

New Zealand Maori leaders embrace charter schools

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One of the peak bodies representing New Zealand's Maori tribal leadership, the Iwi Chairs Forum (ICF), has unanimously backed the conservative National government's drive to establish a system of charter schools. As in the US and Britain, these publicly-funded, privately-run schools are being used to undermine public education and establish a bridge-head for widespread privatisation.

In an op-ed piece published in the *New Zealand Herald* on September 17, ICF spokesman Toby Curtis said the leaders' group had resolved to "actively support" the establishment of the euphemistically-titled "partnership schools." The ICF also urged the government to "expand this initiative and to advocate the concept publicly." The resolutions followed a call by the organisation in 2014 that the number of charter schools be increased and that "more Maori communities be encouraged to take advantage of them."

Charter schools are not required to use the national curriculum, be held to national standards, have qualified and registered teachers, or be accountable under the Official Information Act to disclose documents to the public. They can set their own salaries, the length of the school year and select which students they admit.

There is no support within the broad population for charter schools. The policy was smuggled in behind the backs of the electorate as part of a confidence and supply agreement between National and the right-wing, pro-market party ACT following the 2011 election. ACT, which brought forward the proposal after the election, had won only one seat and 1.07 percent of the votes.

Nor does the ICF represent the interests of ordinary Maori people, the vast majority of whom remain deeply

impoverished and alienated from the political establishment. The ICF is one of a raft of organisations promoted by the ruling class to elevate a pro-capitalist Maori elite. Curtis, who has been knighted for his services, is a member of the Partnership Schools Authorisation Board, which oversees applications from private sector organisations seeking to establish charter schools.

National, supported in a coalition by the Maori Party, initially set up five charter schools, declaring it would be a limited "trial." The pool was soon expanded to nine schools, targeted mainly to working-class areas in Auckland and Northland. Under-Secretary for Education David Seymour (ACT Party) last month announced a third round of applications. Two new charter schools will open in 2017. Another is being planned for the South Island by the wealthy Ngai Tahu tribe and an unnamed American businessman.

Charter school operators are exploiting the deepening crisis in education, which is expressed in a long "tail" of under-achievement, particularly affecting sections of the working class. A 2013 OECD report found New Zealand has the largest gap between high and low achievers of any country, with the lowest 25 percent well below international norms. The government denies that the cause is poverty and deepening social inequality, which now impacts on at least one in four children. Instead, it blames teachers and the "leadership" within the public school system.

Within the charters, working-class students are being used as guinea pigs. Of the nine schools, four have been set up by Maori trusts, two by Pacific Island community organisations, and two by the Villa Education Trust, which bases itself on "Christian philosophy and values." The ninth, the Vanguard Military School, operates a senior secondary school

boasting “a military ethos with a high level of structure and discipline that promotes teamwork and aims to eliminate the unsavoury aspects of school life.” Its director, Wayne Hyde, has a long history in the armed forces.

The agitation by Maori tribal leaders and politicians in particular is critical for the government in its attack on public education. Curtis falsely claims that charter schools offer “greater autonomy and freedom” and can be a “circuit breaker in closing the educational achievement gap between Maori and non-Maori students.” In fact, the Maori elite is seeking to implement a thoroughly right-wing agenda. This privileged layer supports the privatisation of education, along with social welfare and public housing, in order to create new sources of profit.

Two Maori Labour Party parliamentarians—Peeni Henare and Kelvin Davis, the party’s associate education spokesman—last month attended a \$250-a-seat fundraiser for the He Puna Marama Trust, which runs a charter school in Whangarei. Labour leader Andrew Little told Radio NZ that while his “preference” was for the MPs not to attend, he left the “judgement call” up to them. NZ First leader Winston Peters also attended with colleague Pita Paraone.

Both Labour and NZ First nominally oppose charter schools, as does the Maori nationalist Mana Party, which postures as “left wing” and “pro-poor.” When the first charters were established in 2013, however, Mana leader Hone Harawira declared he had “mixed emotions.” Harawira said he knew the people involved in the two Northland charter projects. He described them as “genuinely good people, dedicated to doing the best for Maori kids,” and wished them “all the best.”

The government has already bailed out one charter school with extra funding and support after it was found to be failing almost all the benchmarks in its contract. Auditors found Te Pumanawa o te Wairua had poor financial controls, and could not provide operational budgets, forecasts and management reports. It had a litany of academic and governance failings. Accounts revealed only \$1.4 million was spent by the school on education and the remaining \$2.5 million went elsewhere.

Other schools have been criticised for high funding rates, and failure to meet targeted roll numbers. The *Herald* reported in August that some are paying their

owners hundreds of thousands of dollars in “governance fees”—up to 40 percent of total salaries—to manage average rolls of just 70 students. Vanguard Military School paid \$309,391 for “management” services, above what it paid its principal.

While none of the charter schools has so far partnered with business or other private backers, as was intended, the government is pushing for more dependence on outside investment by reducing the amount to be provided for future schools. The charters, however, remain funded at a much higher level than state schools. One, Terenga Paraoa, received almost \$20,000 per student this year. State secondary schools get on average \$7,600 per student per year.

Charter schools are an attack on the educational rights and unity of the entire working class. For the Maori nationalists, the charter system is to be used to secure public funds to set up what are, in effect, racially segregated Maori-only schools, on the model that already exists with “language nests” at pre-school and primary levels.

The push for charter schools by the Maori elite exposes all the purveyors of racial identity politics and the program of “Tino Rangatiratanga,” or Maori self-determination. According to this agenda, Maori should be in charge of running their “own” affairs within the framework of the profit system. There is nothing progressive in this. Maori are not “one people,” but are divided by class.

“Self-determination” is the perspective of a small privileged layer that has been created through the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process on the basis of multi-million dollar payouts to tribal businesses. Deeply hostile to the working class, they have moved far to the right in defence of capitalism and are now openly imposing austerity measures on working people of all races.



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