. "Everything", he reported in 1909, "is subordinated to securing high marks in competitive examinations" (*AJHR*, E-6, 1909, p. 9; E-6, 1910, p. 12). Fowlds also assumed that market preferences, even long-established ones, could easily be

redirected by Ministerial decree (*AJHR*, E-1, 1911, p. 35). But as he and his successors were soon to learn, rural parents knew only too well what the market acknowledged as being worthwhile knowledge for school leavers to possess.

Hogben's attempts to realign the district high school curricula with rural pursuits attracted the wrath of the Otago Education Board's subcommittee on district high schools (established in 1908) and the board's Chief Inspector, Peter Goyen, both of whom were adamant that the dual (i.e., academic-practical education) role of the schools should be left untouched in order to protect "the interests of the main body of pupils as well as the select few" (Goyen, 1908). In a lengthy address to his board in July 1909, Goyen revealed a clear appreciation of market forces and public demand when he observed that:

At present the chief aim [of district high schools] is to prepare their pupils for public examinations. It is right that, as far as practicable, country children should share with town children in the provision made by the state for education for public office and professional careers, and no scheme of work should be imposed upon rural schools that would deprive or tend to deprive country children of their share in this provision. (Goyen, 1909)

Goyen concluded that Hogben's rural curriculum proposals lacked obvious market support because 75 per cent of all district high school pupils were preparing for the fourth form Junior Civil Service or fifth form University of New Zealand Matriculation Examinations (Goyen, 1909).

### *Towards Curriculum Differentiation and Educational Efficiency*

In the meantime, Hogben and Fowlds were forced to acknowledge that the district high schools, by virtue of their geographical location, had to serve a "double purpose" (*AJHR*, E-10, 1910, pp. 18, 38). Still, this did not stop them from arguing in favour of *curriculum differentiation* wherein the vocational aspirations of pupils, their intellectual abilities, and their intended duration of stay at a post-primary school would determine their particular course of study (p. 7). According to this principle, short-stay pupils would be expected to follow a curriculum with a distinct practical/applied emphasis (i.e., agriculture and dairy

science for boys, and domestic science for girls) while longer-stay pupils would undertake the academic, examination-directed course (*AJHR*, E-10, 1910, p. 28; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993, pp. 103-111).

Hogben and Fowlds' understanding of 'educational efficiency' led them to announce that "some sort of distinct natural sifting of pupils" ought to occur; that is, pupils should embark upon the Matriculation course only if they fully intended to proceed to university study (*AJHR*, E-10, 1910, p. 24). However, it should be noted that neither the Department of Education's Free Place Regulations nor the University of New Zealand's Matriculation Examination requirements imposed such a limitation upon pupils (Lee, 1991; McLaren, 1965, 1970, 1987). Furthermore, because the post-primary schools were operating in a voluntary (i.e., non-compulsory) market, they were obliged to respect the wishes of those pupils who chose to attend (*AJHR*, E-10, 1910, pp. 3, 16-25). Frustrating as it was to them, Hogben and Fowlds were powerless to intervene in a market that had identified non-academic courses as being unattractive options for ambitious, credential-conscious youth (*AJHR*, E-6, 1911, p. 12; Lee & Lee, 1992). Nevertheless, this did not deter Hogben from continuing to remind post-primary teachers of their "special obligation" to educate their non-academic pupils in accordance with the existing Free Place Regulations (*AJHR*, E-6, 1910, p. 11).

### *The Education (Cohen) Commission, 1912*

In his opening address to the Education (Cohen) Commission in 1912, Hogben observed that New Zealanders' "craze for examinations" had effectively prevented an agricultural bias from being incorporated in the district high school curriculum (*Cohen Report*, 1912, p. 44). Many of the inspectors who gave evidence to the commission agreed with Hogben's assessment regarding the marginal status of agricultural courses in the rural high schools. The Chief Inspectors for the Auckland and Wanganui Education Boards (Edward Mulgan and George Braik respectively), both informed the commission that the rural course, as it currently operated in the district high schools, handicapped those intent on preparing for recognised public examinations (pp. 57-58, 487). Frederick Bakewell, the Wellington inspector, noted that attempts to introduce full rural courses in high schools in his district from 1910 had been disastrous. Despite his censuring these schools for allowing examinations to override "the benefits of a vocational training in the

agricultural and pastoral occupations", the rural course encountered "strong opposition from local communities" simply because it was popularly regarded as being the "poor relation" to the recognised academic examination-oriented course (p. 521). Leonard de Berry, Headmaster of Hokitika District High School, put the matter in its economic and social context when he observed that the rural course was the victim of the law of supply and demand. "There is no demand at all for any special local training", he told the commissioners, because practically every boy or girl who goes to the local district high school "goes with the object of passing Junior Civil Service and Matriculation and getting off the [West] Coast as soon as possible" (p. 370).

Arguments such as these were already familiar to other educationists who appeared before the Cohen Commission. Noting the sustained high level of public demand for school credentials, the Rev. Julian Dove, Principal of Wanganui Collegiate, noted that public opinion on the matter tended to be remarkably utilitarian to the extent that "it knows what a school is doing, and it knows what it wants that school to do" (p. 725). Dove's comment was demonstrably at odds with that of the President of the South Canterbury branch of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) who remained optimistic that "people will come to see that it is just as respectable an occupation to be driving a plough as to be driving a quill" (*New Zealand Education Journal*, 1912, p. 210).

Ignoring the wealth of evidence that the terminal, agriculturally-oriented course was powerless to compete with the portability, marketability, and status of recognised public examinations, the Commissioners concluded their report with the observation that:

One of the main, if not the chief, defects of the present system of education is its tendency to make the public examinations the objective, the result being that the ranks of clerks (in the case of men) and of typists (in the case of young women) are unduly extended. The growth of the cities at the expense of the rural and country districts, as disclosed by the latest [1911] Census, is disquieting. If the suggested modifications of the syllabus result in a bias being given to the primal industries of the Dominion...and to the increased productiveness of the soil, the Commission is convinced that the material prosperity of the people of the Dominion will be greatly enhanced. (*AJHR*, E-1, 1912, pp. 15-16)

Although they recommended assigning higher marks to agricultural subjects in the Junior Civil Service and Matriculation Examinations to give a stronger bias to the "primal industries of the Dominion" and thereby enhance New Zealand's economic prosperity, the Commissioners were unable to suggest any alternative arrangement that would diminish the public's insatiable demand for academic examination qualifications (p. 16). Not surprisingly, the long-established academic subjects continued to dominate the curricular offerings of most district high schools to such an extent that barely ten per cent of all senior free place (i.e., fifth and sixth form) scholars were enrolled in the full agricultural course as late as 1925 (*AJHR*, E-5, 1926, p. 6). Although the Commissioners had ignored the reality that the market and the examination system had subverted the best attempts by educational planners to offer a curriculum in keeping with perceived local needs, the public were not about to support any moves towards easing the examination treadmill.

