

Boarding the School Bus



EVERY DAY DURING THE SCHOOL TERM, several thousand buses travel along country roads once marked with distinctive dark yellow bus route signs (now fluorescent green), carrying more than 100,000 pupils to school in the morning and returning them home again in the late afternoon.¹ Since their inception more than 80 years ago, school buses have changed the educational and social landscapes of rural New Zealand. As with many innovations in education, the service was initiated largely in an effort to save money; part of a process referred to as school consolidation. Before the first buses rolled down the driveway of the first consolidated school at Piopio in the South Waikato on 1 April 1924, the merits of consolidation had been debated in educational and community circles for nearly a decade. Its implementation would bring enormous change to the lives of rural children and their experience of school.

The Education Act of 1877 had made school attendance compulsory for all children living within two miles of a school, but in a largely rural country, with a scattered population, this led to a proliferation of small schools accommodating Maori and Pakeha pupils. By the end of 1912, there were 2214 public schools open. Of these, 1343 or 61% were sole-teacher schools.² A decade later the number of schools had grown to 2550 but the proportion of sole-teacher schools had fallen only marginally to 60%,³ despite a 6% decline in the proportion of the population in rural areas.⁴

The high proportion of sole-teacher schools led to a number of problems, the most significant of which were adequately staffing the schools and the cost of their establishment and maintenance. Those issues had been recognized since at least the 1890s and the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) in particular had advocated closing smaller schools and transporting children to larger, central schools. How best to effect that pupil movement remained a problem.

An amendment to the Education Act in 1886 making it compulsory for all children living within two miles of a railway station to attend school, together with the introduction from the mid-1890s of subsidized rail travel, offered some limited scope for implementing consolidation. The Otago Education Board was the first to take advantage of this option when it rejected a proposal to build a new school in West Otago and chose instead to subsidize the transport of pupils by rail to the school at Tapanui.⁵

State subsidization of rail travel grew gradually during the first decades of the twentieth century. No definite figure of the number of pupils transported in this way was ever published but, by taking the average subsidy of 6d. per day and the total expenditure of £11,942 for 1922, it is possible that by then, as many as 10,000 primary pupils may have been travelling to school by train.⁶ However, unlike the school buses of a later era, regular scheduled services were used at this time to transport children to and from school, with the school timetable having to be adjusted to accommodate the railway one.⁷

However, rail transport could only ever afford a limited and localized solution to the problem of the proliferation of sole-teacher schools, the great majority of which were located in small, isolated communities. Effective use of rail also relied on the cooperation of the Railways Department but this, as the Cohen Commission noted in its report of 1912, was not always forthcoming. Minor timetabling changes and the addition of a passenger carriage to a goods-train were identified as inexpensive and effective ways of helping more country children to attend school 'but existing departmental systems would appear to be a serious obstacle to a good understanding of these points'.⁸

The Commission strongly endorsed the idea of school consolidation and cited with obvious approval a report on the positive effects of school consolidation in Wisconsin. The North American precedent had proven to be administratively and financially beneficial. Consolidation also enabled expanded and improved programmes to be put in place and led to a better physical environment: 'It makes possible the construction of artistic modern buildings, properly heated, ventilated, lighted, equipped, adequately provided with sanitary arrangements, pure drinking water, &c.; in fact, just the necessities of the modern school which the one room district school does not have and never has had.'⁹

Many of the Education Boards who made submissions to the Commission supported the idea and identified schools which might be involved. The Commissioners 'strongly recommended' that an attempt at consolidation should be made 'forthwith', citing as key advantages the reduction in *per capita* cost; an increase in average daily attendance rates; higher pupil retention rates; increased teaching time and reduced homework hours. The Commissioners also concluded from their investigations that better salaries would be paid and therefore more highly qualified teachers employed; that there would be improved supervision at schools; and better material equipment in terms of buildings, libraries, heating and sanitation.¹⁰ Each of these points would be reiterated over the next decade by virtually everyone speaking in favour of consolidated schools.

