



Careful Change, or Rash Reform: What Next for NCEA?

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Abstract

When New Zealand's government proposed replacing the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in August 2025 after a six-week consultation, what did this urgency reveal about contemporary educational governance? This article asks what remains unexamined in the rush to reform: whose evidence counts as legitimate, whose voices matter in educational decision-making, and what remains of 'equity' when government acknowledges that its proposed reforms will cause harm to already disadvantaged groups of students? This article does not argue for or against the replacement of NCEA. Rather, drawing on the concept of moral panic, together with Ball's critical policy discourse analysis and scholarship on neoliberal educational reform, we set out to formulate and discuss three main questions about the proposal. Our analyses uncover trends indicating that the reforms are motivated and shaped by ideological loyalty to standardisation, managerial oversight, and market responsiveness, rather than by careful consideration of all available educational evidence. Rather than offer definite answers, we invite readers to consider these questions, which have been foreclosed by the speed and process of the proposal, but which are essential for democratic educational governance in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords NCEA reform · Policy analysis · Educational assessment · Education and democracy · New Zealand education

Introduction

In August 2025, New Zealand's coalition government released a discussion document proposing to replace the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) with new national qualifications. This move initiated a 6-week consultation period for

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what would constitute a fundamental transformation of secondary education assessment (Ministry of Education, 2025). For readers unfamiliar with NCEA's history, as a qualification NCEA has served as New Zealand's national senior school assessment system since 2002, replacing older School Certificate and University Bursary examinations with a standards-based, modular approach, designed to better serve diverse student populations (Hipkins, 2013). NCEA was designed and developed in a process taking three years (1999–2001) and involving the participation of hundreds of teachers on expert and advisory panels. By way of contrast, the breakneck speed of the consultation process for the 2025 proposal—six weeks to analyse, consult, and respond to 88 pages proposing wholesale replacement—gives us pause. What does this urgency reveal about contemporary educational governance?

This article does not argue either for or against NCEA replacement; we are not trying to decide whether the current system should be retained, refined, or fundamentally reimagined. Rather, we approach the 2025 proposal process with curiosity about what remains unexamined in the rush to reform. Drawing on Ball's (1993, 2012) critical policy discourse analysis, scholarship on moral panic and crisis construction (Cohen, 2002), and analysis of neoliberal educational reform patterns (Ball et al., 2012; Devine et al., 2018; Thrupp, 2018), we set out to explore not what the proposals explicitly state, but what they work to obscure: whose evidence counts as legitimate, what gets silenced in crisis discourse, and what ideological commitments become visible through examining absences and contradictions. In researching and writing this article we are playing the long game—offering conceptual tools for noticing patterns in policy discourse, rather than accepting proposals at face value.

To research this article, we examined policy texts and consultation processes—what Ball (1993) terms the contexts of influence and text production. This approach can highlight patterns and ask questions but cannot definitively explain motivations. To follow the arguments presented below, readers need to have a basic familiarity with NCEA's structure (standards-based, modular credits, internal and external assessment), but do not require specialist knowledge—indeed, one topic we examine is how technical language in policy documents functions as an exclusionary mechanism. We note gaps in how the proposals address Te Tiriti o Waitangi—particularly in the form of vague commitments without structural guarantees—but full treatment of those issues lies beyond the scope of this article. Similarly, while achievement data from Wharekura (secondary Kura Kaupapa Māori) suggest NCEA's flexibility has been used effectively within these contexts, examining these patterns requires dedicated analysis that lies beyond the scope of this article.

Examining the policy literature gave rise to three large, interconnected questions, which are used to structure the article, below, and present our results. First, the evidence question: What is the evidence for claiming that current challenges constitute a “crisis” requiring the full replacement of NCEA, rather than targeted refinement? What evidence is absent from the crisis narrative? Second, the equity question: How can reforms that are expected to worsen outcomes for already-disadvantaged students be also claimed to advance equity? What notion of fairness allows acknowledged harm to vulnerable learners to proceed without concrete mitigation? What gets lost when proposals remove the flexibility that currently enables diverse students to achieve qualifications? Third, the process question: What does a six-week period of

consultation reveal about whose knowledge is considered legitimate in educational governance? How do compressed timelines, technical language, narrow expertise, and legal barriers to collective input influence whose voices are valued in policymaking?

These questions concern democratic educational governance in Aotearoa New Zealand: whether policy development will be democratic or technocratic, evidence-based or ideologically driven, responsive to those most affected or determined by narrow conceptions of expertise. The 2025 NCEA replacement proposal, through its speed and certainty, works to foreclose these questions. In the interests of democracy, it is essential to maintain space to raise them—and the resulting discussions are of interest to anyone concerned about how such key educational decisions get made.