Support for the view that the agricultural course provided "as good an education as the professional [academic] course" was minimal (*AJHR*, E-6, 1915, p. 10). The fate of the agricultural course was not helped by the fact that four leading principals – James Tibbs, Rector of Auckland Grammar; John Caughley, Headmaster of West Christchurch District High School; Charles Bevan-Brown, Rector of Christchurch Boys' High School; and T.D. Pearce, Rector of Southland Boys' High School – had announced that the only education worth striving for was one that offered high-status academic knowledge leading directly to public examinations (*AJHR*, E-12, 1912, pp. 44, 320, 388, 417, 711; Cumming & Cumming, 1971, 1981; Dunlop & Dakin, 1958, pp. 11-12). The difficulty of providing a "realistic education" for those pupils who remained at school for up to two years and who had no wish to undertake university level studies, continually troubled the Department, successive Directors and Ministers of Education, for the remainder of the period under review (McKenzie, Lee & Lee, 1996; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993).

### ***THE CHANGING POST-PRIMARY SCENE: 1915-1929***

Following Hogben's retirement as Inspector-General of Schools in March 1915, Josiah Hanan was appointed Minister of Education (1915-1919) and immediately began to "review existing [educational] conditions in the light of national [wartime] requirements" (*AJHR*, E-

1A, 1916, p. 1; Hanan, 1916). Predictably, Hanan endorsed agricultural instruction in rural schools on the grounds that it was "in the interests of the country" to popularise rural life and to elevate the status of agricultural labour, thereby reversing the rural-urban population drift (*AJHR*, E-6, 1916, p. 19; E-6, 1917, pp. 13, 18; 1918, E-5, p. 27; 1918, E-6, pp. 15-16). With educational efficiency aspirations clearly uppermost in his mind, Hanan concluded that pupils should be directed into one of four courses – University preparation, General, Continuation, and Country life (*AJHR*, E-1A, 1916, pp. 4-6; *NZPD*, 1917, p. 527).

At the same time, wartime considerations soon began to underscore the necessity for curriculum reform, the success of which would depend in no small measure upon the Department of Education's willingness to adopt a much higher profile in post-primary education matters (*AJHR*, E-1A, 1916, pp. 1-3, 7, 11; *NZPD*, 1917, p. 52). Hanan's decision to intervene in high school affairs was justified in terms of the pressing need to prioritise New Zealand's post-war reconstruction (*AJHR*, E-1A, 1916, pp. 1, 11; E-1, 1917, pp. 42, 49; E-6, 1917, p. 4). In this important respect, Hanan and Hogben parted company; the latter having placed great faith in schools initiating curricular reform with support from the Department whereas Hanan looked to educational legislation to facilitate nationwide change (*AJHR*, E-1A, 1916, pp. 1-11; *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, pp. 2769-2773; *NZPD*, 1916, p. 115; 1917, pp. 526-527).

### *The 1917 Free Place Regulations and Compulsory Agricultural Science*

In July 1917, the Free Place Regulations were revised to require all junior free place (i.e., third and fourth form) scholars attending secondary, district and technical high schools from January 1918 to study History and Civics (for boys and girls) and Home Science (for girls) for two hours each week (*New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, p. 2770). Agricultural Science (i.e., Practical Agriculture and Dairy Science) also became a compulsory subject for boys attending the district high schools (where there were fewer than 70 pupils in the secondary department) on the grounds that such instruction had obvious economic, educational and vocational value (p. 2770). Nevertheless, Hanan recognised that New Zealanders were inherently suspicious of, and indeed were resistant towards, any attempt to restrict boys' and girls' educational, social and vocational ambitions on the basis of the

course of study undertaken or attendance at a particular type of post-primary school and, therefore, was careful to emphasise that a broadened high school curriculum would not undermine the status of academic instruction (McKenzie, 1986, 1987; *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, pp. 2447-2448; *NZPD*, 1917, pp. 532-533). The established relationship between the school curriculum and the examination system would, therefore, not be compromised (McKenzie, 1983, p. 27; *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, pp. 2769-2773).

The introduction of compulsory Practical Agriculture and Dairy Science instruction in the district high schools from 1918 infuriated ambitious pupils, their parents, teachers, and some education board officials (McKenzie, Lee & Lee, 1996; Thom, 1950). Many of these critics complained that there had been inadequate consultation over the matter, that agriculture was a narrow curriculum subject associated with hard manual labour (and therefore unable to facilitate the vocational mobility of rural youth), and that it was both a nuisance and a low-status subject despite its recent inclusion in Departmental and University (Matriculation) examination syllabuses (*AJHR*, E-1A, 1916, pp. 1-11; 1917, E-1, pp. 3-4, 9, 42-44, 49; 1917, E-6, p. 4; *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, pp. 2769-2773; 1917, pp. 3029-3034; *NZPD*, 1916, p. 115; 1917, pp. 526-527). The Wellington inspectors highlighted the conservative market perception of the 'terminal' status of the agricultural curriculum in their report for 1918 as follows:

It must be remembered that Matriculation is the preliminary step to every learned profession, and where there is a small district high school with only one secondary teacher, parents who do not intend their children to take up rural pursuits are aggrieved that the children's chances of entrance to such professions as, say, law or accountancy should be jeopardised by the requirements of compulsory training in another vocation altogether. (*AJHR*, E-6, 1919, p. 16)

The nations' inspectors, however, were by no means united in their support for academic courses in the district high schools. The Wanganui inspectors, for example, confidently reported in 1919 that the district high school "has, and rightly in our opinion, little need to provide the purely literary type of instruction" (*AJHR*, E-6, 1919, pp. 15-16). The North Canterbury inspectors went further and argued that district high school courses should be noticeably different from those offered in the technical high and secondary schools so as to eliminate

inefficient and undesirable curricular overlap (*AJHR*, E-12, 1912, pp. 108, 130, 222, 272, 320, 361, 365-366, 555-557). But comments such as these ignore the reality that the curricular overlap between the three types of post-primary schools was an inevitable consequence of school authorities working to satisfy the demands of their local communities (Lee, 1991; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993, pp. 113-119). In other words, academic and commercial courses were provided specifically because there was tangible and ongoing market support for them (*AJHR*, E-12, 1912, pp. 222, 237, 241, 306, 373, 388, 720).

