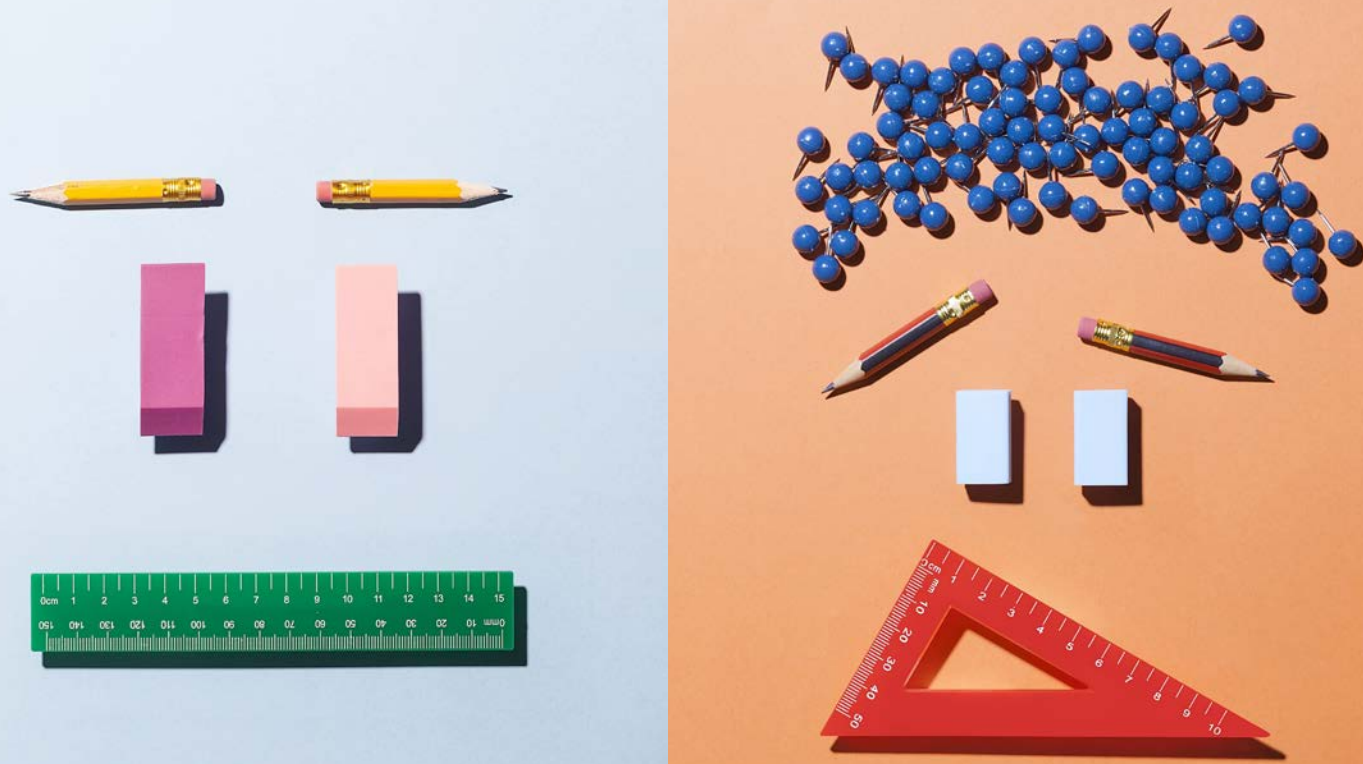


Perfect storm

With a worsening staff shortage, increasing student mental-health issues, chronic underfunding, and a fractious relationship with the Education Ministry, Auckland's secondary schools are at breaking point.

TEXT — MATT ZWARTZ / **LOCATION PHOTOGRAPHY** — SIMON YOUNG

Byron Bentley has been principal at Macleans College for 18 years. The archetypal educator in a grey suit and striped tie, he welcomes me into his office with a strong handshake and a voice that's used to addressing assemblies. His desk is covered in files; shelves of objets d'art reflect some of the 55 ethnicities represented by Macleans' roll of 2600 students.

Around 65 per cent of the students in Years 11, 12 and 13 at Macleans are studying for Cambridge exams, with the remainder doing NCEA. The co-ed state secondary at Bucklands Beach invariably ranks among New Zealand's best for academic success. Bentley believes its whanau house model is one reason for that. "They belong to something within the school and identify with it. There's an extra layer of support for the kids."

Students are assigned to one of eight whanau houses in Year 9, with around 60 kids moving up through each house each year for five years. Named after inspirational New Zealanders — Hillary, Te Kanawa, Batten — the houses have their own identities, assemblies, mascots, captains, and leaders. Inter-house competitions, held three lunchtimes a week, range from athletics to cross-country and music. "It certainly helps the core academic progress of the kids," says Bentley.

But as successful as the whanau house model is, it is dwarfed by one imperative. "Priority number one through to 10 has got to be get quality teachers. Nothing else matters in the school. Nothing."