The next section introduces the conceptual tools we will use to analyse policy discourse and thereby to see what policy works to naturalise or obscure. The following three sections then explore each question in turn, before reflecting on the patterns these queries have revealed, and what these patterns suggest about educational governance.

Theoretical Tools for Seeing What's Obscured

Several conceptual frameworks helped us identify what the policy discourse naturalises or obscures. These frameworks do not reveal “the truth” about policy motivations—intentions are complex, involving multiple actors with varied interests. Rather, they provide lenses for asking productive questions: What problems get framed as requiring intervention? Who speaks with authority, and whose knowledge is marginalised? What evidence is emphasised, minimised, or absent? What becomes thinkable and unthinkable within dominant discourse?

Ball's Policy Discourse Analysis

Stephen Ball's (1993, 2012) critical policy discourse analysis offers systematic tools for examining not just what policies say but also what they silence, whose voices they privilege, and what alternatives they render unthinkable. His distinction between “policy as text” and “policy as discourse” is particularly helpful.

Policy as text recognises that documents are “encoded in complex ways” (Ball, 1993, p. 11), created through compromise and contestation, containing contradictions that reveal conflicting priorities. The NCEA replacement proposal claims to promote equity while recognising potential harm to disadvantaged students. This textual contradiction prompts us to consider what competing interests or values may be at play.

Policy as discourse examines how language exercises power by shaping certain “truths” and positioning individuals in particular ways (Ball, 1993, p. 14). For example, when officials describe NCEA's flexibility as a “problem” and students as “credit counting,” what understanding of learning and achievement is normalised? What alternatives are dismissed? Ball's framework helps identify patterns that merit closer scrutiny. Throughout our analysis, we use it not to claim certainty about what is happening, but to raise questions that the proposal's speed and certainty seem to suppress.

Moral Panic and the Politics of Speed

Stanley Cohen's (2002) analysis of moral panic clarifies how crisis discourse functions politically. Moral panics involve constructing *folk devils*—threatening figures requiring urgent intervention—by presenting selective evidence that highlights dangers while minimising contradictory information. This process creates a smoke screen wherein urgency and alarm obscure alternative explanations and careful examination of evidence. Crisis discourse normalises the need for immediate action, framing deliberation as a dangerous delay.

The NCEA proposal's rapid timeline together with the selective use of evidence suggests asking: What does framing issues with NCEA as a crisis demanding complete and urgent replacement achieve, that framing them as issues needing targeted improvements would not? This question relates to what McIntyre (2018) describes in post-truth contexts: truth is slow and meticulous, requiring evidence-gathering, verification, and collective analysis. Urgency favours assertion over careful examination. When we see compressed timelines alongside claims of crisis, despite mixed evidence, we might want to ask: What does speed prevent us from scrutinising? In situations where thorough inquiry risks confirming predetermined conclusions, can urgency itself be a strategic move?

Education Policy History

Since the 1980s, New Zealand's education system has been through ongoing neoliberal reforms, leading to persistent instability that Devine et al. (2018) argue weakens educational effectiveness. These reforms share some key characteristics: they feature standardisation and testing regimes, accountability mechanisms that individualise systemic issues, market logic positioning students as consumers of an educational product, managerial control replacing professional autonomy, and a focus on economic rationality over educational values (Ball, 2012; Thrupp, 2018). Awareness of this history helps us ask if current proposals are in fact evidence-based responses to NCEA's specific challenges, as the government claims.

The proposed reforms emphasise standardisation, external accountability, and market responsiveness—such as the prominently featured employer surveys—while marginalising professional judgement and reducing flexibility. What is implied by these alignments with neoliberal education policy? Ball (2012) contends that such reforms embody specific ideological commitments—prioritising competition over collaboration, individual responsibility over collective capacity, measurable outputs over holistic development—rather than neutral technical improvements. Thrupp (2018) highlights how standardisation rhetoric promises “raised standards” while often resulting in curriculum narrowing, increased inequality, and diminished educational quality.

When we later consider how proposals recognising potential harm to disadvantaged students proceed without mitigation strategies, this historical context prompts us to ask: What conception of “raising standards” permits worsening outcomes for already marginalised groups? While we cannot definitively determine why particular reforms emerge at specific moments, we can notice patterns linking them to broader

political and economic agendas, and how they obscure structural and resource inequalities.

1: The Evidence Question—Crisis or Sleight of Hand?

