



With the election just around the corner, the NZAGC asked eleven political parties (National, Labour, Act, Alliance, NZ First, United Future, Greens, NZ Democrats, Progressive, Christian Heritage and Libertarianz) to provide and explain their policy on gifted children. We publish here the five replies received.

LABOUR

There have been major advances in the way we approach gifted education under the Labour Government. Since 1999, the government has funded a range of initiatives in gifted education, and in conjunction with the gifted education community, developed a national policy for gifted education. The policy has helped raise the profile of the needs of gifted learners in NZ schools. It is grounded in the belief that gifted learners may be found in every classroom and school in NZ, and therefore the regular classroom is the first place where the learning needs of gifted and talented students are to be met.

In recognition of the diversity of gifted students' needs and the need for a range of provision, however, out-of-school and special programme initiatives, such as those provided by one day schools, also receive financial support. The expectation is that schools and teachers will provide a suitable education for every learner, matched to their individual learning needs. Effective teachers identify the particular needs of each of their students. Experience and research show that professional development and quality teaching – as well as “special programmes” – can be most effective in improving children’s learning outcomes, irrespective of their gifts and abilities.

Contributing to the professional development of staff across the education sector has been a focus for the government in recent years. We will spend over \$67 million this year helping teachers and principals further advance their skills and knowledge. That is a staggering 125% increase in funding since 1999. But we believe the investment is well worth it.

A great deal of work has been done and is continuing on implementing the Initiatives for Gifted and Talented Students. A group of experts and practitioners were invited to form an advisory group, to provide a sounding board of sector opinion. Through this group the Ministry of Education receives expert advice on issues of implementation and future directions, targeting specific issues and co-opting experts in the wider community to provide advice on particular issues.

In addition, in December 2003 the government changed the National Administration Guidelines so that from the first term of this year, all state and state-integrated schools are required to demonstrate how they are meeting the needs of their gifted and talented learners.

I am delighted to be able to say that 17 innovative programmes targeting gifted and talented learners, called Talent Development Initiatives, have received funding from the first funding round. The contestable funding pool will fund up to 20 one- to three-year programmes and successful applicants will become service providers as part of the Talent Development Initiatives network. The main goal of the network is to nurture talent by developing programmes that are responsive to the specific needs of gifted and talented students: cognitive, social and emotional, creative, and cultural.

There are now 19 full-time and part-time gifted education advisors throughout the country, who support schools and teachers to develop gifted education policies and programmes. The University

of Waikato provides national co-ordination, and advisors are supported by a national co-ordination team. The team's role is to facilitate training for the gifted education advisors and co-ordinate and disseminate information on provisions that meet the needs of gifted and talented learners.

The team has been focusing on developing strong links outside the gifted community. It met earlier in 2005 with representatives from each School Support Service to discuss supporting integrity of advisor practice. This led to the development of guiding principles, which were matched with the core principles of the gifted policy.

Parents and caregivers are a vital component in the education mix, and this is equally valid with gifted students as any other group. Common sense and the research tell us that when families are involved in their children's education they do better in school and are better prepared for life's many challenges.

We have been working to increase the information available for parents. Information on characteristics of gifted children and key contacts was sent to schools, community groups, libraries and doctors' surgeries in 2004. The aim is to promote the broadening of the concept of gifted and talented and to provide key points of contacts for parents wishing to seek further information.

The Support for Parents and Whanau section of the TKI Gifted and Talented Community: www.tki.org.nz/r/gifted/talented/parents/ site has also been launched. This site includes contributions from experts in the field of gifted education, an online discussion space for parents, links to associations for caregivers of gifted and talented learners and links to Ministry documents. An advisory group has contributed to the process of developing this site to ensure that it meets the needs of parents of gifted learners.

A booklet for parents on meeting the needs of gifted and talented children is currently in draft stage. The booklet will assist parents, schools, and teachers to form a positive partnership to support gifted education.

NZ's gifted education policy is an example of community developed and community driven policy. Successes include the growing size and knowledge base of the national gifted education community. The community continues to work together to constructively address the issues in gifted education. As a result, a distinctly NZ approach to gifted education is developing. This includes a commitment to meeting the needs of gifted and talented learners in the regular classroom as well as through separate provision, a broad definition of giftedness and talent and the corresponding promotion of a wide range of appropriate identification procedures.

Schools are increasingly accepting of the necessity of attending to the learning needs of gifted learners. The consultative policy development process has produced strong public ownership of NZ's gifted and talented education policy from the diverse gifted education community. As a government we have laid a solid platform to build upon to be sure today's gifted students become tomorrow's leaders in whatever field they pursue.