Despite strong endorsement from the Commission, there was little immediate movement towards adopting its recommendation, and it would be more than a decade before any schools were successfully consolidated. The existing state of roads, especially in rural areas, and the scarcity and rudimentary nature of motor vehicles meant that options available for transporting children were rather limited. Uncertainty on the part of Education Boards over the level of financial support which might be forthcoming from government would also have been a factor. Part of the attraction of school consolidation was clearly the hope that it would reduce the cost of education but reduce costs for whom? Boards had long since learnt that economies by central government were no guarantee of any lessening of the costs that they would be expected to meet. The views which pupils might have on these proposals were simply not canvassed.¹¹

A change of government within weeks of the Cohen Commission's report being tabled also served to remove talk of school consolidation from the immediate agenda. The outgoing Minister of Education, J.A. Hanan, who had been responsible for establishing the Commission, was an enthusiastic advocate

of the perceived educational benefits of consolidation. His replacement, the Hon. J. Allen, was more interested in reducing costs than embarking on an experiment which, despite the efficiencies promised by its proponents, might well result in increased expenditure. However, it was undoubtedly the outbreak of war in 1914 which was the major factor in slowing attempts to consolidate schools. Any additional expenditure, no matter what longer-term reduction in cost it might bring, was unlikely to attract support when all available resources were being directed towards the war.

Even when Hanan returned to the portfolio in 1915, his renewed efforts to speed progress towards consolidation served only to highlight uncertainties about the policy. In March 1916 he requested the Director of Education, W.J. Anderson, to ascertain from all the senior inspectors what schools in their districts could, 'with advantage', be combined or grouped into one school. Yet he also directed that the reports should be confidential 'so that they might not disturb the various Boards and Committees'.¹² Hanan's concern to reduce costs was made even more explicit in the letter which Anderson subsequently sent to the inspectors, asking them to name those schools which could be grouped 'so as to reduce the number of schools and effect a saving in expenditure on teaching'. The cost of conveyance was not to be more than the total cost of maintaining the present school.¹³

The responses to Anderson's request indicated a wide disparity of viewpoints among inspectors. Auckland's inspector identified 25 groups of schools comprising 62 separate schools.¹⁴ The response from Otago, by comparison, effectively ruled out any possibility of consolidation in the province: 'I have to say that the configuration and climatic conditions in Otago are not favourable to consolidation of schools and consequent conveyance of children.'¹⁵

Some inspectors seem simply to have ignored the memorandum; at the end of June the Director had to write once again to the inspectors in Napier, Nelson and Greymouth, reminding them of his earlier request.¹⁶ With few exceptions, there appears to have been a distinct lack of enthusiasm at the prospect of embarking on an exercise of school consolidation. Little came of this survey, and its results were not even reported back to the inspectors until August 1918 and then only as a request to provide further information.¹⁷

However, there was still support for consolidation in educational circles and especially within the NZEI. In February 1917 Hanan met with a delegation from the Institute, to discuss a remit supporting consolidation which had been passed at their recent conference.¹⁸ A record of that meeting shows the Minister agreeing with the delegation's submission and observing that 'he was thinking of doing something in the direction desired'. He also noted that 'The Act provides that the Board "may" consolidate schools, but it also provides for the Minister doing so in the event of the Board neglecting it.'¹⁹ But despite his assurances and the apparent strong support from teachers, Hanan made little progress on consolidation. Neither the Department nor the Boards appear to have had much appetite for change. This is well illustrated by the handling of a letter from the Otorohanga Chamber of Commerce, received by the Director in June 1917, which requested that a central primary school be established at Otorohanga.

The businessmen's letter nominated five schools which might be closed as they now 'could be reached in all weather by motor omnibuses', and another eight which anticipated improvements in roads would make closure feasible within a year or two.²⁰ It was referred to the senior inspector for Auckland, E.K. Mulgan, and a local inspector, N.R. McKenzie, was dispatched from Hamilton to investigate. His report was largely favourable to the Chamber of Commerce's proposal but signaled that there would be increased costs and some administrative changes.²¹ Unconvinced by McKenzie's endorsement, Mulgan wrote to the Director advising that if any appreciable addition were made to the present allowance for conveying children effecting the proposal 'might not be in the interests of economy'.²²

A request from the Otorohanga Chamber of Commerce in December 1918, this time directly to the Minister, suffered a similar fate. Clearly somewhat irritated by the lack of progress, Hanan invoked his powers under the Education Act and directed the Auckland Education Board to carry out the investigations necessary to effect a consolidation. He advised the Chamber of Commerce accordingly, in January 1919: 'I may state that I am very anxious to see a demonstration of the policy of consolidating schools as I am convinced that such a demonstration would be an object lesson which would create public interest in this system and cause considerable demand for its extension.'²³