The Ministry's discussion document opens with confident claims about NCEA's shortcomings. It asserts that the system "is not fully supporting all our young people" and must be replaced so students can gain "the knowledge and skills they need to thrive post-school" (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 6). These claims are presented as self-evident, justifying the call for urgent action. However, the document offers little clarity on why current challenges constitute an existential crisis rather than issues that could be addressed through targeted improvements. Equally important is the question of what kinds of evidence are missing from this crisis narrative.

What Gets Emphasised: Constructing a Crisis

The proposal highlights several concerns to justify replacing NCEA. Officials cite 250,000 instances of students not attempting external examinations, and frame this as evidence of "credit counting," where students disengage once they have achieved minimum credits (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 9). Yet, this figure refers to individual examination instances across multiple subjects, not 250,000 students. Because each student typically enrolls in several examinations, each comprising numerous assessment standards, the presentation choice magnifies the apparent scale of the issue. Why present a figure in a way that inflates the perceived problem rather than situating it within NCEA's voluntary assessment structure?

The document also cites employer surveys indicating that 70% lack confidence in NCEA and reports that many teachers view the system as unreliable (Ministry of Education, 2025). But what is the relationship between these subjective perceptions and objective evidence of outcomes? Employer surveys measure confidence rather than systematically analysing employee capabilities, and teacher surveys reflect views of system reliability rather than measured student achievement. What, then, is the rationale of prioritising these subjective judgements over empirical outcome data?

The proposal further claims that New Zealand students score below the OECD average in literacy and numeracy. While this is accurate, it overlooks the complex factors shaping these results—such as socioeconomic inequality, resource distribution, and broader educational conditions—and fails to consider NCEA's role in increasing participation among previously excluded groups (Hipkins, 2013). What does it suggest about the aims of the crisis narrative when international comparison data are presented selectively, stripped of contextual factors, and disconnected from NCEA's achievements in promoting? The pattern echoes what Cohen (2002) describes as a smokescreen in moral panic discourse: selective evidence is marshalled to highlight dangers while marginalising contradictory information.

What Gets Minimised or Ignored: Counterevidence and Complexity

Recent achievement data reveal a more nuanced story than crisis narratives suggest. In 2024, school-leaver attainment rose at NCEA Levels 2, 3, and University Entrance for the first time since 2020, signalling a recovery from pandemic disruptions (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2025). Yet these improvements receive little attention in documents that justify replacement NCEA.

The decline in Level 1 attainment that officials emphasise also needs context that the proposal fails to provide. NZQA data shows a 10.4% drop in NCEA Level 1 attainment for Year 11 students who took NCEA Level 1 in 2024 compared with 2023 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2025). This coincides with the introduction of stricter literacy and numeracy requirements by the current government. The Minister of Education, Hon. Erica Stanford, has previously defended this decline, stating that the drop was expected (“Drop in NCEA Level 1 achievement ‘anticipated’, Education Minister Erica Stanford says,” 2025). In addition, more schools have stopped offering NCEA Level 1, which may have increased the likelihood that students do not achieve it, especially given that many of these schools have fewer students facing socioeconomic difficulties (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2025). If the decline stems from government policy changes and school-level decisions rather than NCEA’s core design, what is achieved by blaming it on system failure?

International recognition complicates the crisis narrative further. The European Commission’s 2017 comparative analysis found substantial alignment between NCEA and the European Qualifications Framework, and highlighted NCEA’s innovative features (New Zealand Qualifications Authority & European Commission, 2017). When international organisations acknowledge NCEA’s strengths, what then explains the domestic crisis discourse?

What Doesn’t Get Asked: The Missing Questions

Perhaps most revealing are the questions the proposal does not ask. Why do well-resourced schools achieve strong NCEA results while under-resourced schools struggle? Why do some schools rely heavily on unit standards, while others do not? If concerns about the reliability of internal assessment are driving reform, why not support teachers and invest in improved moderation so its benefits are preserved while consistence is enhanced? The proposal gives these questions no attention, and that silence is telling. When alternatives to wholesale replacement exist but are not considered, we must ask what this implies about whether the reforms aim to solve the stated problems or pursue other objectives.

This pattern of emphasis, minimisation, and omission recalls Cohen’s analysis of moral panic: a crisis is constructed through selective evidence, and the exploration of complexity and alternatives is closed off. Ball (2012) argues that crisis discourse often functions to justify predetermined solutions, with evidence strategically arranged to support conclusions already reached. When we see such a selective presentation of issues and evidence, typical of moral panic construction, we might ask: What if the goal is not to objectively assess NCEA’s performance, but to justify its replacement for reasons that lie outside the evidence? We cannot definitively answer

this by examining policy texts alone. Yet the pattern warrants scrutiny, especially when a six-week consultation period shuts down careful exploration. Speed prevents us from asking the very questions these patterns invite. That is why playing the long game matters: it creates space for inquiry that rushed reforms seek to suppress.

