

Visit from New Zealand

By Lynn Richards

During January, I had a unique opportunity to learn about New Zealand's approach to public schooling. My niece, Rana Richards, joined us in Vancouver for two weeks on her way to England. Rana has taught nine- and ten-year-olds in New Zealand for the past eight years. She is employed by a mid-sized school in Waipukurau at the north end of the South Island.

In recent years, many of us have consulted New Zealand's recent experience. As we see the possibility of increasing cut-backs in public spending, we look to New Zealand, where the government's cash literally ran out one day in 1984.

How is the school system organized in New Zealand now? These are the major characteristics.

- Each school has its own board of trustees.
- The board has full financial and personnel control of the school.
- The board is elected from within the school's catchment area and is formed almost totally of parents.
- Members of the board serve for two years.
- All schools are "open-catchment" (students may attend any New Zealand school they wish to attend, although most attend their local school).
- The board selects and hires the principal.
- The principal hires teachers, in consultation with the board.
- National testing is in place for all students, with regular feedback to parents.
- Excellent teachers are recognized.
- Teachers who are having difficulty are helped a great deal, but may be asked to go to part-time or retraining situations.

Rana is extremely excited about her school. She reports that it is an excellent school and that she accepted the offer to move to this school so that she could work with the headmistress, whom she describes as extremely knowledgeable and capable.

Parents are much more involved in the schools than in the past, and both parents and teachers have much more control over the school's performance. There is constant activity among parents to improve school facilities and resources through fund-raising and other contributions. There is a great deal of objective testing done to chart students' progress and identify areas for improvement. Test results are given to parents but not directly to students. And, when a school suffers declining enrollments, changes are made very quickly.

Costs, of course, are much lower than they used to be (they had no choice.), but teachers are not paid any less than they were, heads of schools generally are better paid than before, and there is some possibility that a system of financial incentives will be put in place for the outstanding educators at work in the system.

Sounds good to me!

(Excerpted with permission from "The Net", February 1995, the newsletter of The Parent Network)