On this occasion, Mulgan's response was more supportive and he forwarded the Director a copy of a memorandum from McKenzie, entirely favourable to the Chamber's proposal. The 'overwhelming majority' of people would welcome consolidation, the local inspector reported. Seven schools on metal roads could be consolidated immediately and another three or four once road surfaces were improved. Moreover, at least one local firm was prepared to run a bus service. McKenzie urged the Department to make an experiment in the Otorohanga district.²⁴

The Auckland Education Board's reaction was altogether different. Board member James Boddie and the advisory inspector D.W. Dunlop were delegated the task of preparing a report which they eventually submitted in June, nearly six months after the Minister's directive was sent. Boddie and Dunlop opposed the Otorohanga proposal, arguing that it would result in little, if any, gain in efficiency, while costs would be 'enormously increased' and local community interest in education would be 'destroyed'. They concluded that adopting the principle of organizing teachers would achieve the desired efficiencies at comparatively little expense. Even where it appeared that consolidation might bring about savings the Auckland Board report was at pains to explain why this would not (or should not) be the case:

At first glance it appears that the proposed scheme would effect a saving of about £850 in salaries [from a total expenditure of £2150]. Against this, however, is the extra salary paid to teachers, or to returned soldiers who would act as drivers of the buses. The Otorohanga Committee considered that female assistants as well as males, might act in this capacity, but apart from the fact that they might be unwilling to accept the responsibility, we consider it would be unwise to place a girl in charge of a motor 'bus carrying 30 children on a country road. It would therefore probably be necessary to

engage at least four or five drivers and a motor mechanic, and this would probably bring the amount of salary to practically the same amount as the salaries paid at present.²⁵

Without Board support, no consolidation carried out at the Minister's directive was likely to succeed. The matter simply lapsed. There is only one further reference to the issue in Education Department files after mid-1919, a report on the prospects for consolidation which had been promised to Hanan in July 1918.²⁶ Written by the Senior Inspector of Primary Schools, T.B. Strong, it was not submitted until July 1920, nearly a year after Hanan had left office. Strong adopted a cautious approach, concluding that the post-war era was not an 'opportune time' to undertake any consolidation that involved the expense of building extra classrooms or purchasing motor vehicles. Small-scale consolidation could and should be effected in places where one school can be substituted for two 'without undue inconvenience to any of the pupils'.²⁷

Strong's report also echoed Boddie and Dunlop's concern²⁸ that school consolidation would destroy the local interest in education, though his reasons were more economic than educational. As he saw it: '[T]he settlers themselves . . . judge and no doubt rightly that the removal of a school lessens the selling value of land in the vicinity and, on the other hand, raises the value of land nearer the central school. I am quite positive that there would be the most strenuous opposition to any general attempt to consolidate country schools.'²⁹

Here the matter would rest and there would be little or no discussion for another two years. It was revived in 1922 following the receipt of a report from T.U. Wells, headmaster of Richmond Road School and a member of the Auckland Education Board. In 1921 the Government had sent Wells to Toronto as the New Zealand representative to the Imperial Conference of Teachers. Wells was also asked by the Minister of Education, the Hon. C.J. Parr, to report on 'various phases of educational activity' in Canada and the United States.

School consolidation featured prominently in Wells's report.³⁰ He visited — and was impressed by — consolidated schools in Iowa, Colorado and California, and wrote effusively in praise of the social and material advantages which such schools conferred on their communities:

The following is a summary of the special advantages claimed for the consolidated school: (1) There are pupils enough and taxable property enough to make it practicable to build and to equip a good school (2) the better salaries and the improved living conditions make it possible to secure well-trained and experienced teachers; (3) a much-improved attendance; (4) an up-to-date four-year high-school course without leaving home; (5) the pupils advance faster and stay in school longer; (6) better sanitary conditions; (7) better libraries; (8) better vocational instruction; (9) better play and playgrounds, better athletics; (10) better community activities; (11) fewer changes in teachers; (12) greater enthusiasm and school spirit; (13) better supervision, better leadership; (14) larger vision and perspective; (15) wider opportunities for making acquaintances and forming friendships; (16) better opportunities for team-work; (17) greater training in cooperation; (18) better returns for money spent. From what I saw of the work that these schools are doing, I should say that the claims mentioned above are fully justified. I am sure that, could our own settlers see a consolidated school in operation, there would be an insistent demand for the institution of similar schools in New Zealand.³¹

On his return, Wells became an enthusiastic campaigner for the principle of consolidation, visiting many rural communities in the Board's area to speak on the benefits which school consolidation might bring.³² He was clearly successful in persuading the Auckland Board of the merits of an experiment in consolidation for, by early 1923, it was actively canvassing school districts, especially those in South Waikato, for likely participants.