2: The Equity Question—A Contradiction?

The Ministry of Education professes a commitment to “equitable and excellent outcomes” (Ministry of Education, 2024, p. 5), yet concurrently promotes an NCEA replacement proposal that concedes changes “may initially have impacts on achievement rates, especially for students who are already disproportionately reflected in lower achievement results” (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 35), while offering no concrete mitigation strategies. How can reforms expected to worsen outcomes for disadvantaged students, even in the short term, credibly claim to advance equity? How are we to make sense of this contradiction? Examining what current NCEA structures enable and what the proposals would change reveals patterns that suggest specific ideological commitments are being naturalised and presented as equity advancement.

The Question of Flexibility

Before asking whether the proposal promotes equity, we must first consider how vulnerable students currently navigate NCEA structures. NCEA’s modular design enables students to earn credits gradually over time rather than requiring them to succeed in all subjects within a single year. This flexibility was deliberately built into NCEA and has been particularly important for particular groups of students, including those experiencing disrupted schooling, those whose learning pace requires more time to master particular standards, and those juggling part-time work (Hipkins, 2013). When proposals mandate a set number of subjects within a fixed timeframe, without detailing how such students will be supported, we must ask: whose educational reality is centred in policy design?

The absence of discussion about how more prescriptive structures will accommodate diverse circumstances suggests these realities are being either overlooked or deemed unimportant in reform planning. This raises a fundamental question: whose lives and circumstances are treated as important in policy development? Taking the proposals together, a clear pattern emerges: each proposal acknowledges potential equity implications, yet each one is advanced without concrete mechanisms to prevent harm.

Within NCEA, internal assessment plays an important role in providing flexibility. Research shows that external assessment can include culturally responsive features—Gibbs’ (2023) work on Progressive Achievement Tests, for example, demonstrates how attention to cultural context and accessibility can make standardised assessments more equitable. Likewise, Mahuika et al. (2011) show that both internal and external assessments can be redesigned to better serve Māori students when grounded in culturally responsive principles. The central distinction, therefore, is not

whether external assessment can be culturally responsive, but how much flexibility each mode affords.

Internal assessment enables forms of culturally sustaining pedagogy that nationally standardised external examinations—administered on fixed dates to all students—cannot easily replicate. Kerr and Averill (2024) argue that culturally sustaining assessment must be grounded in Kaupapa Māori principles and a clear commitment to the wellbeing of learners. Internal assessment affords teachers the scope to design tasks using locally relevant, community-specific contexts; to provide diverse modes of demonstrating learning beyond written examinations; and to build on students’ cultural strengths—adaptations that are far more difficult to realise in standardised national assessments. Studies of assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand further indicate that when teachers are trained in te ao Māori pedagogy, and assessment design occurs in partnership with Māori communities, learners experience greater engagement, stronger affirmation of identity, and improved academic outcomes (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013; Ratima et al., 2020; Sexton, 2025).

Current NCEA structures also enables students to gain qualifications through multiple pathways when schools cannot offer a comprehensive range of academic subjects. The proposal itself notes that “nearly 30 per cent of credits gained in schools with ‘More’ Socio-Economic Barriers to Attainment were from unit standards, compared to just 8 per cent in schools with ‘Fewer’ Socio-Economic Barriers” (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 11). Minister Stanford has explicitly acknowledged that high-equity schools have been “using the flexibility of the system to essentially get their kids across the line to give them a qualification” (cited in Walters, 2025). Removing this flexibility prompts a critical question: whose qualification achievement is recognised and valued in this reform?

The VET integration proposal recognises genuine implementation challenges but tends to interpret variation in the use of vocational pathways between high- and low-decile schools as evidence of NCEA failure rather than as an indicator of resource inequality. It offers no clear account of how VET partnerships will be adequately resourced across diverse school contexts, nor how students will be distributed across various pathways. This absence of detail raises an important question: might the reforms unintentionally entrench streaming practices that have historically disadvantaged Māori, Pacific, and low socio-students?

The replacement of NCEA Level 1 with the Foundational Award illustrates what Ball (2012) terms *symbolic reform*. If employers do not currently value Level 1, on what basis would they value a renamed qualification aimed at the same learners? The proposal concedes that it will face “similar issues to those in the current system” (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 6). What does it suggest about reform priorities when the change appears largely cosmetic—new name, same students, unchanged perceived problem? Eighty-nine principals wrote to the Minister to warn that “removing Level 1 entirely risked leaving some students without any meaningful formal qualification” (Walters, 2025), so why does the proposal still not offer any concrete mechanisms to prevent this?

