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User-Pays in New Zealand's Free Compulsory Education System

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Abstract

In 1989 New Zealand embarked on the reform of its compulsory education sector. The resulting model, known as Tomorrow's Schools, decentralised administration and gave each individual school its own Board of Trustees responsible for managing the school's finances. Since then, the cost to parents for their children's compulsory education has increased considerably.

This thesis examines schools' behaviour when requesting and collecting money from parents and caregivers, compliance of this behaviour with Ministry of Education policy and the changes over time in the amounts of money raised locally by schools.

Schools' compliance with Ministry of Education policy is generally poor. Many schools do not tell parents that donations are voluntary and charge parents for items not allowed under Ministry policy, including photocopying, use of information technology equipment and subject fees for subjects which do not have a take home component. Costs to parents are lowest in small schools and rural schools. Larger primary schools request and collect more in donations from parents and are more likely to exclude children from participation because of non-payment, and this was consistent across decile groups. Parents with children in large/urban high-decile schools pay most.

Secondary education is much more expensive to parents than is primary education and parents expressed concern about this and about children being excluded from curricular and extra-curricular activities because of parental inability to pay. In addition, compliance with Ministry policy appears to be lower in secondary schools.

Decile-related funding has caused some higher-decile schools to conclude that government no longer fully funds them and they must raise additional money from parents. Schools turn to parent communities to make up any shortfall in funding, and there are indications of erosion in belief in the ideal of a free compulsory education.

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