Wells also convinced the Minister, James Parr, of the desirability of some experiment in school consolidation. By mid-1923 it had become part of the Government's education policy. In a newspaper interview, Parr explained how consolidation would resolve a key weakness in the contemporary education system: that 'multiplicity of small ineffective, one-teacher schools scattered all over New Zealand'. Since it was 'impossible' to provide efficient education for all pupils in such schools, the remedy lay in their 'gradual disestablishment' and replacement by 'the central, consolidated school, with good buildings, efficient staff, and modern equipment'.³³

Given the willingness of the Auckland Board to press ahead with an experiment in school consolidation, there was little need for any directives from the Minister, a contrast to the situation five years earlier under Hanan. Parr had only to encourage the Auckland Board's efforts and to ensure that support and assistance in ascertaining the suitability of the schools in the various districts under consideration was forthcoming from his Department. That Parr had been chairman of the Auckland Board prior to entering national politics was undoubtedly of assistance in smoothing his dealings with it.

Yet it was not simply the personalities and enthusiasm of Wells and Parr which provided a greater chance of achieving a school consolidation. By 1923, conveying children to a central school, upon which the entire idea of consolidation depended, had become a more feasible proposition. In large part this was linked to the improvements in automobiles. By the early 1920s cars, trucks and buses had reached a level of reliability which would have been inconceivable even five years earlier. The roads, too, had improved markedly since 1912, when the Cohen Commission had made its recommendation on consolidation. This was particularly the case in the Waikato, where the growth of the dairy industry and the establishment of dairy factories in a number of towns had led to a steady improvement in rural roads, as had the development of rural mail deliveries. By 1923 metalled surfaces, rather than dirt tracks, were becoming the norm. Thus, while automobiles still broke down and many roads remained subject to wash-out, the prospect of children being able to travel routinely and reliably to a school perhaps five miles from their home was no longer a fanciful notion.

Another factor which is likely to have made both Boards and the staff of the Department more inclined to consider consolidation was the demand for new school buildings which, increasingly, the Department was unable to satisfy. The Minister addressed this in his report for 1924:

There are . . . at least three important respects in which the question of buildings is at present a very difficult one . . . first, the very rapid increase in population, particularly in the North Island; further, a large number of the schools which were built thirty or

forty years ago are falling into decay and have to be rebuilt. There is the leeway of the war period to make up; and there is the undoubted fact that any given sum spent on the erection of buildings will provide less than one-half, probably only one-third, of the school accommodation it would previously have secured.³⁴

Building three or four classrooms at a central school was certainly a far less expensive proposition than replacing the entire building at each of three or four small rural schools. In the circumstances, consolidation was the only way in which Boards and the Department would be able to keep up with the demand.



Figure 1: Kohua Road School in 1927 provides a good example of the sub-standard state of some small schools in the 1920s.³⁵

By August, the Auckland Board had received proposals from school committees and other interested parties in three districts: Te Awamutu, Otorohanga (which had revived its bid of five years earlier) and Piopio. Wells and Dunlop, still both involved in education, were sent to investigate the viability of each.

Apart from examining matters such as the suitability of school buildings, the likely effect on costs, the availability of transport in the area and the state of the roads, the Board representatives also consulted widely with residents of the communities involved. In the case of Piopio, for instance, they visited all the neighbouring school districts concerned — Arapae, Te Mapara, Paemako, Wairiri Falls, Mairoa — holding meetings with families and discussing the full implications of the proposal.³⁶ The *Otorohanga Times* carried an extensive report on Wells's visit to the district at the end of September, noting that he had been to all the localities involved: Kio Kio, Otewa and Otorohanga. Since his arrival coincided with Friday market day when most of the settlers were in Otorohanga, a meeting was also held there in the afternoon.³⁷

