

## **Case Study: Making Evaluations More Useful Post Review Assistance: the Follow-Up Workshop**

A challenge for all evaluators is to make the process and the outcomes of evaluation more useful to evaluands.

The Education Review Office (ERO), a New Zealand Government agency with responsibility for evaluating and reporting on the quality of education in all schools, has undertaken a trial strategy to help make its report findings more useful to school trustees. Initially the focus has been on those schools that have been identified as being at risk.

This paper briefly outlines the role of ERO and the findings of a recent Government review of ERO. It describes a process used by the Office with schools where risks to students and/or the Crown have been identified during a review. The process assists schools in making effective use of the evaluation findings contained in the ERO report.

The paper also includes consideration of the evaluation of this strategy.

### **Introduction**

The Education Review Office (ERO) was established as part of a reform of the New Zealand school system, based on the Picot Report released on 10 May 1988. This report recommended that schools should be autonomous and self-managing organisations, with a Ministry of Education established to provide policy advice and an independent agency to monitor education standards and performance. Legislation putting this into effect was passed in 1989.

ERO reports publicly on the quality of education received by children and students enrolled in early childhood centres and schools. In doing so the Office reviews all service providers in terms of their accountability for resources and effectiveness of their services in raising achievement and reducing educational inequality.

Each school is a Crown entity and has an elected board of trustees that is responsible for the governance and management of their school. This was a significant change, particularly in the primary education sector as there was now no regional management of education between the Ministry of Education and the individual school.

## **The Education Review Office – its roles and responsibilities**

The Education Review Office has a wide brief in evaluating the quality of education in New Zealand. Statutory Review Officers appointed by the Chief Review Officer have the power to enter, the power to obtain any information required to carry out its statutory functions, and the power to publish (see [www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)). ERO, however, does not have the power to coerce.

ERO's role in schools is to carry out external evaluations of the quality of education provided for the students enrolled. Currently ERO undertakes these evaluations through *Accountability Reviews* developed in 1997. Previously ERO has had a number of approaches to school evaluation including Assurance Audits (focusing on compliance) and Effectiveness Reviews (focusing on student achievement).

Accountability Reviews are broad based and address risk factors in the following review areas: governance, management, the delivery of the curriculum, and the quality of student education.

Accountability Reviews are undertaken to:

- inform stakeholders about the merit, worth or significance of educational services provided by governing/managing authorities;
- provide governing/managing authorities with regular independent evaluations that confirm and can in turn be used for their own self-review, policy development and other areas of decision-making;
- inform policy development and decision making by Ministers and other Government authorities; and
- provide reliable evaluations that can be used for effective interventions and follow-up services to schools and early childhood centres.

The Accountability Review is sufficiently flexible to address legislative requirements, but increasingly the focus has moved from the Assurance Audits undertaken first in 1993 as boards' understanding of compliance requirements has increased. The focus now is more on performance.

Accountability reviews are performance-based evaluations that determine the quality of education services students receive by:

- **evaluating** the performance of governing/managing authorities in meeting their contractual obligations and undertakings both over time and in relation to other comparable providers;
- **evaluating** the impact on student education of enrolment and participation in a particular school/centre during the time students are enrolled at that institution;
- **assessing** the capacity of the governing/managing authority to minimise or eliminate the risks to students' education; and
- **assessing** the benefits of any sustainable external support, advisory service or other intervention.

Currently ERO undertakes reviews of schools about every four years. However, by 2006 ERO will be funded to carry out reviews of schools and early childhood centres every three years.

One of the most common reasons for the timing variation is when the Accountability Review identifies a number of high-risk issues in a school. The Office is likely to return to these schools within a year and conduct a discretionary review.

During a regular review when ERO is not satisfied with the performance of a school, it decides to return to the school to carry out a follow-up (discretionary) review within the next 6 to 12 months. The discretionary review always has specific terms of reference and these are linked to the identified risk area.

### **The Ministerial Review of ERO**

In the twelve years since its inception in October 1989, The Education Review Office has been subject to three Government reviews. The most recent was a Ministerial Review on the *Roles and Responsibilities of the Education Review Office*. The committee, chaired by a former Minister of Labour and State Services, the Hon. Stan Rodger, presented its findings to the Minister in December 2000 (hereafter known as the Rodger Report).

In setting the Review in context, the report noted that “despite several reviews of the Office and refocusing exercises (two key issues) have remained unresolved” (p7). The issues are:

- The role of the ERO. From its inception there has been debate over what its primary focus should be; and
- the lack of support for schools – particularly after the Education Review Office has identified issues to be addressed.

The Rodger committee made 27 recommendations based on “three key principles:

- reviews should adopt improvement rather than compliance principles
- advice must be provided to school/early childhood services following a review
- Education Review Office staff should be culturally aware and the services they provide culturally appropriate in the broadest sense of the term” (p1)

The Rodger Report identified ERO’s emphasis on summative reporting for accountability purposes as being an issue and “concludes that the focus of reviews of educational institutions needs to be on improvement and formative assessment with some summative evaluation dimensions.” (p.13)

The education reforms of 1988 envisaged ERO as identifying issues and school support agencies working in cooperation with the school principal and board to remedy the situation. Some schools see that ERO should provide that support.