That's a problem, and not just for Macleans; Auckland faces a crisis of teacher availability. The number of graduates entering teacher training nationally declined from 17,065 in 2010 to 10,965 in 2015. Almost half of all new teachers are leaving the profession within five years. Forty-five per cent of the current workforce is over 50 — and 21 per cent of those are teachers in their 60s and 70s. Teachers who have migrated from the UK are filling some of the gaps, but far from all.

Mike Williams is principal of Pakuranga College and president of the Secondary Principals Association of New Zealand (SPANZ). With the rambunctious lunchtime sounds of his own school in the background, he says the shortage is particularly bad in science, maths and technology. "Schools are surviving — just — but we've used all of our normal backstops. Probably every secondary principal I know has put pressure on someone who was retired, or about to retire, and convinced them of the merits of teaching for another year — or two — or of going part-time."

In Auckland, the teacher shortage is compounded by the high cost of living; experienced teachers in provincial areas are no longer moving here for jobs, which may pay several thousand more, because it no longer makes financial sense.

The majority of applicants for teaching jobs in Auckland are now graduates, young teachers who are still flatting or in other flexible living arrangements, Kiwis returning from overseas, and new migrants. "Now that's great for a little while — lots of young and enthusiastic teachers is good for a school," says Williams. "But the other place we're all suffering is those young teachers, three or four years down the track, might want to have a family, buy a house. The reality is in Auckland you can have a family or you can have a house. If you're a teacher, you're dreaming to think you can have both of those."

A national Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) survey of secondary principals earlier this year found the average number of teaching job applicants is the lowest it's been since 1998. One in 11 classroom positions draws no applications at all. In Auckland, 30 per cent of classroom positions attract no suitable applicants.

Melanie Webber, who teaches English and media studies at Western Springs College and is also the PPTA's junior vice president and spokesperson on Auckland issues, says the government is in denial about secondary teacher supply. "You will hear them say, even now, there's a small problem in certain areas. It's not true. It's across the board. And principals are funny about saying, 'I don't have an appropriately trained person to put in front of this class.' You don't want to stand up and say, 'I've got someone who's just okay, I've got someone who'll fill the gap, they're better than nothing.' No principal on Earth wants to stand up and tell parents that."

Fifteen principals, including Byron Bentley, spelled this out last year at a meeting with then-Education Minister Hekia Parata, then-Secretary of Education Peter Hughes, the Teachers Council and the Qualifications Authority (NZQA). "The message we were trying to get through was you've got to get the quantity of teachers up," says Bentley. "Bringing them in from overseas is a short-term solution, but there's no short-term fix for this because you've got to get these people through and train them. But hurry up ... [and] incentivise them to hell." He shakes his head. "That was the clarion call."

Despite this, he says, little has been done, and the number of students going into teaching remains too low to fix the problem. "In no way is it going to feed the machine, especially in Auckland where you've got huge demand. The rolls are all rising on this influx of population, and it's flowing through already into the secondary school sector. The crisis is right here, now."

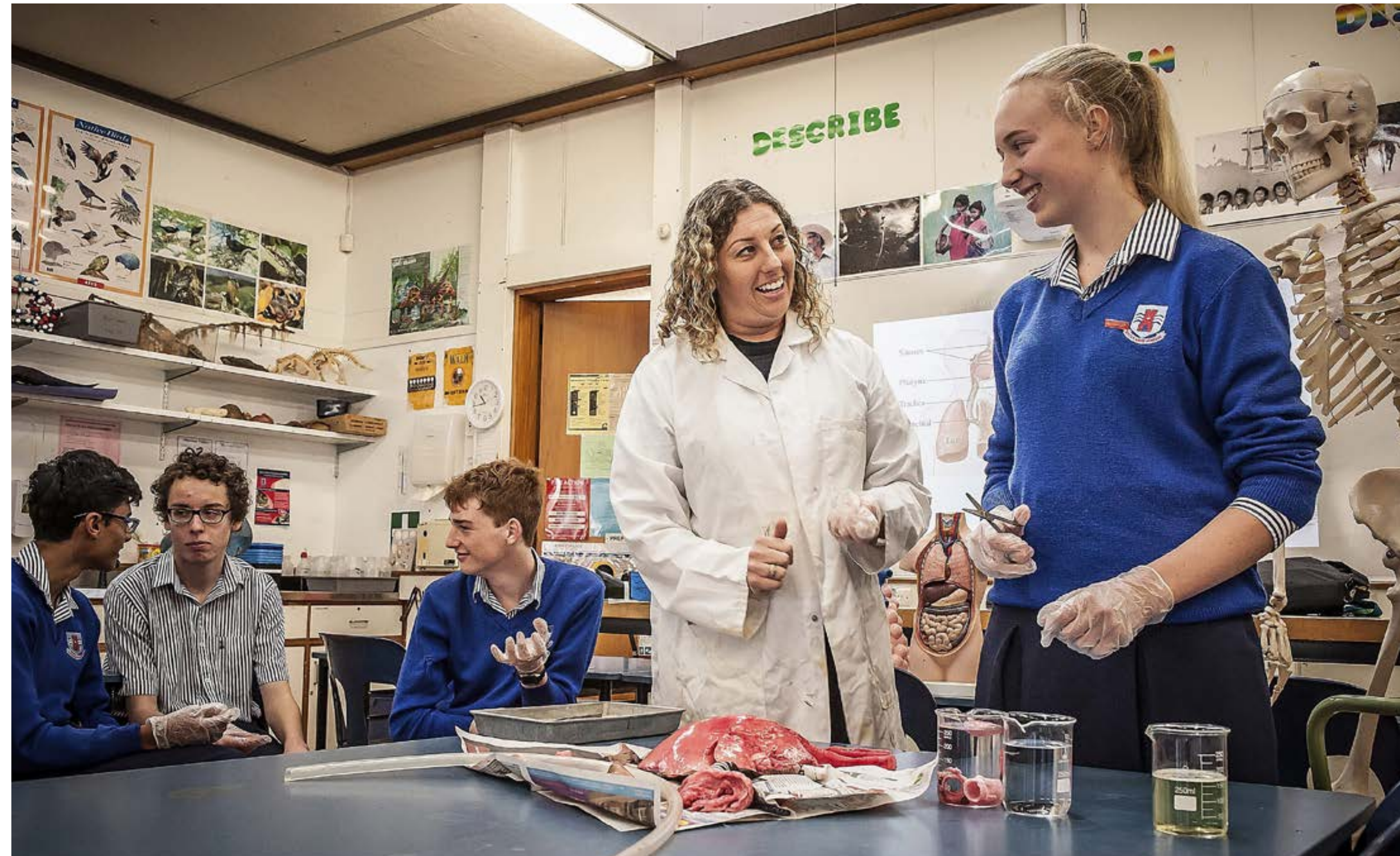
It's a crisis for which there's only one answer: teachers must be paid more. A trained teacher with a four-year degree currently starts on $52,000. It takes them six years to get to the top of the scale, which is $76,000.