### *The Tate Report on Post-Primary Education, 1925*

Regardless of market pressures, successive Directors and Ministers of Education continued to insist that agricultural instruction was an indispensable feature of the district high school curriculum because New Zealand's economic, political and social landscape required that the bulk of the adolescent population be trained along practical lines (*National Education*, 1922, p. 287; Thom, 1950, pp. 22-36; Wild, 1953, pp. 9-11). Frank Tate, Director of Education in Victoria, Australia, and James Parr, Minister of Education (1920-1926) under the Massey government, both subscribed to this view.

Tate's report on post-primary education in New Zealand, published in 1925, was underwritten by the realisation that conservative educational practices were deeply ingrained in rural communities and schools. In acknowledging that market forces governed curricular choices in rural communities – "farmers preferred that their children should take Matriculation subjects rather than the special rural course" – Tate also conceded that "social esteem vitally affects schools and school customs" (Tate, 1925, p. 1). Having identified this constraint, Tate then proceeded to defend compulsory agricultural instruction in the district high schools (pp. 40, 50). Tate's philosophy on agricultural education was entirely consistent with the Minister of Education's own views as outlined in his annual report in 1924. In that report, Parr reminded his readers that the Department was duty bound to provide a "sound and thorough training in agriculture" because "the prosperity of New Zealand depends largely on the development of agriculture" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1924, p. 7). Parr's supporters confidently expected that school-based agricultural instruction would "halt the gradual trend towards the cities and away from the farming districts" (*NZPD*, 1924, pp. 418, 987; 1925, pp. 590, 764-767; 1926, p. 948; 1928, pp. 139, 142;

1930, pp. 351-353, 364, 372, 377, 382, 388; *New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1930, p. 152).

Critics, for their part, were only too aware of the reluctance of some district high schools to teach agriculture to disinterested youth. The Chairman of the Southland Education Board, H. Niven, captured the rural mood when he observed that "the interests of [rural] residents cannot apparently be sufficiently aroused to enable a forward move to be made [in agricultural education]" (*AJHR*, E-2, 1923, p. xix). The reason for this, James Wallace (Otago Education Board Chairman) and the Wanganui inspectors explained, was that the efficiency of district high school teaching was still being judged publicly by examination results (*AJHR*, E-2, 1922, p. xviii; 1923, E-2, p. xvi; 1924, E-2, pp. xxix-xxx; 1925, E-2, p. 65). Other members of the inspectorate also readily acknowledged the conflict between examination requirements and the provision of a full vocational course in Agriculture (*AJHR*, E-2, 1923, p. ii; E-5, p. 3; 1924, E-1, p. 25; E-5, p. 8; 1925, E-5, p. 6). Although initially hesitant, the Chief Inspector of Schools T.B. Strong (later, Director of Education, 1927-1933), finally conceded the fate of the rural course in his evidence to the Commission on Agriculture in 1925.

A pupil who takes the agricultural course finds it difficult to pass public examinations.... The examination requirements do not fit in with a full agricultural course. Consequently the boy may arrive at the end of his course and find himself without any certificate to hallmark his progress at school. Parents do not like this: they naturally desire some visible sign of the lad's progress. (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1925, p. 108)

By the mid-1920s there was incontrovertible evidence that bestowing a compulsory status on Agriculture and other vocational subjects (and courses) actually *disadvantaged* many high school youth by further restricting their curricular and subject choice (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1933, p. 51; McKenzie, Lee & Lee, 1996; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993). Parr, it seems, had not yet learned that New Zealanders were unsympathetic to courses – especially compulsory ones – that they perceived as limiting the opportunity for economic, geographical and vocational mobility.

***The Syllabus Revision (1928) and Bodkin (1930) Committee Reports***

Remarkably little progress in the direction of popularising rural subjects (and courses) was made by any of Parr's successor. Indeed the Syllabus Revision (Lawson) Committee, appointed in 1926 by Robert Wright, Minister of Education in the Coates government (1925-1928), seemed oblivious to the rural communities' economic, educational and social aspirations when it reported in 1928 that equality of educational opportunity would be achieved by "more effective educational guidance with a distinct bias to rural life" (*Lawson Report*, 1928, p. 60). Similarly, the Parliamentary Recess Education (Bodkin) Committee's report in 1930 overestimated the benefits to be gained from a post-primary school based agricultural curriculum at the same time as they underestimated the strength of demand for academic subjects. Clearly influenced by Atmore's personal vision that "all types of schools shall play their part as effectively as possible in counteracting the undoubtedly dangerous drift of population from the country to the towns" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1929, p. 3), the Committee later reported that:

It has been abundantly demonstrated by the evidence taken that [agriculture] has not had that pride of place, that emphasis, or that practical application which it ought to have. Except, therefore, in a few isolated schools and districts... the teaching of agriculture in our schools may be said so far to have been not very successful. (*Bodkin Report*, 1930, p. 32)

***TOWARDS A COMMON CORE POST-PRIMARY CURRICULUM: 1930-1945***

What the Bodkin Committee on educational reorganisation in New Zealand had noted was that academic and commercial courses continued to appeal to district high school pupils whereas agricultural and other rural-related courses fared poorly. There was ample statistical evidence to support such a conclusion: between 1915 and 1920, an average of 38.3 per cent of district high school students studied Latin, 36.6 per cent took French, 63.4 per cent chose Chemistry and Physics, and 30 per cent took two or more commercial subjects (*AJHR*, E-6, 1916-1921, Table L2; *AJHR*, E-6, 1918, p. 4; Lee, 1991, p. 167). Because all of these subjects were included in the public examination syllabuses, they were assured of a prominent position in the post-primary school curriculum.