The strengthened achievement requirements amplify the likely effects of the earlier proposals. Officials acknowledge, drawing on international evidence, that “achievement of the qualifications is likely to decline in the short-term compared to

NCEA,” citing Queensland’s “initial slight decline in achievement rates (about three per cent)” (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 34). But what is obscured when a 3% decline is described as “slight”? In New Zealand, this could equate to roughly 1,500 fewer students achieving Level 2—a substantial number of young people. Moreover, the proposal notes that impacts will fall on “students who are already disproportionately reflected in lower achievement results,” yet it provides no specific strategies to prevent this.

Taken together, these elements reveal a consistent pattern. Each proposal explicitly acknowledges equity concerns, yet none includes mitigation measures. Why might this be? One explanation is that officials accept these equity risks as the price for pursuing other priorities. Another is that acknowledgements of equity concerns serve a primarily procedural function—demonstrating that issues were noted without any real commitment to addressing them—and thereby legitimising the claim that equity has been “considered.” This pattern prompts a broader question: what does repeated acknowledgement without mitigation suggest about whether equity genuinely underpins the reform agenda?

What Conception of Equality and Quality Becomes Visible?

When we see flexibility reduced in ways that limit the success of diverse students, while changes likely to harm already disadvantaged students proceed, what ideology becomes visible? One possibility is equality understood as standardisation—everyone faces the same assessment conditions and timeframes regardless of circumstances. This aligns with the neoliberal logics Ball (2012) and Thrupp (2018) describe: “raising the bar” through uniform structures, with those who cannot meet requirements held individually responsible for their failure.

International frameworks, however, stress that equality requires differentiation rather than uniformity. UNESCO’s (2020) Global Education Monitoring Report emphasises that inclusive education depends on flexibility and responsiveness to diversity. The OECD (2023) likewise advocates Universal Design for Learning and flexible systems that can adapt to the specific needs of diverse learners, especially those in vulnerable circumstances.

When proposals diverge from international inclusive education standards, what does this suggest? Perhaps a different view of equality is operating—one that prioritises market responsiveness and employer demands over educational values. This pattern resembles what Thrupp (2018) identifies in neoliberal “raising the bar” rhetoric: standardisation that promises improved quality but instead narrows the curriculum and deepens inequality. When “higher standards” take the form of stricter requirements that are openly acknowledged to harm already disadvantaged students, what conception of standards is being advanced? This logic individualises structural inequality. If students fail to meet uniform standards, their lack of effort is blamed rather than insufficient support or resources. In doing so, it obscures what the government’s own data show: socioeconomic factors, not qualification design, are the main drivers of achievement gaps (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2024).

What alternative concept of equity is being displaced? Although imperfect in its implementation, current NCEA structures reflect equity understood as removing

barriers, providing multiple flexible pathways, and honouring diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge. When schools lift achievement rates by using the flexibility that supports culturally sustaining pedagogies, this is equity enacted through responsiveness rather than uniformity. When students facing challenging circumstances can make progress by accumulating credits over time, this is equity expressed as accommodation rather than rigid requirements. The proposals would dismantle these mechanisms of equity without clarifying what, if anything, will take their place.

We cannot definitively identify the drivers of these reforms. Nonetheless, the patterns we see align more closely with neoliberal logics of standardisation than with research on culturally sustaining, inclusive education (Kerr & Averill, 2024; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020).

3: The Process Question—Speed vs. Democracy?

The Ministry of Education allowed just six weeks to analyse 88 pages outlining a fundamental transformation of an assessment system serving 150,000 students annually. What does this compressed timeline reveal about how they conceive democratic participation? More provocatively, what if speed is the point? McIntyre (2018) argues that, in post-truth contexts, truth is slow and careful—it depends on deliberation, evidence-gathering, and collective analysis. Urgency, by contrast, privileges assertion over analysis. Viewed alongside historical comparison points, the 2025 consultation process reveals patterns of technocratic rather than democratic governance, with speed functioning to shut down precisely the questions that careful inquiry would raise.

Temporal Compression as a Political Strategy

The difference between the 2025 timeline and earlier NCEA policy progress is striking. NCEA's original rollout involved years of consultation starting in the late 1990s, with Cabinet requiring “regular consultation with principals’ groups, the PPTA and other stakeholders, such as panels of teachers undertaking development work” (New Zealand Government, 2003, Communication section, para. 2). The government noted that “many hundreds of people were involved in the professional dialogue and building of common understanding about NCEA” (New Zealand Government, 2003, Communication section, para. 3). Teachers participated directly in standards development—not just providing feedback on pre-made proposals but contributing their expertise to designing the qualification structures. Implementation was carefully : Level 1 in 2002, Level 2 in 2003, Level 3 in 2004, with schools able to continue Sixth Form Certificate if they were not ready for Level 2.