Another way of attracting graduates to teaching in the first place? The government could wipe a fixed amount off their student loan for every year they teach.

Back at Macleans College, someone has prepared a timetable for my three-day visit. Bentley takes me on a tour of the school, its grounds and facilities such as the gym and assembly hall, which has been cleverly designed to break down into smaller spaces, extending its usefulness. The campus is set into the south-eastern edge of Macleans Park. Past the fields are Eastern Beach and the blue sea beyond. The grounds "flatter to deceive", Bentley says, pointing out the actual school boundaries. He's right: it's hard to distinguish where the grounds end and the park begins, creating a lush and verdant illusion of a school property that stretches to the sea.

It all seems quintessentially Auckland, down to the pukeko strolling languidly along the rugby field's western touchline. Up the path, the school has opened a new $2.5 million multi-sport playing field with an artificial surface and sophisticated drainage. It was funded entirely by Macleans in a process Bentley describes as "a piece of cake" compared to managing the school's other projects in conjunction with the Ministry of Education.

ART DIRECTION BY JESSICA ALLEN, STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY REBEKAH ROBINSON



ABOVE—Macleans College biology teacher Aliesha Chamberlain guides students through a dissection.

The ministry says on its website that education is free for the 5-19 age group, but Bentley says it's time to "stop the weasel words about [parental] 'donations' and call it what it is: user-pays. It ain't free. It's not. You're never going to fund it enough. Modern schools need all this high-quality technical gear, you've got to protect the plant, so we've got about 70 CCTV cameras around. Mainly because people walk through here all the time outside of hours. All those things cost a fortune. Where's it going to come from?"

Focus groups with parents run by the PPTA last year found they now accept they have to pay fees. And Macleans' 400 foreign fee-paying students, who make up just over 15 per cent of the roll, contribute an extraordinary 39 per cent of the school's annual income. They directly subsidise an enormous range of services it couldn't afford otherwise, including relief teachers and extra-curricular activities. Macleans' international department has 10 full-time staff just to help manage these students and their educational and pastoral needs. The school would take more if it could, but finding suitable homestays for the students has become harder over time. The yearly "donation" for New Zealand students is $590, but even in this relatively well-off part of town about 20 per cent of parents don't pay it. "Just because you're a wealthy community, how are you supposed to extract money out of them?" Bentley asks. "Do you lift your fees? That presumes you are offering a superb service on all fronts. You hope you're doing that, but there is a limit to how much you can expect parents to pay."

Predictably, there's acceptance by opposition parties that free education is over. When it comes to this somewhat socialist ideal and actual legal statute, Labour's education spokesman, Chris Hipkins, reckons the government is dancing on the end of a pin. "By law, kids shouldn't be denied their education based on their parents' ability to pay. But let's face it, that's happening. If parents can't afford to pay, their kids are being denied opportunities within school and within the school's programme, and that's creating unfair advantage and disadvantage. The basic reason we adopted free state education in the first place was that it shouldn't matter who your parents are or how much money you've got in your family ... because education is supposed to be the great opportunity, the great social leveller."

Hipkins says he's not willing to give up on the promise of a free education "but we've got to start from accepting the reality — that's not what we've got now". Given how closely successful education outcomes are tied to other social factors such as housing and incomes, it's hard to know if Labour could return New Zealand to truly free education either.

The government is in the middle of an education sector funding review due to lead to the implementation of any new measures in 2020, but there is cynicism among educators about whether it will provide much-needed new money. The PPTA's Melanie Webber: "It's merely moving around not enough money. If your pie's only a certain size, no matter how you slice it, it's not going to feed the 500."