Furthermore, these subjects found ready support in a labour market that was expanding steadily in the professional, public administration, commercial and financial spheres (Lee, 1991, p. 168). Although officials could point to 61 per cent of male district high school pupils studying Agricultural Science over the period 1915-1920 (*AJHR*, E-6, 1916-1921, Table L.2; Lee, 1991, p. 167 *AJHR*, E-6, 1930, Table L2), it needs to be remembered that its apparent popularity was due largely to its *compulsory* status from 1918.

Notwithstanding the fact that by 1930, 76 per cent of all male pupils attending district high schools were receiving instruction in Agricultural Science, complaints about the dominance of academic instruction at these institutions and the low status assigned to agricultural studies persisted (*AJHR*, E-6, 1930, Table L2). The overarching social efficiency strategy – where the curriculum provided to individual pupils would be determined in accordance with their intellectual abilities, the type of post-primary school they attended, their intended length of stay, and future employment options – continued to be promoted unquestioningly by Directors and Ministers of Education throughout the 1930s. T.B.Strong, Director of Education (1927-1933), for example, fully endorsed this selective schooling policy wherein boys attending rural high schools would be expected to take the full agricultural course, despite the worsening worldwide economic depression and the resultant collapse in international demand for New Zealand's agricultural exports (*AJHR*, E-6, 1931, p. 4; *New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1933, p. 51; *NZPD*, 1933, pp. 1235). Taking up this theme, the Principal of Rangiora High School, James Strachan, summed up the views of most rural educationists when he warned the Bodkin Committee that:

It seems to be fashionable at the moment to hold some pronounced views on the subject of agricultural education.... As far as can be gathered from current opinion, agricultural education is being put forward as a remedy, or at least a palliative, for some of the economic ills that afflict us. (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1930, p. 40; *NZPD*, 1930, p. 389)

Strachan and other commentators were understandably anxious to ensure that rural youth would in no way be disadvantaged when competing for jobs alongside their urban counterparts. However, as L.E.Matthael, Chief of the Agricultural Service for the International

Labour Office of the League of Nations acknowledged, the problems associated with introducing rural courses of instruction into rural high schools were not unique to New Zealand at that time:

Rural bias, if it means keeping the population on the land, is really a sentimental end pursued in defiance of a fundamental law in economics. Countryside children should never be such that the town and country children can be said to have been differently educated. Rural bias would be an injustice to the rural population by putting them at a disadvantage on seeking employment.... The boys and girls in the country must have the privilege of the same education as those in the towns. (*National Education*, 1930, pp. 425-427)

Matthael's sophisticated knowledge of the complexities of rural communities internationally was demonstrably at odds with the views of Harry Atmore, Minister of Education (1928-1931) and his successor, Robert Masters (1931-1934), both of whom left the educational community in no doubt that they wanted agriculture included compulsorily in all rural high school courses and examinations (*AJHR*, I-8A, pp. 29, 32, 120, 146-147; 1932, E-2, p. 25; *National Education*, 1930, p. 424, *New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1932, pp. 124-125; *NZPD*, pp. 353, 372). Atmore and Masters felt confident that rural community valuations about which courses were of greatest benefit to adolescents economically, socially and vocationally could still be modified by appealing to the needs of the nation rather than to individuals alone. However, by this date, even the traditionally loyal and conservative inspectorate was beginning to doubt the wisdom of forcing low status agricultural instruction upon unsympathetic rural communities (*AJHR*, E-6, 1929, pp. 3-4; 1932, E-2, pp. 5-6; 1933, E-2, p. 6; 1935, E-2, p. 2; 1936, E-2, pp. 10, 16). Taking up this point Thom, who later became an inspector of post-primary schools, wrote:

It was no unusual sight to see the [district high school] boys digging over a section of school ground, a dreary task all too reminiscent of the chores to be done at home, and only to be relieved by the periodical orgies of clod-throwing when the eye of authority was turned away. More than this, the 'agriculture' boys were too often regarded as an odd-job group, who could be used to erect goal-posts, clean up after the school dance, and generally to do those tasks for which their more academically-minded classmates could not be expected to spare the

time. In some schools there were occasional visits to nearby farms, to the butter factory or to some other local institution, and these could be, and sometimes were, both interesting and profitable. But such bright spots do not alter the general picture. At its worst the teaching was perfunctory and inefficient by any standards. (1950, p. 88).

### *The First Labour Government (1935-1949)*

The landslide election of the first Labour government in New Zealand in December 1935 paved the way for a re-evaluation of priorities in the education system in general and in post-primary schooling in particular. The Labour party had long campaigned on a platform of promoting equality of educational opportunity through a non-selective schooling policy (Lee & Lee, 1992, pp. 12-14; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993, p. 161; *NZPD*, 1936, p. 534) and this was reiterated by Peter Fraser, Minister of Education (1935-1940), when he outlined his government's educational vision in 1939:

The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers.... If there is to be true equality of opportunity, by one method or another, the country child must be given access to the facilities from which he has always tended to be barred by mere accident of location.... (*AJHR*, E-1, 1939, pp. 2-3)

Although Fraser was determined to "give the country child the same educational advantages as are enjoyed by those who reside in the cities" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1936, p. 3; E-1, 1937, p. 3; E-1, 1937-1938, p. 3; *NZPD*, 1939, p. 483), he was not ready to abandon school-based agricultural instruction altogether (*AJHR*, E-1, 1938, p. 4). Indeed, Fraser was particularly careful to note that the government's objective of providing the country child with "as good an education as the town child" did not guarantee that country children would receive "exactly the same [education] in every detail" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1939, pp. 6, 12).

Fraser's successor, Rex Mason (1940-1947), revealed his firm grasp of the intricacies of rural education when he shrewdly observed that "traditionally, rural New Zealand demands all the advantages that fall to the lot of the city child" (Mason, 1945, p. 48). Unwilling to

intervene legislatively to modify the educational aspirations of rural New Zealanders, Mason instead sought to reassure rural communities that "the policy in the future will be to make still greater efforts to give the country child educational opportunities equal to those of the city child" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1941-1942, p. 2; 1945, E-2, p. 3; Mason, 1945, p. 51). Mason's decision not to treat rural folk and their children as second-class citizens appeared to have been underwritten by the comments of the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools, James McIlraith, who in 1937 had reported that:

Though the [district high school] pupils are mainly drawn from rural districts, it cannot be assumed that either they or their parents intend that the pupils' future vocation will be associated with rural life. In fact, a considerable percentage of these pupils are in attendance for the express purpose of qualifying for city vocations. (*AJHR*, E-2, 1937-1938, p. 5)

While Mason was sympathetic to the idea of including agricultural subjects in the district high school curriculum, he and his Departmental officials nevertheless were aware of the growing debates, both nationally and internationally, concerning the merits of introducing a general (i.e., non-vocational) education curriculum into the post-primary school sector (*AJHR*, E-2, 1941, p. 7; Campbell, 1937, pp. 287, 321, 411; Strachan, 1940, pp. 22, 27-29, 38-39; Lee, 1991, pp. 498-669; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993, pp. 162-176). Such a curriculum had the potential to minimise, if not eliminate, curricular biases and to allow pupils to choose subjects more closely related to their future vocational destinations.