The contrast with the recent NCEA Change Programme, which the current government has abandoned, is even more stark. Beginning in 2018, that process included six months of initial public engagement (May to October 2018), during which approximately 16,000 New Zealanders participated through surveys, workshops, fono, hui, focus groups, and submissions (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2018). After this extensive engagement, Cabinet approved changes in February

2020 and established four NCEA Panels to ensure broad stakeholder representation. Development involved iterative consultation on draft materials, with Subject Expert Groups comprising teachers, industry specialists, and academics preparing reports in response to feedback. Implementation was again carefully phased, with pilot programmes, trial runs, and professional development. When evidence showed that only 40% of schools felt ready for the new NCEA Level 1, Minister Stanford postponed the programme by two years, responding to teachers' calls for greater clarity (Stanford, 2024).

This responsiveness exemplifies democratic policy development: when evidence indicates insufficient readiness, implementation slows to address concerns. The 2020 process featured extended timelines, multiple engagement methods, iterative refinement, professional participation, and responsive adjustments—elements missing from the 2025 proposal.

What becomes impossible in six weeks but possible over longer periods? A thorough analysis of complex proposals, genuine consultation with professional communities, evidence-gathering on likely impacts, the development of informed alternative recommendations, and meaningful engagement from citizens without specialised knowledge who need time to understand the implications. Comparing six weeks with six months (2020) or the years invested in the original NCEA development raises a key question: who benefits from decisions made quickly rather than slowly and collaboratively? Ball (2012) argues that crisis discourse creates urgency precisely to prevent deliberation that might expose problems with predetermined conclusions. When we observe temporal compression alongside confident crisis claims, despite mixed evidence, we might ask: what does speed prevent us from examining carefully?

Technical Language as a Mechanism for Exclusion

The discussion document consistently relies on technical-managerial language—terms such as “system coherence,” “qualification credibility,” and “international alignment.” Although these appear neutral, they conceal political choices. For example, “system coherence” can signal standardisation that constrains culturally responsive flexibility. “Qualification credibility” may privilege employer perceptions over educational values. “International alignment” can entail importing practices from different cultural contexts at the expense of approaches that are locally appropriate.

Ball (1993, 2012) shows how technical discourse operates politically by recasting complex political choices as neutral technical adjustments. When opposition to reforms is framed as mere emotional attachment rather than informed professional judgement, such language elevates some actors as authoritative while depicting others as unreliable.

Requiring specialist knowledge to interpret policy proposals also raises questions about whose participation is effectively ruled out. Parents seeking to understand implications for their children must navigate educational jargon, qualification frameworks, assessment terminology, and pathway requirements—or else defer to what they perceive as authoritative judgements expressed in professional discourse. This creates divides between experts and non-experts and limits non-specialist involvement in debates about children's educational futures.

Whose Expertise is Authoritative?

An examination of what is prioritised and what is marginalised in the proposal reveals a hierarchy of expertise characteristic of neoliberal reform. The document foregrounds employer survey data, international comparison rhetoric, and quantitative metrics (Ministry of Education, 2025). In doing so, it privileges economic rationality—framing education primarily as workforce preparation—and elevates quantitative indicators over qualitative understanding.

Concurrently, key forms of educational knowledge are sidelined. Teacher professional judgement receives minimal recognition. Student and whānau voices are provided with no formal mechanisms for input. Research on NCEA's equity is treated only cursorily. Community-based knowledge about local contexts, student circumstances, and cultural perspectives is largely absent.

The hierarchy of voices is further evident in the Minister's response to a letter from 89 principals expressing concern. She claimed to have “consulted with the education sector including her advisory group of principals” (cited in Walters, 2025), thereby framing the objections as minority dissent. Yet the signatories represented leaders from a wide range of school types and contexts. Dismissing their collective professional judgement raises critical questions about whose voices are considered legitimate. The narrow composition of the Professional Advisory Group—consisting primarily of principals from a limited range of schools, and excluding classroom teachers, students, whānau, and researchers—ensures that its advice reflects particular perspectives while systematically excluding others.

The NDA Revelation: Silencing Collective Wisdom

Perhaps most revealing is that the Ministry requires participants in advisory groups to sign non-disclosure agreements, preventing them from consulting their professional communities about policy development (Gerritsen, 2025). Reporting on this discovery, the Principals' Federation president recounted refusing to sign an NDA, stating: “I can't represent their views, so I just become one individual expressing my opinion. That's not consultation. That's a sham process that allows the Ministry to claim they've consulted with the sector when they haven't” (cited in Gerritsen, 2025).