The general view of those interviewed for this story (apart from Education Minister Nikki Kaye, see page 40) is that the sector has been chronically underfunded by successive governments. MP Catherine Delahunty, spokeswoman for the Greens, believes it's gotten worse under eight and a half years of National.

"They don't see funding state schools as their top priority. They're always looking at ways in which our schools can self-fund or how privatisation can be supported."

In its first Budget, in 2009, the government gave an extra $35 million to private schools, says Delahunty. "They're prepared to prop up Wanganui Collegiate, which should stand on its own merits, but when it comes to state schools in Auckland, a lot of them have been struggling for a very long time. Underfunding is a very bad way to treat the education system, because we pay for it later on in many other ways in our society."

Last year, the government handed out $41 million to private schools. Its argument for doing so when so many state secondary schools are struggling is that private schools actually save the public money, because without them the full cost of educating their students would be borne by the taxpayer. But if someone chooses to spend up to $30,000 a year on their child's private education, opting out of a "free" state system, that is a personal decision. Shouldn't the school be sustainable without taxpayer subsidy?

If elected, both Labour and the Greens say they will look hard at the subsidisation of private schools. But neither promises to remove it.

As I spend time at Macleans, observing classes, talking to teachers and students, it becomes obvious that one of the factors underpinning the school's success is its wider culture: the whanau house system (particularly its competitive elements); the 70-plus extra-curricular activities available, from fencing to hip hop; the cultural diversity; the mutual respect between students and teachers; and, according to a survey of 60 prefects run by the school in April, the disciplinary system. "We love that there is no tolerance of stealing," one prefect commented. Said another: "Bullying and comments on Facebook are taken seriously," unlike other schools, "where some of our friends are scared". Safety and the feeling of inclusion ranked as highly important: "We don't have to worry about safety when we come to school."

In a chat with me about their experiences at Macleans, students Rhi Ann and Jasmine are eager to demonstrate their pride in the college. "The teachers are really good," Rhi Ann starts. You have to say that, I point out, given their form teacher is in the room. They laugh and insist it's what they'd say anyway.

"The school really stresses being a well-rounded student," Jasmine says. "There are so many clubs here, so many things to do."

She wants to tell me about "these Macleans values". "M stands for manners, A stands for Articulate, C stands for courage, L stands for loyalty, E stands for Effort — 100 per cent, A stands for authority respected, N stands for No lies, and S stands for sympathy and service." She recites them without stumbling once. "When we get to Year 9, they teach us these values, and they really put a lot of stress on it, so we try to learn and grow into them."

I ask how they're personally tracking against the school's values and there's a long pause. "It's a bit difficult for me to have courage, to go outside of my comfort zone," Jasmine ventures. "But I'm working on it. I'm not really a risk-taking person, unlike someone else I know who is totally crazy." I'm not sure if this is directed at Rhi Ann, the teacher, me, or someone else. They both say they have close friends in the school, and this is really their favourite thing about it.

Have they experienced bullying? "We're aware of it," Rhi Ann says. "It's been mentioned in assembly. But personally, I've never encountered it." Jasmine agrees. "I don't think I've experienced it at Macleans."

Yet bullying, the ubiquity of digital technology, and academic pressure created by continuous internal assessment are together putting enormous pressure on our teens. Educators are seeing more

RIGHT, TOP—Macleans principal Byron Bentley with the prefect leadership team of (from left) Helen Wu, Theo Quax, Bronte Croad and Ben Zhang.

RIGHT— Vee Muckerdhooj instructs Macleans students in an automotive technology class.

mental health issues among students; schools are desperately aware New Zealand has the highest teenage suicide rate in the developed world.

Barbara Jones, head of counselling at Macleans, has silver hair and a professionally concerned expression. Her office is a little larger and warmer than those of the other staff, but then, students don't come in here to be told off. On one wall there is a print of *Behave*, Otis Frizzell and Mike Weston's appropriation of the Beehive matches logo. I sit on a red couch, a coffee table and a box of tissues between us. Macleans employs five full-time student counsellors, and they are constantly busy. Jones tells me there's been an upswing in students seeking help in the past few years.

"We're seeing kids come in, and in the health centre, too, with panic symptoms. They can't breathe, they're shaky, they're having real panic attacks, and that's horrible. Sometimes they suffer from claustrophobia, agoraphobia, depression, OCD." Suicidal ideation? "Yes." The school takes a "wraparound approach" to supporting distressed students, getting parents and mental health services involved. "Mental health in general is a very alarming problem. It's scary for schools, it's scary for families, it's scary for the kids," says Jones.

NCEA and the constant demands of internal assessment contribute to the pressure our kids are under. A 2015 Educational Review Office study of 68 secondary schools found that students in all schools were experiencing a very assessment-driven curriculum and assessment anxiety.