### *The Thomas Committee, 1942-1943*

The Thomas Committee, appointed in November 1942 by Mason and Beeby (Director of Education, 1940-1960), was instructed to suggest changes to the free place regulations governing the existing post-primary school curriculum and to make recommendations for modifying the School Certificate Examination (*Thomas Report*, 1944, p. v). Mason also charged the Thomas Committee with the seemingly impossible task of persuading parents, employers, teachers and pupils to no longer regard public school examinations (particularly Matriculation) as the sole arbiter of worthwhile education. The compulsory common core

curriculum prescriptions outlined in the Committee's report<sup>1</sup> and the introduction of a wider range of subject options for the Department's own soon-to-be revamped School Certificate Examination<sup>2</sup>, Mason confidently predicted, would ensure that all high school pupils received a "generous and well balanced education" (*AJHR*, E-1, 1943, p. 2; *Thomas Report*, 1944, p. 5). Significantly, the Committee also recommended abolishing compulsory agricultural instruction in the district high schools in light of the realisation that "[earlier] attempts to persuade rural parents to enter their children for courses specifically fitting them for life on the land... had not been successful" (*AJHR*, E-2, 1945, p. 4; Mason, 1945, p. 49; *Thomas Report*, 1944, pp. 10, 12-17, 55, 60-61). In arriving at this recommendation, the Committee had grasped part of the logic behind the school credentialling process for they had recognised the historical reality that:

The nature of the education a pupil has been given has frequently been determined less by what his teachers have believed he actually requires, even for vocational purposes, than by the demand for attainments that can readily be marketed. (*Thomas Report*, 1944, p. 5)

### ***Reaction to the Thomas Report, 1944***

Many district high school teachers applauded the new common core curriculum philosophy and hoped that the public would view their institutions more favourably once agricultural instruction became optional. William McIlroy of Palmerston District High School, for example, looked forward to the time when the district high schools would no longer be regarded as occupying a "third best, poor relation" status wherein "pupils often felt inferior in social position and in educational opportunity to those in other post-primary schools" (*National Education*, 1944, p. 213).

From the outset, the influence of the Director of Education (Beeby) was abundantly clear in the Thomas Committee's deliberations (Lee, 1991; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993, pp. 169-170). Having declared that the solution to the rural-urban population shift phenomenon "lay not within the education system as much as the social system" (*Otago Daily Times*, 1945), Beeby must have been surprised that there were still politicians – both conservative and liberal – who insisted that a rural bias in the district high schools would rectify every economic ill in New Zealand (*National Education*, 1944, pp. 357-361; *NZPD*, 1944, p. 201;

1945, p. 322).

From the rural communities' perspective, the presence of an academic curriculum in their district high schools served to deflect criticism that these schools were "the wart on the nose of the [post-primary] education system" owing to their Cinderella-type status (*National Education*, 1943, p. 115; 1944, pp. 71, 287; 1945, pp. 79, 214-215, 242; *NZPD*, 1945, p. 319). Indeed, no government that cared about rural electoral opinion would dare contemplate blocking access to academic courses, despite the fact that very few district high school leavers ever embarked upon university level studies (*AJHR*, E-2, 1935, p. 3; E-2, 1938, p. 19). Thus success in high status public examinations, as Thom has argued, became synonymous with entry to higher status, better-remunerated, white-collar urban employment (1950, p. 86).

## THE POST-WAR DECLINE OF THE DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOLS

### *Declining Enrolments*

In September 1945, the Thomas Committee's key recommendations were formalised in the Education (Post-Primary Instruction) Regulations that subsequently governed all post-primary schooling, both private and State, from 1 February 1946. These regulations not only set out the nature and scope of the new core curriculum requirements but also specified the conditions governing the award of the School Certificate Examination (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1945, pp. 280-282). However, there were other changes occurring in the post-primary sector: the Education (School Age) Regulations, for example, had raised the school leaving age from 14 to 15 years as of 1 February 1944, thereby making universal post-primary schooling a reality (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1944, pp. 39, 76). Together, both sets of regulations resulted in an immediate – and, at times, seemingly unmanageable – increase in both post-primary entry numbers and pupil retention rates. Between 1944 and 1954, for instance, the secondary school rolls increased from 18094 to 31781 (75.6 per cent); the technical high schools from 11814 to 20027 (69.5 per cent); and the district high schools from 6966 to 9410 (35.1 per cent) (*AJHR*, E-1, 1945, 1955, Tables E.1 and I.2). The fact that the town secondary and technical high schools experienced the greatest enrolment growth, and the district high schools the least, was not unexpected in light of the accelerated post-war rural population exodus.

### ***Resource Constraints: Accommodation, Staffing and Curriculum***

The rapidly changed composition of the post-primary school intake from 1944 taxed the resources of the Department of Education to such an extent that by the late 1950s there were unprecedented school accommodation problems and serious shortages in the supply of qualified teachers (McLaren, 1974, p. 104; Whitehead, 1974, pp. 57-59). Although few post-primary schools escaped these pressures, the district high schools were particularly ill-equipped to deliver the new core curriculum requirements, particularly in art, music and social studies (Thom, 1950, pp. 72-80). With a staff of two or three in the senior school, the district high schools could only offer a narrow range of subject options for the fifth form School Certificate Examination, and very few were able to prepare pupils for the sixth form University Entrance Examination (Lee & Lee, 1992). Acknowledging these constraints, the Department instituted boarding bursaries in 1944 (to an annual value of £40) for those district high school pupils who had passed School Certificate and who wished to attend an urban secondary school in order to prepare for the University Entrance Examination (*AJHR*, E-1, 1945, p. 3). Despite these allowances, critics continued to complain that the costs associated with undertaking a sixth form year at an urban secondary school remained prohibitively high for rural families (*National Education*, 1945, p. 215).