Trevor Mallard
Minister of Education

NATIONAL

Parents and families are the first educators of our children. Schools are there to support the education that parents seek for their children. So parents should have considerable influence over the values and philosophies incorporated in their children's education.

Parents have always known their child is unique, but it's a recent discovery among education policy makers, who now talk about "diverse" students.

Acknowledgement of diversity is a small step towards recognising that one-size-fits-all education is the antithesis of diversity. However, the steps will stay small while the government focuses on central control and making every school and every child fit a tight mould.

Gifted children and their parents are a challenge to the education monolith.

National believes that parents should have a critical role in determining their children's education. Labour believes that parents should take what they get because it is good enough. Despite the rhetoric of 'diversity', Labour believes it can and should all be accommodated in the nearest school.

Labour believes the parents' role is fulfilled through the representative capacity of boards of trustees. Boards do fill a vital role of governance, but a vote once every three years is no replacement for the ability of each parent to seek out what is best for their child.

In fact, the only way that the individual talents of all children and the special talents of gifted children can be recognised is through a flexible education system that gives decision-making capacity to the parents, principals and teachers who best understand the child.

Parents of gifted children would have been pleased that, contrary to expectation, Trevor Mallard recognised some particular needs of gifted children. He did this despite a view among the education bureaucracy that there is no such thing as gifted children and if there were they would not be a high priority. However, the strategy has not gone much further than recognition.

Schools are required to come up with plans and there has been a small amount of money available. However, like many of the other 30 initiatives that have been announced by the current government, this one is likely to run out of steam. Enthusiasm will be replaced by compliance and teaching will be replaced by form-filling. Schools have become adept at applying for money for specific purposes and then including it in their general budget.

National believes it is much better to provide flexibility across all funding for schools so that teachers and principals can adapt their programme to the children where children have particular needs. These needs are often best met by a mix of staff skills, including some specialist capacity, or better use of a teacher with particular abilities with gifted children. That is why National is advocating that all funding be paid to schools in a single grant.

Essentially, all schools will be bulk funded and they will be spared the difficult process of making a choice. It has become quite clear in the last five years that the administrative mechanism for delivering funding has no relationship to the level of funding. Despite five years of a centralised salary system, schools have had to raise up to half a billion dollars a year from the community to be sure that they are able to deliver the curriculum.

Teacher union arguments that centralised salaried funding mean more money for schools, and bulk funding means cuts have been proven a nonsense. A single grant does not guarantee schools will have all the money that they wish for. But it does mean that they will have as much choice as they could wish for in their capacity as professional educators.

I believe we can redirect money from the bureaucracy to schools to help them with growing expectations from parents. The Ministry of Education has expanded rapidly in the last five years. More and more resource is spent chasing their own pet projects because they believe they know better than schools. The amount of money spent on policy advice has almost doubled in five years.

The money controlled by the Ministry and spent on curriculum and professional development has more than doubled to over \$200 million per year. Principals tell me they could make better choices about how that money is used.

The last budget indicated the government's priorities for education and its strong view that centralised solutions are best. 2700 schools across NZ received increased operational grants of \$20 million. The MOE received an increase of \$24 million.

Flexible funding works where schools are subject to the discipline of parental choice. At the very least, parents have a right to rescue their child from a situation harmful to the child's welfare. However well a school is run, it can't always cater for the needs of every child. Sometimes with the best leadership and the best teaching a child does not do well. This may be no fault of the school but simply the result of a personality clash or peer group problems.

Choice, though, is a much more positive concept than just rescuing children in bad situations. National believes parents should have as much choice as possible about how their child is educated.

Greater parental choice will require greater diversity of provisions of schooling. I applaud and support the day school option that has been developed by the parents of gifted children and interested teachers. While some schools don't favour this option, it does work well for many gifted children. It has given those children and their parents an appetite for more of the sort of learning that works for them.

Parents of children right across the range of abilities value choice. In fact, under current policy, choice is confined to those who can afford to buy a house in the suburb that surrounds a school they would like their children to attend. Government policy is aggressively reducing parental choice. Well over 40% of secondary school students now attend a school with a zone and the government is intending to extend zoning as quickly as possible.

Integrated schools are having great difficulty raising their roll caps and the government has approved only a few integrated schools in areas where there is very rapid growth in pupils. Schools that have strong community support and who want to expand cannot do so until every classroom in neighbouring schools is full. Recently the government announced the change in the rules for bulk-funded buses to make sure that no bus carries children past their nearest school. The document setting out the changes to the bus policy states it is government policy that every school provides a high standard of education. This defies reality and defies the natural range of views that parents hold about the suitability of any school for their child.