Add the impact of social media and secondary teachers are rightly worried about the amount of pressure on students, says SPANZ's Mike Williams. At Pakuranga College, he has has three and a half full-time-equivalent counselling positions and a team of paid and volunteer youth workers to support a roll of around 2250. "You're a teenager and you do something a bit dumb? Twenty years ago, a couple of people saw you do it and you live with a bit of a ribbing for a few days and then it's gone. Now, someone took a picture of it and they put it on the internet and the entire world knows what you did," Williams says. "Now the dumb thing has suddenly become everyone's business."

One of the Ministry of Education's major new programmes is creating Communities of Learning (CoLs), groups of education and training providers working together. The idea is that by collaborating, schools can share best practice, lift standards and better plan for future educational needs. Funded under the government's Investing in Educational Success initiative, a CoL establishes leadership roles inside each group of schools to help in the process. There is general agreement the concept of CoLs is a good one, but also that the implementation has left a lot to be desired.

The Greens' Catherine Delahunty sits on Parliament's education and science committee. "Nikki Kaye told me that [creating CoLs] was all about breaking down competition. So in one breath, they support privatisation and charter schools, and in the next it's, 'Oh, we're breaking down competition.' They don't know what they're doing."

Delahunty says CoLs are a long way from the "silver bullet" of educational outcomes the government is hoping for, and teachers are generally unimpressed. "They're very cynical at the moment, teachers on the ground, about the point of this."

"I think that the concept's good," Bentley says. Then: "I can't recall principals or boards ever being consulted about it, just this is going to happen, it's going to be good. Well, who said? What's good about expecting a principal to be out of their school running a whole lot of other schools? It's hard enough running your own school. The way it's been handled is very poor. It's been dictated to us by someone in Wellington. They don't get how it works in the real world."

The current model provides money to employ a principal, a CoL leader, and for a few positions below, but no project money to execute collaborative ideas. Given the paid roles are clearly and prescriptively defined, critics say this erects a barrier to true collaboration, as there's no flexibility for schools to choose their own CoL structure, or money to implement their ideas.

Williams agrees, both that it's a noble ideal and that it has been poorly executed. "The previous minister was adamant that the leaders of these communities would be our best principals; it would be a career progression for them. The reality is it's not a career progression. It's a fixed-term job for a few years. More importantly, that's not what motivates principals to collaborate. Principals don't work in an environment where they'll collaborate better if that person's getting paid more and they're the boss. We collaborate for principles and ideas. It would have a lot more traction with a different leadership model and some resourcing to do something."

Wasn't the whole philosophy behind Tomorrow's Schools to encourage competition, not collaboration? "Yes. But at heart we are collaborative, we want to work together, and we find ways of doing it," Williams says. "This missed the point, thinking that the [way] to make us collaborate was paying someone more money. It's a very business-world way of looking at it."

LEFT—Dr Jane Luton (second from left) takes a Macleans College drama class.

ABOVE—Macleans' 1st XV, with coach Bevan Packer, and the Hauraki Gulf as a backdrop.

Williams says people are struggling to find ways to make CoLs work, but they're getting there, slowly, because they do actually want them to succeed. "Already the hard, fast rules are being blurred. We will see more of that as time goes on."

Whetu Cormick, national president of the New Zealand Principals' Federation, suggests there may be a bigger agenda, such as turning them into buying collectives in order to leverage cost savings. "It's about schools pooling their resources and saving money. Somebody — a politician I can't reveal — likened the model to the DHBs [district health boards]."

Cormick wants to know "the true intent" for CoLs now and into the future. "Because our parents, Minister, would probably be really interested in knowing what is the greater plan for Communities of Learning."

There is a fear that CoLs, coupled with the latest amendments to the Education Act, are a Trojan horse for super schools, a signpost of a policy future not being publicly disclosed. The amalgamation of many, disparate schools into super schools, run by super principals and boards of trustees, is something that the education unions and many others in the sector vehemently oppose.

Bentley believes super schools are bad news. "The strength of New Zealand education for decades has been community-based schools. Everyone gets in behind it, hopefully it's well led, well managed, and away you go. You've got your own identity."

National has forced through a series of systemic changes that have proven unpopular within the sector. These include National Standards in 2010 and recent changes to the Education Act, which allow the minister to combine school boards, a principal or board to be in charge of more than one school, and the establishment of Communities of Online Learning (COOLs), which can be privately owned and run but receive public money.

Educators here point to the example of the United States, where there has been growth in the number of online charter schools, but learning outcomes have been very poor.

While tension between the profession and the ministry has always existed, is the relationship now becoming dysfunctional? Bentley and Williams, both principals of large Auckland secondary schools and facing all the unique issues that entails, agree the ministry has a tendency to be autocratic. It operates what Bentley calls a "low-trust model".

"It's been around for years and years, [under] successive governments. They don't trust schools to do things so [government] will have to come in over the top and sort it out. We're saying you don't need to sort anything out. We'll manage it, thanks. We've been managing our schools for years, we can handle it."

Delahunty says it's gotten worse under this government. "I think there are a lot of teachers and teachers' organisations that have felt really excluded by the government from critical education debates. The leaders of the education sector do their very best to maintain a relationship with government — they have no choice, but it should not be like that. [The ministry should] have a genuine conversation about assessment and the teacher shortage. The concept that we're behind you, we're listening to you, and we have expertise and resources to support you, I don't think that relationship exists any

more. The ministry should be a seat of expertise and support, rather than a centre of management and control."