Despite the concerns expressed earlier by both Strong and Dunlop, there was generally strong support for consolidation within each of the communities involved. In the first instance, each of the proposals appears to have originated from within the communities themselves; it was not simply a matter of the Board attempting to foist something on the district. The reports to the Board also suggest that there was strong (though not always unanimous) support in each of the communities. A joint committee of local residents reported in favour of establishing a consolidated school at Piopio.³⁸ The situation was similar in the Otorohanga district where, apart from dissent from some of the Kio Kio School parents,³⁹ there was strong endorsement from the other school committees. The local Chamber of Commerce telegraphed the Minister expressing their support and the local branch of the Farmers' Union wrote of the 'hearty approval of the members and settlers generally' who would 'welcome an experiment in the Otorohanga district of such a system'.⁴⁰

Community perceptions of the advantages consolidation would confer both on the children and the district are revealing. For instance, one speaker at the meeting with Wells in Otorohanga suggested that the 'number of accidents happening to children riding horses was a hundred times greater than those to motor omnibuses. In those latter the children . . . were controlled during the ride to and from school. There was not a hundredth part the risk of riding to school as at present.' Greater opportunity for secondary education was also seen as a likely benefit. 'The rising generation would be trained farmers and trained citizens.' A farm boy in the Otorohanga district was likely to be nothing more than an unskilled labourer if he left school at 13 years of age. Country boys between 14 and 17 years of age needed an opportunity to learn a trade or get an education. 'Any man opposed to consolidation must show why he accepts lower standards of education in New Zealand.' Several other speakers thought it would give locals greater 'pull' with the Highways Board in getting special consideration for better roads.⁴¹

Residents of the Piopio districts expressed a similarly diverse range of views. Perceived benefits were those of better equipment, better sanitary arrangements, conveyance of pupils in covered vehicles under supervision and fewer changes in teaching staff. Improved facilities for organized games were also important.⁴² In a small sole-teacher school with perhaps 25 pupils, ranging in age from 6 to 12, even learning the rudiments of rugby or hockey, let alone participating in a game, would have been difficult. A good case could be made for seeing school consolidation as the catalyst for participation in team sports to become a part of the experience of rural children.

By the beginning of October the Auckland Education Board had considered the reports on all three proposals. Te Awamutu was eliminated early, for only two of the ten schools involved were sole-teacher schools and a consolidation would have increased the roll of Te Awamutu District High to more than 1000, making it the largest school in New Zealand. As the report observed, the school would be 'unwieldy', and it was doubtful whether there would be any significant increase in 'efficiency'.⁴³

That left Otorohanga and Piopio. Unable or unwilling to decide between them, the Board recommended to Parr that consolidation be carried out in both

districts. Parr was reluctant to accept this advice. From the outset both Parr and his advisers in the Department had intended that transporting children to the central school should be contracted to a private company. But in neither district was there a company willing to carry out such work. Parr responded to the Board, giving an assurance that the Department would be 'willing to purchase the necessary Ford lorries, hire drivers, and so do the work directly'. Given the experimental nature of the scheme, however, Parr requested the Board to consider which of the two districts offered 'the greater advantage' for the carrying out of a consolidation scheme. The Department would then accept the Education Board's decision.⁴⁴

Parr's personal preference was for Otorohanga, on the basis of anticipated savings in building costs and in response to the 'very keen public spirit as evinced by the Chamber of Commerce, the County Council and the School Committee at Otorohanga'. He did acknowledge, however, that being a District High School counted in Piopio's favour.⁴⁵ The Board once again dispatched Wells and Dunlop to investigate further. They recommended Piopio. The community's remoteness from the railway and the sole-charge nature of all schools in the area were deciding factors.⁴⁶

The Board accepted the recommendation and the decision was conveyed to Parr. If he kept to his word and accepted it (and he did) then the 42 pupils at Arapae, the 25 at Te Mapara, the 32 at Paemako and the eight at Wairiri Falls would no longer be walking (or riding on horseback) the two or three miles to their local school. Instead, each morning they would be picked up from their gates in a bus, delivered, hopefully dry and unscathed, to join 110 other pupils in a newly enlarged school in Piopio and then returned home again in the afternoon.⁴⁷