### ***Ineligibility to Accredited for University Entrance***

The marginal status of the district high schools was further confirmed when the University of New Zealand released details of its accrediting scheme in 1943 (*Senate Minutes*, pp. 2, 73-74). Upon discovering that the district high schools had been excluded from the list of high schools eligible to accredit, the Canterbury Education Board immediately complained that ambitious rural pupils would now be forced to relocate to the towns, thereby diminishing further the academic standing of the rural high schools (*Otago Daily Times*, 1945). The Otago Education Board also responded, arguing that parents needed to be reassured that their children, irrespective of their location, were given the same opportunities and privileges under the accrediting system (*Otago Daily Times*, 1944).

The Department of Education, however, did not appear to share these concerns. Instead, it argued that the School Certificate and University Entrance examinations were each designed for different

purposes: pupils who wanted an examination qualification for general employment purposes would be expected to enter for School Certificate whereas those intending to go to university would need to pass University Entrance (and then travel to the city to study at one of the university colleges) (Lee & Lee, 1992; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993). In this way, the Department was able to argue that district high schools would therefore be freed from the need to provide specialist instruction in the sixth form and would then be able to "do full justice to the work of their pupils up to the School Certificate stage" (*Otago Daily Times*, 17 February 1944). Despite repeated calls from the NZEI over the years 1944-1946 urging that the district high schools be allowed to accredit, only six of the 97 district high schools were placed on the accrediting list (*National Education*, 1944, pp. 72, 104, 374; 1945, pp. 73, 79-80; 1946, p. 100).

### ***Increasing Urbanisation***

The district high schools were to encounter further problems. The pace of urbanisation showed no signs of abating and notwithstanding the inclusion of agriculture as an optional subject in the School Certificate Examination, Wild's survey revealed that only 17 of the 104 district high schools continued to teach agriculture as late as 1958 (Wild, 1958). Two reasons can be offered to account for the declining popularity of agriculture: first, most rural parents wanted their children to take the general course at school and, should they so decide, a more specialised course later; and, second, school-based agricultural courses lacked employer support unlike other courses that led directly to apprenticeships in the trades.

Confronted by the reality of declining enrolments and a diminishing share of the total post-primary school population – 8.4 per cent in 1960 compared with 18.0 per cent in 1945 – some district high schools had chosen to merge with neighbouring secondary schools or had become secondary schools proper by the early 1960s (*Currie Report*, 1962, p. 170).

### ***The Currie Commission, 1962***

Convened in February 1960 specifically to consider "education in relation to the present and future needs of the country" (*Currie Report*, 1962, p. 1), the Commission on Education provided an official conduit

through which criticisms and discontent could be relayed. According to Beeby, the primary role of the Commission was to "conduct an independent survey of the effects of educational policy and practice over the past two decades" (1992, p. 193). The Commissioners began their work by enthusiastically endorsing the 1939 Fraser-Beeby education dictum (*Currie Report*, 1962, pp. 11-12), labelling it as an "[i]ndispensable objective for education at all levels, not merely the post-primary" (p. 11). They then suggested that "the secondary schools were the area where the greatest possibility for advance lay" (p. 13). Here, their primary concern was to ensure "improved educational opportunity" for the "substantial proportion of the school population" (p. 13) that were unlikely to pass the School Certificate Examination.

Besides addressing contemporary educational problems (pp. 22-23), the Commissioners identified rural education as being one of six "areas of concern". Accordingly, they commented at length on the place of the district high schools in the overall education structure and noted that these schools lacked not only "sufficient staff to give a wide range of specialised teaching" but also "enough pupils to provide economically a wide range of courses" (pp. 161, 444). Having declared that the secondary departments of district high schools, as presently organised, "do not go near enough to the ideal of providing full educational equality for country children", the Commissioners recommended that separate Form 1-6 (later, Form 1-7) schools be formed whenever the pupil numbers in an area where consolidation was viable exceeded 180 (pp. 444-446). The educational benefits of such a move were said to be many: the number and diversity of teaching staff would increase; a wider range of courses could be introduced (it is noteworthy that the Commissioners specifically recommended that agriculture *not* be introduced as a University Entrance subject), and a compelling case could be made for additional equipment to be made available for specialist instruction (pp. 445, 456).

### *Area Schools*

In 1962, the first Form 1-6 school was established in New Zealand, and over the next eight years another 23 such schools and the first 'area school' (formed by combining the two senior classes from all the primary schools in a given locality with the secondary department of an existing district high school) – Maniototo, at Ranfurly – were opened (Dakin, 1973, p. 69; McLaren, 1974, p. 68). By 1980, the district high

schools had all but disappeared from the rural landscape. As Nash has argued, the introduction of a unified salary scale for area school teachers along with a higher per capita grant than the urban secondary schools received have undoubtedly done much to assist with the translation of district high schools into Form 1-6 and area schools (1981, pp. 157-158). Nevertheless, many smaller rural high schools continue to experience difficulties in staffing many specialist areas – in particular, mathematics, science, and technology – and therefore are forced to rely on the Correspondence School to provide this instruction (Fisk, 2002; *New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1995). Today, the rural high schools' viability is further threatened by constraints such as geographical isolation, travel time, and insufficient funding for staff professional development, all of which seriously diminish the capacity of rural school staff to implement the recent reforms in curriculum (New Zealand Curriculum Framework, 1993) and assessment (National Qualifications Framework, 1993 and National Certificate of Educational Achievement, 2002) (*Eduvac*, 1993, 1996; *Otago Daily Times*, 1993, 1995, 1996).

#### ***The viability of rural (and small) schools: the research evidence***

Although the Department (later, the Ministry) of Education continued to record its full support for rural schools following the demise of the district high schools in the late 1970s, Fisk's (2002) detailed investigation of 29 of New Zealand's 33 area schools reveals a less optimistic future for these schools. Beginning with a brief survey of the historical development and contribution of the district high school movement in New Zealand, Fisk then presents a detailed review of the literature on rural schooling (and rural communities) in New Zealand and elsewhere. But, even more importantly, Fisk's comprehensive questionnaire (sent to rural school teachers, principals, and Board of Trustees chairpersons) and follow-up interviews with area school staff and administrators provides a unique insight into the day-to-day problems experienced by area schools (Fisk, 2002).