Why are advisory group members restricted from consulting the very people they are meant to represent? Ball et al. (2012) argue that policy enactment requires contextual knowledge that only practitioners possess. When legal mechanisms prevent practitioners from engaging with their professional communities, policy development proceeds without the collective wisdom needed to understand real-world implementation. Legally restricting access to practitioners' collective knowledge may indicate that officials are seeking procedural legitimacy rather than genuine input. This enables them to claim sector consultation while limiting meaningful influence. It may also suggest that collective professional wisdom is seen as a threat because it could raise questions or objections that challenge predetermined conclusions, making it preferable to gather only individual opinions rather than collectively developed positions.

What Conception of Governance Becomes Visible?

When we consider these patterns together—compressed timeline, technical language that entrenches expert/non-expert divides, narrow hierarchies privileging economic perspectives, and legal barriers to collective input—a clear picture emerges. In contrast to both NCEA's original development and the 2020 Change Programme, the current approach signals a shift from democratic to technocratic governance, where expertise is narrowly defined, efficiency trumps participation, and speed shuts down deliberation.

This technocratic turn runs counter to research on effective educational reform. International evidence from Ontario (Pinto, 2012) and Finland (Sahlberg, 2015) demonstrates that sustainable improvement depends on extended collaboration, pilot testing, professional partnership, and responsive adjustment—all of which are largely absent from rapid, top-down processes. When New Zealand proceeds in the opposite direction despite this evidence it raises questions about whether reform quality or speed is of greater importance to officials?

These are not simply procedural issues. They concern whether those most familiar with implementation realities are able to shape policy, and whether educational policy is oriented toward long-term educational goals or short-term political gains. The 2025 NCEA replacement process—through its accelerated pace, technical framing, narrow view of expertise, and legal barriers to collective engagement—points toward troubling answers to these questions.

What These Questions Reveal About Contemporary Educational Governance

Our intention is to raise questions rather than answer them. While we cannot definitively explain policy motivations—intentions are complex and involve multiple actors with diverse interests—we can observe patterns across these three lines of inquiry that merit our collective attention.

Patterns Connecting the Questions

The selective presentation of evidence emphasises existing problems while marginalising current successes (e.g., kaupapa Māori achievement, NCEA Level 2 and 3 improvements). Implementation challenges are framed as fundamental design flaws, and resource distribution is omitted from consideration. This pattern resembles Cohen's (2002) account of moral panic discourse, in which a crisis is constructed through a focus on selective evidence and the use of smoke screens that obscure complexity and alternative explanations. Equity contradictions highlight harms that are acknowledge but not addressed across the proposals. Flexibility is constructed as a problem, and mechanisms that support disadvantaged students are removed without alternatives. This aligns with Thrupp's (2018) neoliberal "raising the bar" logic that individualises structural inequality. The process features—a compressed timeline that limits deliberation, technical language that creates divides, and legal barriers

(NDAs) that prevent the sharing of collective wisdom—mirror Ball's (2012) analysis of technocratic governance, where managerial efficiency takes precedence over democratic participation.

Taken together, what might these patterns suggest? Rather than jumping to conclusions, it is more useful to identify possibilities. One possibility is political expediency: rapid, visible change demonstrates action on a perceived crisis. Another is ideological commitment, aligning closely with neoliberal reform characteristics—standardisation over flexibility, external accountability over professional autonomy, and market responsiveness over educational values (Ball, 2012; Devine et al., 2018; Thrupp, 2018). When employer surveys prominently cited while research on culturally sustaining practice is marginalised, reforms may be responding to particular stakeholder demands rather than to educational evidence.

Different conceptions of the purpose of education present yet another possibility. The patterns suggest a view of education primarily as economic preparation—training workers to meet employer specifications—rather than fostering personal and civic growth, building collective capabilities, or sustaining cultural traditions. When reforms prioritise standardisation, external accountability, and employer confidence while restricting the flexibility that supports culturally responsive teaching and diverse pathways, what understanding of education's purpose is being normalised?

We do not claim to know which explanation holds, or whether multiple factors interact. However, the reforms appear more closely aligned with neoliberal standardisation patterns—well documented across decades of New Zealand educational policy—than with contemporary research on equity and inclusion (Kerr & Averill, 2024; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). When reforms proceed despite limited supporting evidence, acknowledged equity concerns, and truncated consultation, factors beyond educational problem-solving appear to be at work.

Whatever is driving these reforms, the rushed consultation process prevents meaningful engagement with important questions. How can we sustain gains in student achievement demonstrated in schools where NCEA's flexibility supports culturally sustaining pedagogies? How do we support students whose circumstances require such flexibility? Addressing these questions thoughtfully requires time, evidence, and collective wisdom.