In this context, there is no pressure on schools to do a great job for gifted children. Some already do, and maybe more will, but it's good luck if the teachers at the local school have the professionalism and the skills to do it. If they don't, it might be three years before ERO turns up, and then the school is likely to get a slap with a wet bus ticket. We cannot trust our children to luck.

National would take all of these policies in the opposite direction. We will reduce the impact of the rigid zoning laws on schools and allow the expansion of integrated schools and restore the subsidy to independent schools to the real per student value of the year 2000. We will allow those schools that choose to bulk fund their buses to operate their buses more flexibly than government-run buses.

National's policy will help to increase the supply of places that parents are looking for. The education system needs to be flexible enough to adapt the supply to changing parent demands. The parents are demanding more particular education and better opportunities for their gifted children and while current measures are a step forward, they don't go far enough.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss these issues with the parents of gifted children and their teachers to make sure that we can fulfill the potential of these wonderful New Zealanders. The nice thing is that the kind of measures which will better encourage the achievement of gifted children are the same sort of policy measures that will encourage children of all abilities to fulfill their potential.

Bill English
Spokesman on Education

ACT

As a mother of four adult children, I know that every parent thinks their child is gifted. And yes, I like to think that even abused children were once looked upon as a miracle, even if only for those short precious moments following his or her birth. However, for the duration of this article I shall forget about my own children, who, by the definition of your readers, would not be regarded as gifted.

Gifted children have been short-changed by the Labour Government. Labour's one-size-fits-all approach to education has been a disaster for gifted children and their families. An antiquated and out-of-date approach fails to recognise that not all students have the same needs. Consequently, the special needs of many gifted children aren't being addressed.

Sure, there are some schools that specialise in teaching these children, but because they're not in the state system, the cost of attending is prohibitive to many over-taxed parents. I also note that some state schools have "gifted and talented" programmes, but these are run at a school's discretion and vary greatly in quality and consistency between schools.

Labour has recently made it a requirement that schools identify and attempt to meet the needs of gifted kids. This sounds good in theory, but, in fact, it is simply another box for schools to tick – yet another compliance cost – and isn't likely to result in any real improvement for the majority of gifted children. Seriously underfunded schools are already struggling. Adding another "process" simply eats into the stretched ops budgets.

ACT rejects Labour's one-size-fits-all philosophy and believes that parental choice is the key to meeting the needs of gifted children. Parental choice will allow parents to take their government funding entitlement to whatever school best meets the needs of their children. This will make schools that specialise in meeting the needs of gifted kids – like the George Parkyn Centre's One Day School or the Thomas Kennedy Junior Academy – more accessible to parents who currently can't afford them.

Gifted kids have become invisible under NCEA, where there is no way to differentiate the top students from those who just do well. ACT champions excellence. There is little incentive under NCEA to achieve well – why strive to achieve 99% when the student gets the same grade at 85%? ACT believes that children should be encouraged to reach their maximum potential. ACT would allow schools to dump the NCEA if they wish.

Most parents want the best for their children. That's why ACT trusts families to make good decisions. We know that parents are generally better than government at making the decisions about a child's special education needs. Rather than making gifted education a box that schools must tick, we would give parents the choice and the means to make their own decisions.

Deborah Coddington
Deborah.Coddington@parliament.govt.nz

LIBERTARIANZ

The Libertarianz Party will separate education and state in its entirety. This includes the removal of all compliance criteria and regulations that have stifled the industry for many years. The only thing we will protect people against is the use of force or fraud. These laws would also apply to the state. Tax will no longer be confiscated from New Zealanders to carry our one-size-fits-all sluggard of an education system.

A free and unregulated educational market will allow schools the freedom to diversify into areas such as gifted child education effectively. Competition in the market place will ensure that standards remain high and that expertise in any given area would be free to evolve toward constant improvement.

This is something that the state could never accomplish with even the best of intentions. For too long, we have all been forced to pay far too much for a system that provides far too little in quality, accountability and choice. Through this, parents have been denied the power to decide what is best for their child's education. Not only has choice been thin on the ground, but also the loyalties of our schools have been highly questionable. While parents have been paying taxes towards education, it has always been the state that has divvied out the loot. This leaves schools with no choice but to ensure that the Ministry of Education remains its number one client for fear of losing funding. Parental dissatisfaction is a secondary consideration.

The fact that we have no alternative educational facilities other than those permitted by the state, parents are simply rendered oblivious to the possibilities that could otherwise be at their disposal. For gifted children, this atrocious state of affairs is especially unfortunate. A gifted child's potential will only ever be partially unlocked while resources and funding are at the mercy of whoever happens to be in power on the day.

