



Friday 2 November 2007

From New Zealand Foundation for Character Education

For immediate use

Family life impacting on behaviour

NZFCE report examines success at school

A new report says that an increasing number of students from troubled and dysfunctional homes are bringing practised patterns of anti social behaviour into New Zealand classrooms. The report commissioned by the New Zealand Foundation for Character Education says that the family unit is not as strong, cohesive and functioning with a central focus of raising children as it once was, placing student behaviour and success in school at risk more than ever before.

The Foundation's Chairman Rod Galloway says that too many teachers have to deal with students on a daily basis who have no regard for the rights of others and whose behaviour seriously disrupts the learning process. Despite New Zealand being one of those countries where living standards seem to be constantly improving, there is now evidence that profound and rapid changes in the values systems of the community have come at a social cost leaving our children more vulnerable than in the past.

Galloway, who is also the Principal of George Street Normal School in Dunedin, attributes this to a combination of shifting social values.

"Nowhere is this more dramatic than in the change to family life. The number of New Zealand parents who share an evening meal and spend time talking to their children is among the lowest in developed countries.

Over recent years we have experienced declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates resulting in half of all New Zealand families now being a blended unit. Full or part-time childcare necessary for many of the 43 percent of the workforce who in 2006 claimed

they were responsible for the care of a dependent.

New Zealand has an epidemic of absent fathers with the second highest rate of single parenthood in the OECD that has tripled in the last 30 years.

While many of these families are doing a fine job, the combined effect of older, busier, and often emotionally, physically and financially stressed parents is having a significant impact on classroom teaching and learning.

The report also identifies New Zealand's increasingly violent society as influencing classroom behaviour.

New Zealand principals identify disruptive behaviour as the most common obstacle to learning that they have to deal with in their schools.

The number of disruptive students has increased by ten percent in the past five years.

Although the number of pupils being suspended from New Zealand schools fell by 2.7 percent between 2005 and 2006, the number of pupils "stood down" continues to rise each year. There has been a 5.3 percent increase in the numbers of students stood down since 2000. In 2006 23,488 pupils were asked to leave school for a set period.

The most common reasons were physical assaults and continual disobedience.

Galloway quotes two recent school violence surveys that revealed that one in seven primary teachers surveyed reported being physically assaulted and 53 percent of male and 40 percent of female secondary students surveyed reported being physically harmed. In one primary school, thirteen staff were physically assaulted and on average three to four staff per school surveyed were assaulted in 2006.

Galloway said defiant, disruptive and violent behaviours interrupt the learning of all students, making teaching in many classrooms a more difficult task.

More New Zealand parents, he believes are unable to provide a home environment where children are safe, nurtured, and provided with clear moral guidance than ever before. As a result there is a widening gap between what happens in the home and the expectation of the classroom for successful and positive engagement and that, he claims, is a worrying trend that requires answers.

The report describes the work of a growing number of New Zealand schools providing models of how character education can be successful in improving student behaviour, teaching and learning. While all schools attempt to create a respectful, caring and responsible learning environment, a stronger emphasis is required to make what was once taught in every home more intentional in the classroom.

According to Galloway the need for character education is clear, urgent and important to the success of the present and future generations.

Teachers and principals have the opportunity this week to attend workshops to learn how character education can successfully restore and conserve desirable behaviours such as responsibility and respect. Over 100 teachers and Principals are expected to attend the national character education symposium "*Connecting Character to Conduct*" which is being held in Wellington at the National Library on Friday 2 November. Attendance is free.

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For more information please contact

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