Labour's Chris Hipkins believes the ministry has lost its way. "They're getting public servants or business people from outside of education, and as a result there's a disconnect between the way they are operating and the day-to-day realities of being in a school."

Back at Macleans, before the lunch bell, Byron Bentley is telling me what he really thinks: "Yeah, we're idiots! Don't ask us. What would we bloody know? Do what we tell you. So we've got this mentality now, where you get all this shallow thinking that's based on ideology, not research. Like the 'modern learning environment', where you're going to put a whole lot of teachers in a big space, and they're all going to teach classes and hold hands and do ring-a-bloody Rosie. Where's that come from? It's got no foundational research, it's got no foundation in practice. We know it's a load of rubbish, yet they keep trying to [put us] in buildings with these massive big spaces. We've been a victim ourselves, with our science and technology block two years ago. We had a right royal set-to with them. We said, 'We're a whanau house school, we've got the big open spaces now that we use. We want classrooms and laboratories and workshops that have a teacher with their students, so they can work the magic.'

"Teacher-led instruction is the mantra here, and it always will be. Not student-led. Good teachers will always find out what their students need."

Where does all this leave our secondary schools? What will they look like in 10 years' time? It depends who you ask.

Mike Williams believes decisions need to be made now about what Auckland's schools will look like in the future. "How big are we prepared to let secondary schools go? What does a 3000-student secondary school look like, if that's what's around the corner? What infrastructure do you need to support that many young people? We need to do some really serious thinking about Auckland schools in particular, because that's where most of the overcrowding is coming from. Have we got the right mix of schools, are we putting the right schools in, or are we just going to keep going up to super schools?"

Chris Hipkins' view is more apocalyptic: he predicts higher unemployment because school leavers won't be equipped with the necessary skills. "If we continue down the road the current government have got us on, we'll see a future workforce that is simply unable and unprepared to cope with the realities of the future."

Melanie Webber is more sanguine, and suggests a return to not letting students attend schools out-of-zone is one answer. "I'd love to see everyone supporting their local community school, and going ... 'My kid is going to be fine there, and I want to be making the situation better for everyone with my kid being there rather than making it worse.'"

Relentlessly positive

Education Minister Nikki Kaye sits down with *Metro* to discuss some of the issues raised by our story.

The government's critics say the sector has been chronically underfunded for a long time. What do you say?
The reason we commissioned the funding review[∞] is we saw the need for change. If you look at us comparatively with other OECD countries, we actually spend quite an amount, depending on various measures. I don't want to get into the debate of which measures you use. We're high up there. One of the big issues is tied to the significant gap in achievement between those who are doing well and those who aren't. We've found it challenging in the past to push up against disadvantage. It's one of the reasons we commissioned the funding review. I can go through a range of areas where we've had significant additional investment and we are seeing some of the results. So if you take Maori and Pasifika achievement, that is rising, and in part that is because we are putting in more resource. Whether you agreed with National Standards or greater accountability and transparency around achievement and performance, it has meant that we do know much better where to target resource. So I don't think it's just about more funding, it's about where you put the resource... The most advanced piece of work, or the one that's most publicly known, is around the decile system[†]. The message I've had from the sector is that this is a once-in-a-generation chance to shift things, and we don't want it to be rushed.

We are relying on the students of foreign countries to subsidise the education of our own children. How do you feel about that?
We've always had a system in New Zealand where we've enabled schools to get other revenue. Part of the reason for the funding review is that some schools have a capacity by mechanisms like international students, or because of the nature of their community, to be able to do a lot more. And I think that's one of issues that we're tackling in this funding review, to say what is it that the state provides, and how is it when we have those students who are more at risk of not achieving that we can target additional resource. I don't think you're ever going to want to have a situation where you don't enable schools to fundraise, or to have international students, but this is a balance in terms of ensuring that our system is sustainable and fairer, and that's what we're working through.

Will the funding review actually deliver any more money?
I've been in the role five weeks, and I've learned if you get ahead of Cabinet, that's usually career limiting. But the reality is every year since we've been in office, we've increased the education budget. So it's a pretty reasonable assumption to assume it's going to increase in the future. It is in part being able to say, how do we ensure we have a fairer system? It's achieving two things: one is what does fairness look like? And what is it we need to ensure the vision that we want for every child? To be able to read, to write, do maths, be digitally fluent, well rounded, healthy.

I want to talk about the public funding of private schools — $41 million last year. How is that morally right when our state schools are so obviously struggling?
Whether it's state-integrated or independent schools, there's been two principles behind us having them here in New Zealand. The first is that they save the taxpayer money. If we were having to pay the cost of those students in our state system, the bill would be larger. So it's advantageous for us to not to have to pay all of the costs of these kids. The second principle is choice. We want diversity of options, we want innovation. The overwhelming advice that I've had [is] it would cost us a lot more if we didn't have them. There comes a point at which, effectively, there is a subsidy provided, whether it's via state-integrated schools or independent schools, and if you get that wrong they can become unviable, and that's the delicate balance. I don't think there's any political party that doesn't accept there should be some form of subsidy.

