

Ministry of Education and philanthropic organisations collaborating to flatten the inequality curve

Covid-19 has been described as the pandemic of inequity.

In Aotearoa New Zealand's education sector, statistics and anecdotal evidence support that. The lockdown and a switch to distance learning widened the gap between the haves and the have nots – for example, who had the devices and internet access to make a seamless transition to online learning, and who didn't.

But a mid-pandemic agreement reached between the Ministry of Education, Philanthropy New Zealand and multiple philanthropic organisations could help address inequities, and initiatives that could be successful in flattening the inequality curve in our early learning centres, schools and universities.

The Memorandum of Understanding sets out a framework for the government and philanthropy to meet regularly and provide updates to each other on common educational issues and opportunities.

“Equity is a big issue in education – often outcomes for Māori, Pasific and disabled students in education

system can be at a lower level than others,” says Patrick McKibbin, Manager, Ministry of Education. “And an important focus of our work is finding solutions to that.”

“We also know the New Zealand philanthropy sector invests a lot of time and money in education related initiatives – estimates of this funding are somewhere in the region of up to \$100 million a year – to address the same problem too,” he says.

“But up until now we have been mostly working independently of each other. The Memorandum of Understanding we signed in July establishes the basis and principles for a relationship working together in future.”

“By building that relationship we can understand more about the education initiatives being supported by philanthropy in New Zealand.



The Ministry of Education's Secretary for Education Iona Holsted, and Philanthropy New Zealand's CEO Sue McCabe signing the MOU in Wellington.

“Philanthropy organisations have the opportunity of sharing data and measurement and we can work together, learn together and build evidence together so we both develop a better understanding of what is working and what may be the best plan moving forward.

“In short, it will also help determine which initiatives we might include in our advice to the Government.

“Philanthropic groups will also be able to ask themselves – can we do more to make this project sustainable by working collaboratively with the Ministry of Education?”

Philanthropy New Zealand CEO Sue McCabe says about 30 philanthropic funders have been involved in the discussions with MOE, and the MOU reflects a steady building of the relationship and increased understanding of the contribution each sector makes to education within Aotearoa New Zealand.

“Given the complexity of some of the education issues that both Government and not for profits are committed to progressing, like equitable outcomes for students, the relationship and understanding needs to be present before meaningful collaboration can occur,” she says.

“The agreement is important both symbolically and practically. As a symbol it shows the commitment to working together and progressing the issues of education inequity that is the focus of the MOU. It also contains practical guidance as to how the parties will engage and criteria for what they’ll talk to each other about.

“The causes of inequitable education outcomes for different groups of students are complicated and entrenched, for example racism. Given the complexity of the issues, neither Government, philanthropy, not for profits or other players in the education space can make sufficient progress by themselves. Therefore the collaboration that the agreement represents is the only way we’ll help all learners to reach their potential.”

Patrick McKibbin says part of the inspiration for the collaboration came from the Tomorrow Accord – a

document signed between NEXT Foundation and the Department of Conservation. The Tomorrow Accord sets out an agreement that if philanthropic groups invest in projects that meet certain pre-agreed criteria and then make significant ecological gains, the Department of Conservation will underwrite the maintenance of those gains in perpetuity.

So, for example, philanthropic investment may help rid a National Park of predators and restore plant biodiversity. If the pre-agreed targets are met, the Tomorrow Accord guarantees the government will take over the costs of maintaining those gains.

“The education space is a little more complicated,” explains Patrick.

“Under the Tomorrow Accord, philanthropic investment is largely in predator-free projects, and the big cost is up front. Under the Tomorrow Accord DOC does the maintenance at the other end.”

“In education, philanthropic groups can take a risk on an investment up front that the Ministry of Education can’t always fund. They can gather data and evidence to influence future policy direction. But there is likely to be high continuing costs at the other end, and we can’t guarantee future funding because that could depend on the Government of the day’s priorities.”

NEXT education director Frank Janssen says the collaboration between Ministry of Education and philanthropy is a major step forward and part of the philosophy of NEXT Foundation’s investments.

“We value working collaboratively,” he says, “and to achieve systems change in educational inequality it is important to be working alongside the government.”

“We all share the same vision of an education system with equitable outcomes, so the children of Aotearoa New Zealand, no matter what their challenges, reach their full potential.”