I guarantee that without having even read the policies of all other political parties on the issue of gifted child education, that they will all be gushing forward with more funding and more resources in an effort to buy votes. Don't be conned. While they will be offering varying degrees of educational freedom, the fact remains that ultimately they will have the final say on how schools may conduct themselves, how many schools may be at our disposal and how much control parents may be granted. It must be understood that the greater the involvement they wish to take, the less freedom schools will have to explore their goals, and parents will have fewer options to determine their children's education.

Libertarianz understand only too well the importance of education for the future of each individual. This is why it is imperative that the state be removed from education entirely. If parents are serious about allowing the abilities of their gifted children to flourish, they will ensure that the state has as little effect as possible in their efforts, regardless of tempting bribes. Without the tax burden, parents will easily be able to afford a far superior education for their children that they get now, at a fraction of the cost. Schools also would be relieved of tax and compliance burdens, which will allow them to concentrate on their passion for teaching. Through this, fees would be considerably cheaper.

Libertarianz also recognise that politicians and bureaucrats could never understand the realities of gifted child education without themselves being at the coal face of the industry on a daily basis. They aren't at the coal face because they are more interested in controlling those who are, with ideas that are both out of touch and restricted by their own stunted ideology. This must be stopped as a matter of urgency, otherwise yet another generation of great potential will be lost to mediocrity and semi-recognised genius.

Peter Osborne
Libertarianz Spokesman to Deregulate Education
Ph 0274 326 005, email: ospar@xtra.co.nz
www.libertarianz.org.nz
www.libz.org

GREENS

The Green Party supports a co-operative and inclusive education system that provides a quality education for all learners. We acknowledge the work of the NZAGC in this respect. The Green Party's commitment to quality education for all includes supporting children with all sorts of special needs, and sits alongside the need to confront wider socio-economic disparities. Children are entitled to an education that respects their individuality and that offers maximum opportunities to develop their strengths and abilities.

The Greens recognise that children with special talents have learning needs which are different from those of other children in some significant aspects. They therefore require differentiated learning opportunities and may require emotional and social support if they are to realise their potential.

The rights of gifted children are recognised at an international level through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are very supportive of that Convention. Recent Ministry of Education initiatives and the government's acceptance of the recommendations of the Working Group on Gifted Children have been generally well received, but there continues to be some dissatisfaction with the efforts of schools to respond appropriately to students' individual gifts and talents. The Greens support the Working Group recommendation and the most recent requirement for all state and state-integrated schools to demonstrate how they are meeting the needs of their gifted and talented learners, as they are currently required to do for students who are not achieving, who are at risk of not achieving and who have special needs.

Our education policy ensures that diversity and choices in educational options are available to meet the needs of gifted and talented children. While we do not support the increase in the number of contestable funds because this does not recognise education as a public good, and allows the government to continue to under fund quality education, the Greens would provide targeted funding for gifted and talented learners. Schools are currently under-funded and the funding mechanisms force schools to prioritise critical needs against each other. Gifted children and those with special needs are those most likely to suffer. We support an immediate increase in the operations grant by 10% and a review of school funding mechanisms so that schools don't have to compete with each other or internally, often minimizing special support for talented or special needs children. Children with special needs should be funded on a needs basis and this includes gifted children.

We also support the Education Staffing Review Group recommendations to reduce the staff-pupil ratios. In addition to those recommendations, the Greens support maximum class sizes no greater than 20 for primary, intermediate and secondary schools. We also want smaller early childhood ratios of teachers to children than is currently the case. This would help to give teachers in state schools more time to meet the needs of children in their classrooms. We would also provide for additional gifted advisors and other professional development initiatives for schools.

We support further research and initiatives for home-based services, schools and early childhood services to develop appropriate educational services to learners who are gifted and talented. We are also strong advocates for inclusion education and we would like to see greater co-operation between schools for children of all ages within the school, the siting of different educational services close together and supporting schools that want to move into 'community learning centres'. By encouraging greater co-operation, rather than competition, gifted children are able to develop and share their talents with their community, while being supported and encouraged to develop these talents.

The Green Party support schools that cater for special interest groups within society, as long as they maintain high teaching standards and deliver the core curriculum, including environmental education. This does not exclude gifted and talented children. We would expand alternative education

programmes for young learners who are alienated from general educational settings, to include younger children (under age 13), those who feel alienated, and those whose educational philosophy is different from their school's philosophy. The Green Party values education because children are our future, and all children must be encouraged and supported to reach their potential.

Metiria Turei
Education Spokesperson
Green Party of Aotearoa/New Zealand
Metiria.Turei@parliament.govt.nz

Article published in Tall Poppies 2005 vol 30 no 2
© NZAGC