

NCEA: A qualification for all classes

Is NCEA the “great hope” for New Zealand education, or should schools be adopting Cambridge International Exams? TODD SYMONS reports.

One of the country’s top education academics has called NCEA the nation’s “great hope”.

Despite the system’s history of controversy, Stuart Middleton’s optimism about NCEA is clear. “It’s excellent,” he says.

Middleton, Manukau Institute of Technology’s executive director of external relations and student affairs, was recently awarded a Fulbright scholarship to research in the United States.

He says New Zealand has the potential to have a brilliant education system, but right now there are problems.

According to a 2005 OECD report, New Zealand is fifth in the world for literacy and numeracy standards among 15-year-old students.

But, as Middleton points out, hidden in the OECD figures are details putting New Zealand almost bottom of the world for retention of students between the ages of 15 and 17.

“What this means is we do well until Year 11 but we can’t keep our students in school much longer.”

Middleton says education systems such as the old School Certificate did not help with retention. They made sure some students failed and did not encourage students to stay at school.

“We need to engage students in education longer and have to do whatever it takes to stamp out failure. There is no choice about that.

“NCEA must be a better system – it simply has to be.”

And Middleton says the figures, so far, are on his side.

“More students are passing with NCEA

and more are staying at school because they are passing.”

Richard Thornton, principal of The Manurewa High School, agrees and says he is pleased to see more Maori and Pacific Island students staying at school longer.

“They hang in there with this system and the kids feel a higher level of success.

“If you don’t pass NCEA at Year 11, you can come back and keep collecting credits, so by the time you leave, at least you have some form of qualification.”

John Morris, headmaster of Auckland Grammar School, is a long-term critic of NCEA.

“Some kids should be out doing apprenticeships or working, rather than hanging around doing subjects which bore them,” he says.

A number of schools have adopted Cambridge International Exams instead of NCEA.

According to the Association of Cambridge Schools in New Zealand’s website, 43 schools take part in Cambridge Exams. Of the schools listed, 71 per cent have a decile rating higher than five.

School deciles are measured from one to 10 and a high decile rating means the students at a school come from a high socio-economic background.

Middleton says the “flak about NCEA” and the push for systems like Cambridge comes almost exclusively from upper-class parents.

“They don’t want anything that will upset the advantage they have had for more than 100 years.

“That’s what encourages me to think we are on the right track with NCEA.”

Middleton says: “When you see who is against NCEA, you have to be for it. Why do you think it’s the white and the rich and the powerful who are against it?”

“Because they are white and rich and powerful,” he says.

Decile 10 Auckland Grammar was the first school to offer Cambridge exams in New Zealand and has a policy where the top 60 per cent of students have the opportunity to sit Cambridge. The remainder must sit NCEA.

Morris says the school was under no external pressure to implement Cambridge when it began to experiment with the exam-based system in 2000.

“If anything, there is now pressure coming from the parents of students whose kids are not doing Cambridge and want them to be doing it,” says Morris.

Thornton says it is not just a push from parents that drives the Cambridge systems, but also from schools looking to boost funds.

“If the schools want their \$12,000 off each international student they need to have an internationally recognised qualification.

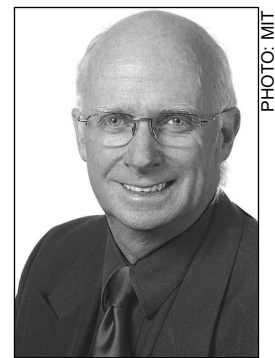
“NCEA is not at that stage yet.”

However, Morris refutes the idea. “We have no trouble getting international students,” he says.

Thornton says it can also be an image thing for some schools.

“If a neighbouring school picks up Cambridge, you have no choice but to do it as well.

“It has a perception of being a more rigorous system and so all the bright kids will follow it.”



STUART MIDDLETON

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