The Greens' Catherine Delahunty describes it as creating a "perverse incentive", in that private schools are competing with state schools for staff and resources, using public money.
There's been a decrease. If you talk to the independent schools, they say we need to fund them more because they've had less students, and partly because of the global financial situation. From my perspective it is a delicate balance, it's about enabling choice, accepting it would cost us more if we didn't have these other options because the state system would have to pay the full cost. We accept that the state system is overwhelmingly important and that's our major priority, and it's effectively a subsidy to ensure that option exists.

The teacher shortage has been described to me as a crisis. Is the government in denial?
No. But can I again give you a bit of perspective? If you look back, you look at all of the numbers of a workforce that is potentially a pool of 120,000 — 68,000 in the secondary sector. For any workforce of that size you would be looking at a couple of percentage points in terms of vacancies. It's just not possible to have such a large workforce without some vacancies. Now the first point I'd make is I totally understand any school that has got a shortage of even one teacher; that's a massive deal, because it means other people are having to do additional work. So I am very sympathetic to that, but I guess when you look back — and these are the questions we're going to ask ourselves in even more depth with this new workforce strategy[‡] — what's a reasonable amount of vacancies, right? And then, how can we be absolutely much more responsive to fill them quickly, and have the people in the right areas so we have less vacancies? We've got a range of programmes that can be dialled up potentially to do more, but the thing that we have to do is have a much longer-term view and not just sitting here with these existing programmes and constantly debating the number. We've got to [have] a much clearer idea of what is the supply pipeline, and ensuring that there is innovation in a range of different providers in specific areas. Like at the moment it's science and technology and te reo. We haven't got that at the moment. I think there's a lot of work to do but we're on the way.

Would you consider things like writing off student loans, bonding, or other financial incentives?
At the moment we do have the Auckland Beginning Teacher Project, whereby we're paying schools an additional $24,000, which is about supporting them to help teachers with mentoring. So we do have financial incentives more at the school level. We haven't looked at anything around student loans because the question comes up, "What's your case for teachers versus other professions?" The argument hasn't been won. We have a range of other levers to pull. The Education Council [came] out with their initial teacher education proposals the other day. They're saying you could have providers in specific subjects.

There seems to be some confusion and cynicism over the real purpose of Communities of Learning, on what the endgame is. Can you clarify their purpose for me?
There's a couple of purposes of them. We haven't had the sharing of best practice that we can. Whether that's teaching practice, or inquiry, or pedagogy, that's one big aim of Communities of Learning. The second is also the sharing of resource. It is difficult to enable us to have choices around things like language because we don't have 10,000 language teachers. And so the ability to share resources to enable everybody to get access to a much more diverse range of subjects or infrastructure utilisation is definitely a benefit. The third part is we know at the moment young people are falling away, or are becoming less engaged, and we're losing them at key points of transition. So the ability to have a much more seamless pathway from early childhood through to secondary is absolutely a goal. What I can see is some shoots of beautiful things happening. As minister I'm involved in reviewing and endorsing the achievement challenges, and it's been amazing to see the level of detail [at which] these schools are collaborating and looking at where they need to put resource. So that's really positive. You've got this mix of those schools that are hungry and loving it, and are totally engaged in the Community of Learning, versus those schools that are moving on at a moderate pace, and those schools that are moderately sceptical.

Is that ministerial euphemism, "moderately sceptical"?
(Laughs.) Yeah. What we need to do is be able to work on the systems that will support Communities of Learning, to power them up to be able to do what they want to do. The way that I look at it is we want schools to lead that process alongside the ministry. So we're looking at what could be a range of service offerings, in terms of maybe bundled infrastructure services, or social and health services, that will enable them to collaborate more. It will also enable young people to be able to get access to things they haven't had before, and it comes back as well to your previous point, which is some schools have access to resources that other schools don't. The sharing of it can only be a good thing in my view if young people get much greater equity of what's delivered at the school level.

One of the reasons that the cynicism exists is the sector feels railroaded, and that the learning achievements are very prescribed.
I accept some people might feel like that. The facts are, it's up to Communities of Learning as to whether they want to form, and we now have half a million students and 200-odd Communities of Learning. I have a lot of confidence that schools are doing what they think is right for their communities. We have to do better to communicate with communities and boards and our schools about what's possible. With any new model there will be part that's evolving. We're not claiming it's perfect but I have confidence in all of the schools that have come together to do this. There is overwhelming support for it.

There's always been tension between the ministry and the profession, but has it reached it a point of dysfunction?
I've been an associate minister for four years and I think the relationship has improved significantly. We've had two great Secretaries of Education. The capability of the ministry has lifted significantly, and I've had some sector leaders say that to me. I'd be really keen to understand who's saying that, because my absolute read as an associate minister is that things have got better. We'll look up that information.

Thanks, I'd really like to see it.
Great. Perfect.
(The information never arrives.)