By providing conceptual tools to recognise patterns that rushed reform discourse seeks to obscure, we open space for questions that the proposal's speed and certainty seek to foreclose. A six-week consultation sharply limits such deliberation. In the post-truth dynamics McIntyre (2018) describes, this may be precisely the point. When truth takes time and demands verification, collective analysis, and careful consideration, urgency obstructs that process. When thorough investigation might expose problems with preconceived conclusions, speed becomes a strategy to shut it down. This is why playing the long game matters. By offering conceptual tools to identify patterns such as selective evidence use, unresolved equity contradictions, and constrained democratic participation—patterns that rushed reform discourse works to mask—we create space for the questions that the proposal's haste and certainty seek to suppress.

Conclusion

We conclude this article by inviting readers deeper into the questions we have posed and discussed. Our inquiry revealed patterns suggesting these reforms may be driven less by educational evidence and more by ideological commitments to standardisation, managerial control, and market responsiveness—patterns consistent with decades of neoliberal educational reform in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We have openly acknowledged the limitations of our inquiry. We have analysed policy texts and consultation processes but cannot yet examine practice, since the proposals have not been implemented. We are identifying patterns and posing questions, but cannot definitively explain motivations, because policy emerges from multiple actors with complex, sometimes competing interests. While we highlight what we regard as troubling patterns, we recognise that other interpretations remain possible. Accordingly, we used conditional language—“might,” “could,” “suggests,” “raises questions”—to distinguish between what the evidence clearly shows and what remains a matter of interpretation. Where possible, we have presented counterevidence to our own readings, in an effort to practise the analytical humility we advocate for a process of inquiring into the need to replace NCEA.

We have only briefly addressed the troubling gaps in how the proposals engage with Te Tiriti obligations, and we acknowledge that these issues warrant more sustained analysis than this article allows. Whether proposed structures genuinely embed Te Tiriti principles as foundational rather than peripheral requires dedicated inquiry grounded in kaupapa Māori research methodologies and educational scholarship that centre Māori voices and values. Our analysis identifies patterns—vague commitments, missing detail about co-design processes, structural barriers to culturally sustaining pedagogies, and increased external assessment requirements with little explanation of how cultural responsiveness will be maintained—that raise serious concerns. Fully examining these concerns, however, requires analysis beyond the scope of this article. This limitation matters. Questions about honouring Te Tiriti are fundamental to educational governance in Aotearoa New Zealand, not peripheral considerations.

But perhaps questions are more valuable than premature certainty. In contexts where speed, assertion, and smoke screens obscure complexity, slow and careful inquiry becomes essential democratic work. This is the long game—not accepting or refuting proposals reflexively but creating space for questions that urgent reform discourse works to foreclose. Ball’s policy discourse analysis, moral panic scholarship, and neoliberal reform critique do not reveal “the truth” about policy motivations, but do help us ask better questions: What problems get constructed as requiring intervention? Who speaks with authority? What evidence is emphasised, minimised, or absent? What becomes thinkable and unthinkable within dominant discourse? What ideological commitments are being naturalised as neutral technical improvement?

Considering the evidence patterns, equity contradictions, and process features together, a broader picture begins to emerge. One interpretation is that educational reform is serving purposes that extend beyond the problems it claims to solve—such as political expediency, ideological commitments to standardisation and market responsiveness, or the advancement of specific stakeholder interests. Another inter-

pretation is that the reforms are genuinely motivated, with implementation details crafted to address the concerns we have highlighted. Policy texts do not allow us conclusively to distinguish between these readings. Nonetheless, the patterns matter because they reflect the characteristics of neoliberal educational reform: manufactured crises used to justify rapid change, standardisation logics that individualises structural inequality, and technocratic forms of governance that sideline democratic participation.

The key issue is not simply whether NCEA should be replaced, refined, or fundamentally reimaged, but how such decisions are made. Good answers to complex questions depend on the very conditions that rushed reform processes tend to avoid, namely: comprehensive evidence review, deep engagement with diverse experts and communities, and collective wisdom about how to balance educational values with economic priorities. We therefore advocate that a slower, more deliberate process would have better served the larger ends of education in this country—not to reach consensus on every issue, but to allow the problems to become visible and discussable. The choice, then, is not between adopting the current proposals or defending the status quo; it is between competing approaches to educational governance. The patterns we have traced suggest that the 2025 NCEA replacement currently exemplifies rapid, top-down, assertion-driven change. Whether the proposed replacement for NCEA will serve Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse communities remains an open question—one that cannot be adequately addressed in six weeks, or in a single article.

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