ERO has an evaluation role and believes that its independence would be jeopardised if it were advisory and then evaluated its own advice. The Rodger Report endorsed ERO’s right to remain independent but expected ERO to develop an approach that focused on school improvement.

## **The Post Review Assistance Model**

As noted above, when ERO identifies a poorly performing school, its procedures allow, within a year, a follow up evaluation in the form of a discretionary review.

About 55% of the schools that have a follow-up review are able to demonstrate sufficient improvement to return to the normal three-year cycle. For those that are not, this in turn triggers a further follow up review and too frequently an on-going six-month cycle of reviews with very little evidence of improvement.

A board of trustees may not be able to enact the change either because they fail to understand the ERO report, or they do understand but are unable to instigate the change.

ERO recognised that some schools were having difficulty using the ERO reports to plan their actions and developed a new model to assist boards in preparing an action plan to address the issues identified in the report. The model takes into consideration the public concerns that the summative evaluation model is not always contributing to improved quality education.

The outcome has been to trial a model of Post Review Assistance by way of a workshop to help boards to understand the evaluation reports and to assist them in preparing an action plan to improve education delivery for the students. Sixty schools took part in the trial over the period from September 2000 to June 2001.

The Office, in the form of a two-session workshop, provides additional assistance following an adverse review report. The first session is an opportunity for the board to explain difficulties it had during the recent review and to air any grievances it may have had. However, one of the tenets of the model is that the review report must already be confirmed, so there is no relitigation of the issues raised.

The facilitators are from ERO but are not members of the review team that carried out the initial evaluation. They emphasise that they are working from the same report as the board.

The first session identifies the strengths and issues reported. The facilitators provide each member of the workshop with a copy of the report and invite the workshop members to highlight all the strengths reported. These positive elements are then discussed and the likely reasons are explored. The facilitators then provide a different coloured highlighter to identify issues reported on. The list of issues is recorded on a sheet and workshop members are advised that these issues will be the focus of the next session.

It is usual to focus on negative elements of an evaluation and generally the workshop members leave the first session positively as they often had not previously recognised the strengths reported.

The separation of the workshops into two sessions has been beneficial. Participants who were negative, bemused, or feeling disempowered because of the

critical evaluation report, return the next day after reflection, with a clearer sense of purpose and some thoughts on how to address the issues highlighted.

The second session is pure facilitation. The board members are encouraged to complete an action plan template. The action plan identifies exactly what action has to be taken; by whom; in what timeframe; consideration of budget requirements; and a reporting process. Appropriate support personnel or agencies are usually identified.

The facilitators write up all decisions and leave this as the basis for the board's action plan, as part of an expectation of all schools after an ERO review.

Facilitating a workshop to develop an action plan to address identified issues is a simple and logical adjunct to an evaluation completed in the course of the school review.

The key tenets of this strategy have been:

- that the facilitators had no part to play in the evaluation;
- that the workshop is based on a confirmed evaluation report;
- that the workshop takes place within a fortnight of the confirmation date of the report;
- that the workshop takes place at a time convenient for the board;
- that the board may invite anyone it sees as appropriate to the workshop;
- that the board has ownership of the resulting action plan; and
- that the board has the responsibility for implementing and monitoring the implementation of the action plan.

### **Evaluation of Post Review Assistance**

ERO has undertaken through a contract to follow up every workshop with a telephone interview of both the principal and the board chairperson to gauge their response to the strategy.

From this exercise it has been concluded that, with only a few exceptions, the boards appreciated the strategy and they were able to better utilise the evaluation information. Board representatives admitted that they had not initially understood the implications of the ERO report. Also, they had not recognised the positive comments that were reinforcing the good practice as they had focused on the negative findings.

Most board representatives said that the workshop enabled them to take positive steps to improve education delivery in their school. Through facilitation they had a path to follow, with clear actions, deadlines and identified personnel responsible. They were able to develop an action plan in their own words.

However, it is also clear that boards felt most comfortable when school support people (external to ERO) also attended the workshops and offered to provide regular assistance in monitoring milestones and offering advice. This relationship enables ERO to return for a follow up evaluation and not be compromised by evaluating its own advice.

Another strategy to evaluate the impact of the workshops has been to check the quality of the action plans compared to those forwarded by boards that have not had post review assistance. There is a clear difference between the quality of the action plans from the boards that have had post review workshops and those that have not. More particularly the boards that have had the workshops are actively using the action plan and consequently the evaluation has a greater utilisation than previously.

The most desirable outcome would be that, on returning to each of the sixty schools trialed, ERO could confirm that every board had made sufficient progress to now be part of the regular three-year cycle. That is, that the school is no longer at risk.

At this stage, not every school has been reviewed by ERO again since the post review workshop, so that judgement cannot be made. However, of the schools that ERO has returned to, most are now judged to have made sufficient improvement to no longer be at risk and will revert back to the three-year review cycle.

## **Conclusion**

It is still too early to make definitive judgements about the success of the post review assistance workshops because “success” can best be measured in the longer term.

Boards are clearly making better use of the evaluation findings and are developing a more structured approach towards meeting identified issues. Early indications are that the strategy enables ERO to maintain its stance as an independent evaluator whilst providing an evaluation that will enhance the quality of education for all students in New Zealand.

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