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Educational Reform and Change in the Asia Pacific Region

Building Capacity in a Self-Managing Schooling System: The New Zealand Experience

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In this paper we evaluate two recent examples of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's approach to reducing the persistent disparities in achievement between students of different social and ethnic groups. The first example is cluster-based school improvement, and the second is the development of national standards for literacy and numeracy across the primary sector. The evaluative framework we use was derived from recent international analyses of the characteristics of school systems which are either high performers or successful reformers on recent international surveys. Policy documents and evaluation reports provided the evidence on which our evaluation of the two NZ examples is based.

The six criteria associated with high system performance and/or reform success were system-wide commitment to educational improvement; ambitious universal standards; developing capacity at the point of delivery; professional forms of accountability; strategic resourcing and institutionalizing the improvement of practice. Our analysis of the NZ reform examples suggests that while there is a broad commitment to more equitable outcomes, a new resolve to introduce and report against national standards, and a high level of espousal of professional accountability, there are significant contradictions between school self-management and the work that needs to be done to reduce achievement disparities.

Our evaluation of these two examples raises important policy questions about the assumptions that are made in the NZ self-managing system about teacher and leader capability and about where responsibility for school improvement lies.

