

## **EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION**

### **Hon Heather Roy speech to the Independent Schools of New Zealand (ISNZ) Annual Cocktail Function; The Grand Hall, Parliament; Tuesday, February 16 2010.**

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Independent Schools New Zealand Executive, principals, Board chairs, Parliamentary colleagues, Mayor of Wellington Kerry Prendergast, ladies and gentlemen.

It's a pleasure to welcome you to Parliament. Thank you, Peter, [Fergusson Independent Schools New Zealand Chair] for your warm introduction.

As I look around I see many familiar faces. When I took on responsibility for Independent Schools a year ago I was no stranger to this area. I've certainly added to my knowledge by visiting many of you at your schools, and meeting with staff and students, and I look forward to seeing more of you this year.

Yours are innovative, successful schools. Schools wishing to join your organisation must have a proven track record in a variety of areas: a demonstrated commitment to providing high quality education. You play an important role in contributing to excellence in achievement in the overall Education sector.

I have just been looking over some of the NCEA and Scholarship results from 2009. I am encouraged about New Zealand's future when I see how well so many of our young people are doing. Many of the results are staggering, and your schools are among the best. Congratulations, and thank you, for your commitment to excellence in education.

Last year, many of you worried for the future as we experienced uncertain financial times. You will likely be reflecting on the resilience and innovative skills you've developed and needed to utilise in difficult circumstances. While there are signs of improvement, we're not out of the woods - but I know you will continue to use your well-honed skills to tackle these challenges.

As Associate Minister of Education, I'm committed to choice. The Government doesn't believe that central planning, or ideology, should dictate where children attend school. We want to give parents greater freedom to send their children to the school of their choice based on educational quality, school ethos, and their children's needs.

Choice is important to parents, children, and society on every front - yet too often we limit parents' choices when it comes to schooling their children. We must re-think access to education, and the availability and affordability of educational options.

I am very proud of the Aspire Scholarships, which I initiated and launched last year. They are my first step in enhancing choice. Aspire enables students from low-income families to attend an independent school they otherwise would not have the opportunity to attend.

Many of you have embraced Aspire by advertising it widely, and giving these students opportunities they otherwise wouldn't have had. Over 400 students applied for a scholarship,

showing a huge appreciation of the opportunities you offer. In total, 144 scholarships were offered. Recipients are spread across 31 independent schools.

I have had some amazing and touching responses from scholars. When letters were sent to Aspire recipients, I received a call from Rose, a sole parent whose 12-year-old daughter Raquel wanted to attend Diocesan School for Girls. Rose had already enrolled her daughter Raquel, paid the \$200 enrolment fee - but she didn't know how she would be able to afford the fees. Thanks to Aspire, Raquel's dream has come true, and I know she will do well with the support from both home and school.

I also visited Auckland's Corelli School to welcome students on the first day of 2010 and met Aspire recipient Aurelion. A ballet prodigy, Aurelion's family moved from Whangarei to the North Shore so he could use his scholarship to attend Corelli and fulfil his potential.

The Government's commitment to choice in education was further strengthened today with the release of a multi-Party report on school choice. The report came out of the National-ACT Confidence & Supply Agreement. I chaired this group of National, Maori Party and ACT MPs. Our task was to report on policy options relating to the funding and regulation of schools that will increase parental choice and school autonomy.

Having spent a year reviewing current practice here, and best practice overseas, the Group has compiled a report which I - as Chair - launched today. Titled 'Step Change: Success the Only Option', it focuses on those students who are not being served effectively by the Education system - the bottom performing 20 percent and the top performing five percent. It recommends an initiative directed at improving outcomes for these students that, in time, could be applied to the entire system. The initiative emphasises choice, flexibility, accountability, and the specific needs of the student.

There are many challenges now, and into the future, in education. For independent schools, the global financial crisis has had an impact. Fees and funding are always an issue. I am currently discussing with your executive ways in which greater co-operation with the State sector can benefit everyone.

Last year you were invited to comment on the Law Commission's recommendations on legislative changes. I'm considering feedback from independent schools and Ministry advice on this, and aim for the best balance of independence with Government regulation.

Independent schools enjoy considerable freedom from Government regulation. Schools must be able to focus on the needs of students and parents, rather than Government demands. As businesses striving to provide a quality service that people want, you want to avoid being hamstrung by excessive regulation and compliance requirements. Education Minister Anne Tolley and I will soon submit a paper to Cabinet confirming our response to the Law Commission's report.

Behind us is a year of significant achievements under difficult circumstances. Before us is a year of challenges and opportunities. I look forward to seeing the results of these.

Thank you.