What do you perceive as the unique issues facing Auckland secondary schools?
The first thing is growth, and how

do we have enough schooling provision for Auckland? When I came four years ago into the portfolio, I went to the ministry and asked, can you tell me what the school property provision looks like in New Zealand? The biggest thing for Auckland is how do you future-proof a city that hasn't actually been designed that well, whether it's transport or education. The big thing we're working on at the moment is a 20- to 30-year capital infrastructure plan. I think there's been a bit of chatter around schools that are at capacity. New Zealand's got quite a generous entitlement around property, so that's why we have confidence there are no health and safety issues, or we're not aware of any health and safety issues. We don't believe there is overcrowding.
The second challenge that Auckland has: we've done really well around uptake of Communities of Learning, so you can see that the city is hungry for it. I think we need to focus on ensuring there's the resourcing for English as a second language.
I think the third challenge [is] we have a much higher number of Maori and Pasifika students in Auckland and so if we don't realise this vision of no gap, then the quality of life of all Aucklanders and those young people is going to be severely diminished in the future. So we have to keep the foot on the accelerator around lifting Maori and Pasifika achievement.
The final thing that I would say just generally in terms of Auckland is we have extraordinary opportunities as well, in terms of being more intensified, around access to other types of learning institutions and innovation. I mean, I announced recently metro schools[Δ], which is just about saying we can't see any negative impact in other countries from having more-intensified schools.

For you personally then, what are you going to achieve in driving the portfolio forward?
My priorities? There's been significant system change. People will look back on history and they'll go between the Communities of Learning coming in, the Education Amendment Bill with cohorts of entry, Communities of Online Learning, plus all of the work around National Standards and lifting achievement — that's a lot of change. So the first thing I have to do is bed in that change. The second thing is I will be focused on digital technologies. I have a figure from the Foundation for Young Australians that 60 per cent of the jobs that exist now may not exist in 20 years' time. So it will be a whole focus. We want young people to be not only digital users but creators of the future, and that is where we're working on the new curriculum in terms of digital technologies. We'll be announcing stuff around that in the next few months. The other part is health and wellbeing generally. We announced more mental health funding in the Budget. What does that look like at a school level? What does a really positive environment [look like], what are the best conditions for learning possible? And so that's part of my other focus — while also raising achievement! But they're connected, in my view.

Anything you'd like to add?
I think things are going in the right direction, but I want teachers and principals to hear me say that, because one of the big pieces of feedback I get is that they see a lot of negative stuff, and they want the most honest picture presented. Yes, we have our challenges, but actually we do pretty well as a nation. And so I think that's the point that I would make: I have said that I will be relentlessly positive, we will be honest about where we have to continue to make changes, but while I'm minister I will continue to be relentlessly positive about what's actually going on and to fix things where they need improvements. Ⓜ

∞ The Education Funding System Review currently under way and due in 2020.

† Evaluating how fit for purpose the decile system is for delivering educational outcomes is one of the major workstreams of the funding review.

‡ A collection of small initiatives the government is undertaking, including expanding the teacher training programme Teach First NZ to allow for 90 more teachers, and funding for mentoring to convert 700 provisional staff to full-time.

Δ Metro schools are large secondary schools in inner cities where land is scarce. They lack things we usually expect of our schools, such as fields and other recreational facilities.

What the stats say

Ten key things the tables tell us.

1. Only four schools — St Cuthbert's College, Diocesan School for Girls, St Peter's College and King's College — achieved over 90 per cent University Entrance pass rates in 2016, down from nine schools in 2013.

2. State-integrated schools (former private schools which have integrated into the state education system) achieved better pass rates for UE and NCEA level 3 than state-funded schools.

3. Schools with smaller rolls scored higher in NCEA level 3 achievement than those with 1000-plus students (78.2 per cent versus 72.8 per cent).

4. McAuley High, the Catholic girls school in Otahuhu, continues to punch above its weight for decile 1 schools, with a UE pass rate of 65 per cent, well above the average of 55.4 per cent. McAuley also has the fourth-highest NCEA level 3 pass rate (a ranking it shares with St Peter's College, Sacred Heart College and Sancta Maria College). McAuley is the only decile 1 school in the top 45 schools for NCEA level 3 pass rates.

5. Of the top 15 schools, all of which achieved an NCEA level 3 pass rate of over 90 per cent, six are girls schools, five are co-ed and four are boys schools.

6. Single-gender schools achieve both higher NCEA level 3 (83.1 per cent) and UE pass rates (65.9 per cent) than co-ed schools.

7. Private schools outperform both state and integrated schools for NCEA level 3 and UE pass rates, while integrated schools outperform state schools by a significant margin when comparing average NCEA level 3 and UE pass rates.

8. Westlake Girls' High School is the only state school to make the top 15 in NCEA level 3 pass rates.

9. The average NCEA level 3 pass rate for schools that also offered alternative exam systems was 84.4 per cent, well above the average of 75.7 per cent.

10. Of high-decile schools (deciles 7 and above) with state funding, St Peter's College was the only one to achieve above 90 per cent in both NCEA level 3 and UE pass rates in 2016.

Academic results do not indicate the quality of a school and should not be used as the sole basis for choosing one.

Our data analysis was done by AUT's Media+Experience Lab (MaX Lab), an international, interdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration involving researchers and designers from NZ, China and the US. MaX Lab aims to foster economic growth through user experience design innovations. It focuses on smart learning, information, product, service and system design plus big data analysis and graphical visualisation.