As the proposal required the allocation of additional funding, it needed Cabinet approval, and quickly, if the consolidated school were to start in February of the following year.⁴⁸ In December Cabinet granted the funds necessary to purchase, construct and maintain the buses and pay the drivers, together with the £2500 required to erect additional classrooms at Piopio. There was no likelihood that the bus chassis could be bought, the bodies built and the finished buses delivered to Piopio for the beginning of the new school year, then only seven weeks away. Nor could the new three-room block needed be erected in that time. Classes would continue in the old schools for the first two months of 1924. Still, in principle the first consolidation school had been accepted and the first school buses were soon under construction. Three one-ton truck chassis were ordered before Christmas.⁴⁹ The contract for building the bodies was finalized at the end of January, when it was awarded to the Phoenix Motor Company of Petone, which was to replicate the design shown in Figure 2 at a cost of £60 each.

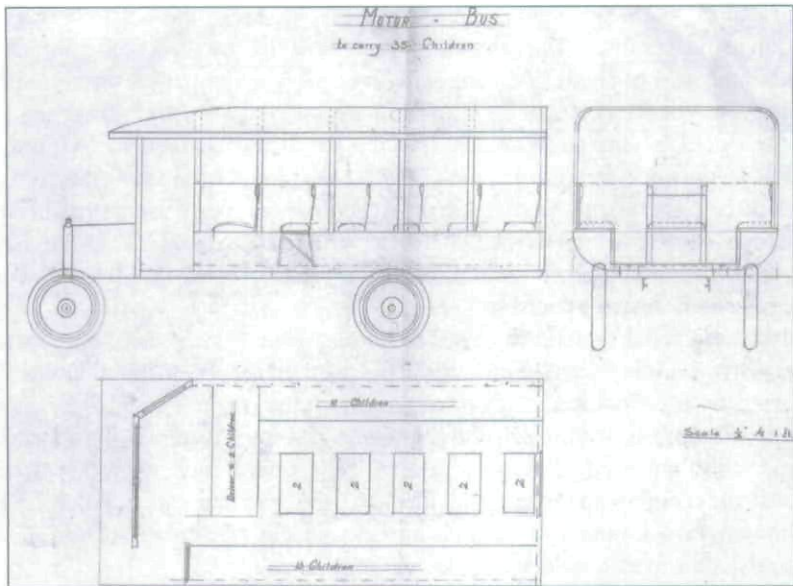


Figure 2: Education Department plan for the bodies of the first Piopio buses.⁵⁰

The completed buses were delivered to the Department in mid-March and left for Piopio by road on 24 March, in the care of a Department official and two driver-mechanics from the Post and Telegraph Workshops in Wellington. They arrived in Piopio two days later.⁵¹ The following week, on 1 April, Parr received a brief telegram from the headmaster of Piopio School, 'CONSOLIDATION EFFECTED CONGRATULATIONS'.⁵²

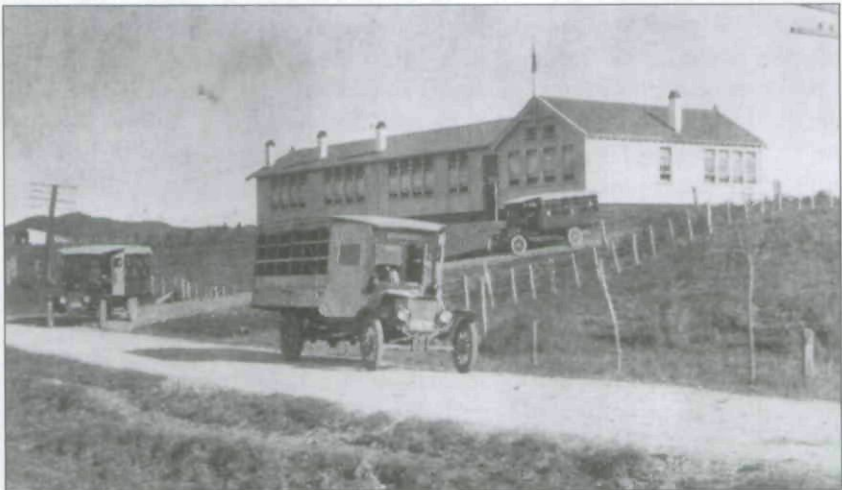


Figure 3: The three original Ford Model T buses leaving Piopio School in June 1925. *Department of Education Centennial Collection, 1977, in possession of the School of Education, University of Waikato.*