Fisk argues that the economic 'reforms' initiated by the fourth Labour government (1984-1990) had an unprecedented impact upon education in general and rural education in particular. By exposing state schools (and other government agencies) to the neo-liberal economic ideology of market forces, competition, and public choice, the government sought to make them more accountable, transparent, responsive, and efficient (Fiske & Ladd, 2000). While the *Tomorrow's*

*Schools* (1988) administrative reforms have allowed greater parental input into school governance (i.e., parents can offer themselves for election to their school's Board of Trustees), school choice has remained illusory for rural parents because they have no option but to send their children to the only school available (unless they are prepared to pay the costs associated with sending their children to town secondary schools). Fisk also presents compelling evidence to support his core thesis that the scope and effectiveness of the rural (and small) high schools are increasingly constrained by the attitudes of officialdom; that the schools are treated unfairly in terms of funding, staffing and resource allocations; that central government policies (usually economic) continue to be imposed despite the wishes of rural parents, thereby limiting the schools' autonomy; that the shape and nature of rural communities have changed markedly since the mid-1980s as poorer (often unemployed and/or benefit-dependent) adults and families abandoned the towns and cities in search of cheaper rental accommodation in the rural regions; and, finally, that the pressure for school consolidation or centralisation or closure remains as intense as ever (pp. 4, 298-302).

### *The contemporary politics of school reviews, mergers and closures*

Although it can be argued that school mergers and (occasionally) closures have long been a feature of New Zealand's public school system, and that educational administrators pay close attention to the statistical relationship between the birth rate and subsequent enrolment patterns when planning school accommodation and staffing, it is only in more recent times that *economic* considerations have dominated that planning process. In late 1990, for example, the newly elected National Government (1990-1999) directed the Ministry of Education to review and report on educational expenditure, with particular attention to "the economic and educational viability of small schools" (Macaskill, 1991, p. 1). Part of the Ministry review team's terms of reference included:

Identifying the key factors affecting the economic and educational viability of small schools; considering possible areas of conflict between economic, educational and social criteria that need to be taken into account in determining the viability of small schools; outlining solutions which could be considered where schools are identified as non-viable; and...making recommendations regarding criteria and processes for determining the viability of individual small

schools...and processes for deciding upon and implementing options for action. (p. 2).

In conducting its review the working group acknowledged the budget imperatives outlined in the government's *Economic and Social Initiative* policy document (December 1990), in particular the necessity for ongoing economic restraint and cost effectiveness in all areas of public expenditure (pp. 3-4). In a portent of what was to follow, the review team noted the problem of "excess capacity" wherein it was deemed inefficient and costly to maintain large school facilities, often on increasingly expensive to maintain sites, when enrolments were small (and often declining) (p. 8). They also commented on demographic changes (e.g., six state primary schools had merged and 74 had closed as a result of a 20 per cent decline in primary enrolments over the decade 1980-1990) and the fact that 557 of 2272 primary schools (24.5 per cent) were one and two teacher schools – 90 per cent of these were in rural locations (pp. 6-7). Additional data revealed that many New Zealand primary schools were in fact small: 45 per cent had fewer than 100 pupils enrolled, 33 per cent had fewer than 50 pupils, and 12 per cent had fewer than 25 pupils (i.e., the criteria for a "sole charge", one teacher school) (p. 10).

Having argued that "other social, educational, economic and community factors need to be taken into account before a [small] school is brought under scrutiny" (p. 10), the review group proceeded to discuss the educational and economic viability of small schools and the schools' relationships with their communities (pp. 16-31). Thereafter the group discussed what might be done when schools were identified as being "non-viable" (pp. 37-44) and concluded their report with seven key recommendations. Recommendations four and five are quoted in full below because they appear to have been overlooked when decisions have subsequently been made to close small (usually rural) schools:

4. That the process used for examining the provision of education in any area be undertaken at the local level, with each district making the initial identification of schools considered non-viable, taking into account the cluster of schools in the area, irrespective of size, and that this process fully involve Boards of Trustees and other relevant organisations;

5. That any examination of the viability of schools in rural areas take particular regard of the contribution of rural communities to the life of New Zealand. (p. 54)

Following consultation meetings with the primary (New Zealand Educational Institute) and secondary (Post Primary Teachers' Association) teacher unions, the School Trustees' Association and the Federated Farmers, the review group received over 2000 submissions from individuals, groups and schools throughout New Zealand (p. 3). Almost all of the submissions strenuously opposed the closure of small schools (p. 64) with many arguing that such closures contradicted the spirit of the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms that had emphasised partnership, consultation and choice (p. 65). Some 48 per cent of submissions made special reference to the rural schools being the focal point, the hub, or the "social cement" of their communities (p. 66). Others commented on the many educational and social benefits that rural schools offered: e.g., smaller classes, more opportunity for one-to-one teaching, and an attractive natural physical environment (p. 69). As might be expected, there was unanimous support for retaining small schools. In the case of rural schools, 26 per cent of submissions objected to children having to travel extra distances should their neighbourhood school be closed, and others (7 per cent) expressed concern about the added dangers of travelling on rural roads, especially in the winter months (p. 69).

Despite the review group's report and the overwhelming public support for small and rural schools, a further 183 schools were closed during the National government's nine year term of office (Fisher, 2003a, pp. A1, 8-9). The election of the fifth Labour government (1999-) has done nothing to slow the process. Between 2000 and 2002, 53 schools have either been merged or closed (Education Forum, 2003, p. 4); in 2003, 29 of the 76 schools under review were merged or closed (Fox, 2004, p. 2) with a further 164 earmarked for review (and 71 for closure – 34 in the South Island) in 2004 (Fox, 2004, p. 2).

### ***Network Reviews***

The explanation offered by the Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, for the merger or closure of small schools was to be found in the changing demography of the New Zealand population. Citing data from *Statistics New Zealand* that estimated 35000 fewer pupils by 2010 and

73000 fewer by 2021, (Education Forum, 2003, p. 3; Fisher, 2003a, p. A8; Fisher, 2003b, p. A11; Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 2-3; Taylor, 2004, p. 15), the Minister announced a programme of "Network Reviews" designed to "provide improved and stable schooling across the country" in situations where school or community needs are changing "as a result of demographic changes or requests for new models of schooling in an area" (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 2-3). Having envisaged approximately 1000 state schools being reviewed over a 10-year period, Mallard initially refused to confirm the precise number of schools that would be "disestablished" (Armstrong, 2004, p. 10) but eventually was forced to concede that "It would not be unreasonable to expect 300 [to close] over a 10-year period" (Fisher, 2003a, p. A1).