For many of the children boarding the buses that April Fool's day, travel by motor vehicle, if not completely unknown, was certainly still a novel experience. Fifty years later, Mona Mills, one of the passengers on the Te Mapara bus that morning, recalled: 'Our family, like just about all of them in the area, didn't own a car. If we wanted to go in to Piopio Dad hitched up a gig or a cart. The only times we rode in motor vehicles were when we went up to Te Kuiti in the service bus.'⁵³ But according to Mona's brother, Jim, such limited experience had hardly prepared them for the reality of these buses: 'this box mounted on a Ford chassis rolled up, its canvas sides flapping in the wind. Inside there were just wooden benches covered in thin leatherette. With the curtains rolled up the bus was completely open and not much more comfortable than our Dad's cart.'⁵⁴

The Arapae route involved a round trip of two-and-a-quarter hours and the Te Mapara and Paemako routes, one-and-a-half hours each. Thus, the drivers⁵⁵ each spent between three and four-and-a-half hours behind the wheel each day and for some of the children, 'packed in like sardines', in the words of Mona Mills, the time they spent on the bus was not much less. These were buses built to carry 30 children and the driver and were loaded to capacity from the first day.⁵⁶

Route	Miles (one way only)	No. carried	Nature of route
Arapae	10	31 pupils 1 driver	Metal, loose, undulating
Te Mapara	7	28 pupils 1 driver	Metal, good, undulating
Paemako	7	38 pupils (3 of whom are secondary ones) 1 driver	Metal, loose, hilly. The car has such a load that it is with great difficulty that the home trip up hill is accomplished

Contemporary accounts of those first bus trips have not survived. However, a passenger on the Waitanguru bus recalled, decades later, the 'kids that never seemed to adjust to the bus and were always sick',⁵⁷ and that was in the 1950s, when the roads were considerably improved on what they had been in 1924. It is reasonable to surmise that being inside one of those original buses was not always a pleasant experience.

Ventilation was also a problem. In fine weather the side curtains were rolled up but, according to Mona Mills, when it rained and these were rolled down, 'the interior of the bus, although tolerably dry, was dark and claustrophobic'.⁵⁸ A request by the headmaster, just a week or two after the service began, for some system of ventilation at the back of the bus was dismissed by a visiting department official: 'I pointed out . . . that ventilation could be provided by rolling up the side curtains.'⁵⁹

Clearly consolidation made for very long days for some children. For those picked up along the route, the time taken to get to school may have been reduced, but for some boarding and alighting at a terminus there was the

prospect of a long walk at each end of the journey. The Paemako terminus, for example, was six miles from Piopio, the Te Mapara terminus was about six-and-a-half miles, and the Arapae terminus nearly nine miles from Piopio.⁶⁰ It was early on decided that in the winter months the lunch hour should be shortened by 15 minutes so that the buses might leave earlier to give children a better chance of reaching their homes while it was still light.⁶¹

The school bus system also involved a significant extension of the social relationships into which the children entered. Previously they had sat in a classroom surrounded by brothers or sisters and children who lived just over the next fence or along the road. Suddenly, they found themselves surrounded by children who might live anything up to 20 miles distant and of whom, hitherto, they would most likely not have been aware. This was certainly the experience of Mona Mills, who recalled the first day being 'dreadful'.⁶² Most seem to have taken it in their stride, however, and friendships with children from other communities rapidly became commonplace in the experience of rural children.

The Piopio experiment attracted considerable interest from around the country. The *New Zealand Herald* and the *Auckland Star* each published a number of articles on developments at Piopio throughout 1924, and the 30 October issue of the *Auckland Weekly News* carried an extensive photographic feature devoted to the school.

Nearly a month before the consolidation, the *Herald* ran an extensive article on the topic, heaping praise and expectations on the principle of consolidation, 'a new departure which promises to lead to one of the greatest reforms this country has ever seen'. Several columns were devoted to how this new initiative might alleviate the 'many adverse elements in the present scheme of back-blocks education'. It suggested that the main achievement promised by the consolidation of schools would be the raising of the standard of education of the country population. However, and perhaps not unsurprisingly for the *Herald* at the time, that real promise lay in improving industrial relations. 'With a system of consolidated schools we shall be able to allow the individual ability to show itself and if we are successful in preventing the round peg from being thrust into the square hole we shall have gone far towards solving the labour problem.'⁶³