Although the teacher unions acknowledged that there was currently "an oversupply of schools" (Fisher, 2003, p. A1), the Minister's announcements regarding the scope and purpose of the Network Reviews did nothing to dissuade them and other critics that the process was being driven by anything other than financial concerns (Education Forum, 2003, pp. 2-3). Even the Education Review Office's report on the Wainuiomata area review (initiated in 1999 and ending with ten schools merged to create five new schools in December 2001) was disappointed with the review process to date:

The Network Review process, as currently implemented, is more successful in focusing on and achieving outcomes associated with the future economic sustainability of schools. The future educational quality, while identified as a key focus of Network Review policy objectives, is not given sufficient attention during the Network Review process. The likelihood of a Network Review achieving its educational objectives, therefore, is not assured. (Education Review Office, 2003, p. 15).

Sensing the growing public and teacher union hostility to the review process (and doubtless also aware of the government's declining popularity in the polls), Mallard announced a five-year moratorium on new school reviews effective from 23 February 2004 (Eden, 2004, p. 3). Later, the Minister admitted that while he had "bitten off more than he could chew" (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2004, p. 3), 164 schools in the 11 areas where the review process was already under way (Northland, Wairoa, Matakaoa, Okato, Taihape, Taranaki, Stokes Valley, Upper Hutt, South Canterbury, Grey Valley, and Invercargill)

would not be exempted from the moratorium (*New Zealand Education Review*, 2004, pp. 8–9). For her part, the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, immediately distanced herself from the school closure debacle by declaring that the Minister should have discussed the review process with his Cabinet colleagues who would then have “realised the [full] scale of the closures” (*Otago Daily Times*, 2004, p. 2). Nevertheless, the moratorium offers a stay of execution, albeit a temporary one, for small and rural schools.

While few people oppose the merger or closure of very small schools where larger, more viable schools are within easy reach, what emerges from analysing the network review process is the government’s apparent willingness to ignore the voices of those teachers, parents and school communities most likely to be affected by school restructuring. As the history of the New Zealand district high schools has clearly demonstrated, this is not a new response – ambitious pupils and parents have long sought *equitable treatment* in terms of access to what they regard as being “worthwhile education”. The point so often forgotten is that although administrators determine educational policy, it is parents and pupils (and teachers) who actually shape educational practice. Taking up this point, Beeby offered a timely reminder to those who seek to institute educational reforms without community consultation when he shrewdly observed that:

Whatever purposes politicians and administrators might have had for education, their plans could be deflected when ambitious parents, acting individually but in unspoken accord, decided they wanted the schools to do something different for their children.... There is always some tension between the controllers and the consumers of education and, in the long run, the consumers’ purposes usually prevail. (1982, pp. v–vi).

### **Conclusion**

The attempt and subsequent failure by the Department of Education, many of its Directors and successive Ministers of Education, to introduce and popularise agricultural subjects and courses in New Zealand district high schools following the passage of the Education Act of 1877, illustrates the tension that existed – and still exists – in reconciling the conflicting official expectation that these schools should provide vocational courses leading directly to employment in the local

rural economy with the community's demand for access to academic courses and examination credentials that offer economic, geographical and social mobility to ambitious youth.

Unable to reach any consensus, the central education authorities found themselves in a no-win situation. On the one hand, if rural subjects were to be made examinable, they would quickly become institutionalised as knowledge to be gained solely from textbook study. On the other hand, if these subjects were not examined, then there was little likelihood that the more academically able pupils would take them, thereby confirming the perception that the rural course in fact catered for a non-selective, low status, low ability group. In practice, then, because the traditional (academic) subjects enjoyed a superior status, preparation for examinations came to dominate the day-to-day work of the rural high schools.

In surveying the century-old district high school movement in New Zealand the historical picture that emerges is one wherein generations of educationists, politicians, and visiting education experts – indeed everyone, it seems, except those who either taught in the district high schools or had cause to send their children to them – regarded the rural schools' curricular offerings as somehow dysfunctional because they chose to concentrate on high status, academic, examinable subjects rather than low status, practical, non-examinable ones.

The mistaken (but nevertheless remarkably widespread) assumption was that the demand for ambitious rural youth to have access to competitive school credentials was a radical rather than a conservative response. However, as the history of the district high school movement so clearly demonstrates, it was not. In fact, the rural communities' stock complaint was that studying agricultural subjects seriously *disadvantaged* rural youth anxious to compete in public examinations alongside their urban counterparts who faced no such requirement. Furthermore, most rural parents argued that because they could provide their children with "on the job" rural instruction, they sent their children to school specifically to be taught those (academic) subjects about which they knew very little. Looked at in this way, although agriculture in its various forms was New Zealand's largest industry and export earner, it was academic education that offered a route by which to escape the rigours and limitations of farming life. In the final analysis, educational systems are powerless tools of economic and social policy when the problems to be addressed lie *beyond* the educational domain. It is a message that today's educators, policy

makers, and politicians would do well to remember.

## NOTES

1. The Thomas Committee recommended a common core curriculum comprising English Language and Literature, Social Studies (preferably an integrated course of history and civics, geography, and some other descriptive economics), General Science, Elementary Mathematics, Music, a Craft or one of the Fine Arts; and Physical Education. For girls Home Crafts are regarded as satisfying the requirements of 'a craft'. (Thomas Report, 1944, p. 12)
2. As argued elsewhere (Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993; McKenzie, Lee & Lee, 1996), the Thomas Committee proposed that the School Certificate Examination be rejuvenated to make it "the general measure of a completed post-primary course" (Thomas Report, 1944, p. 3), unlike the old (1934-1945) School Certificate Examination. The new examination was intended to cater for students with different "needs and aptitudes" (p. 7) by offering a range of optional subjects, although it was hoped that the syllabus would not become overshadowed by academic, university-imposed requirements. To this end, the Committee concluded that "Our proposed School Certificate prescriptions reflect the outlook of the educated layman rather than that characteristic of the academic or technical specialist, and differ in this respect from the corresponding prescriptions for the [new] University Entrance Examination" (p. 9).

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