On 11 April, the *Herald* ran another article on developments at Piopio, which contained insights into some of the changes which the children were already experiencing, little more than a week after consolidation:

Along the routes, where by-roads intersect, small holding paddocks have or are being provided for pupils and the steeds that brought them. In wet weather the children remain under shelter until the bus arrives. Moreover, they can leave wet overcoats and saddles to dry in the shelters during the six hours they are away at school. On their return the final stage of the journey is undertaken under the best conditions . . . Only a small minority have any riding to do. The happy majority join the buses at their own gates.⁶⁴

Road safety, too, was something which had assumed greater significance as a result of consolidation:

The transport of so many small children daily naturally calls for care and discipline. One little detail is packing all the small children at the back, and the big ones forward, so as to keep the weight in the front. A pleasing sight in the morning is to see the children lined up in small queues along the route waiting for the bus. They mount as if it were a drill. On the home journey the children are required on dismounting to stand alongside the bus until it has moved off. Thus traffic control has made its way into the back-blocks, safety first being the motto.⁶⁵

'The inauguration of the scheme', the *Herald* reporter wrote, 'has been received with marked enthusiasm by settlers from one end of the district to the other . . . The settler three miles off the main road and the humble cow "cockie" are also co-operating, all ready to make sacrifices in order that their children may have a better chance.' The article confidently predicted that Piopio was only a beginning and that the 'material advancement in the education opportunities offered to backblock scholars' would see the scheme extended to other rural districts.⁶⁶ In this the *Herald's* journalist proved correct. Over the next four years further consolidations took place at Oxford (1924–1925), Hawarden (1925–1926), Lawrence (1927–1928) and Ruawai (1928–1929).



Figure 4: School bus picking up Paemako pupils, 1924. *Education Department Motor-Bus Picking Up Children For Conveyance To The Piopio Consolidated School*, AJHR, 1925, E-1, Plate between pp.8–9.

In the decade following Piopio's consolidation both the Minister and the Director received hundreds of requests from school committees and other organizations throughout New Zealand either requesting consolidation of particular schools or endorsing the principle. Some even directed their requests to the Prime Minister.⁶⁷ Farmers' groups were particularly forthright in their support for consolidation of schools. For instance, in 1927 the secretary of the Mid-Canterbury Farmer's Union wrote to the Minister to advise him of a

recent resolution passed by his executive, supporting consolidation because it provided 'a better teaching staff' and 'greater competition of children of the same age'.⁶⁸ Other groups also became involved: in 1936 the General Secretary of the RSA wrote to the Minister to draw his attention to a letter recently received from its Wairoa branch outlining the benefits of school consolidation.⁶⁹

By 1936, consolidations had taken place in all of New Zealand's education districts, with 121 schools having been closed and consolidated on larger ones and nine additional district high schools created. A further 52 applications for consolidation were under consideration, but there is no indication in the Department's files of how many schools were involved. In addition, the Department had decided not to build a further 99 schools and opted instead to deal with demand through consolidation. As a result, on average, 9643 children were travelling to school by bus each day. The longest distance any pupil was conveyed was 24 miles (that was in Canterbury), and in the 12 years since the Piopio consolidation, seven children had been injured, two of these fatally, both in the Auckland district.⁷⁰

The election of the Labour Government in 1935 saw no slackening in the pace of consolidation and the expansion of school bus services, indeed quite the reverse. By 1940, 650 schools had been involved in consolidation and of these 415, mainly sole-teacher schools, had been closed. In a speech given in April 1936, the Minister showed himself an ardent propagandist for the benefits of consolidation:

Times, however, have changed; the face of the country has been transformed, the spring-cart, the family churn and the tallow candle have disappeared, but the little school is still with us. Improvements in machinery, in roads and in transport, eliminated the churn in favour of the local creamery, which, in itself, has given place to the great dairy factory. With the coming of the tar-sealed road and the motor-car, the village smithy, and often even the village church, have gone and business and pleasure are concentrating more and more in populous centres, where expert aid of all kinds is available. Yet the little school persists, a social relic of primitive days. We may well ask: has not the time and the opportunity come to take the children to the school and not the school to the children; and should residents in some rural areas tolerate an inferior educational service for their children any more than they would tolerate an inferior medical service? Good roads and quick transport make consolidation possible and imperative. The advantages are almost too obvious to need enumeration.⁷¹

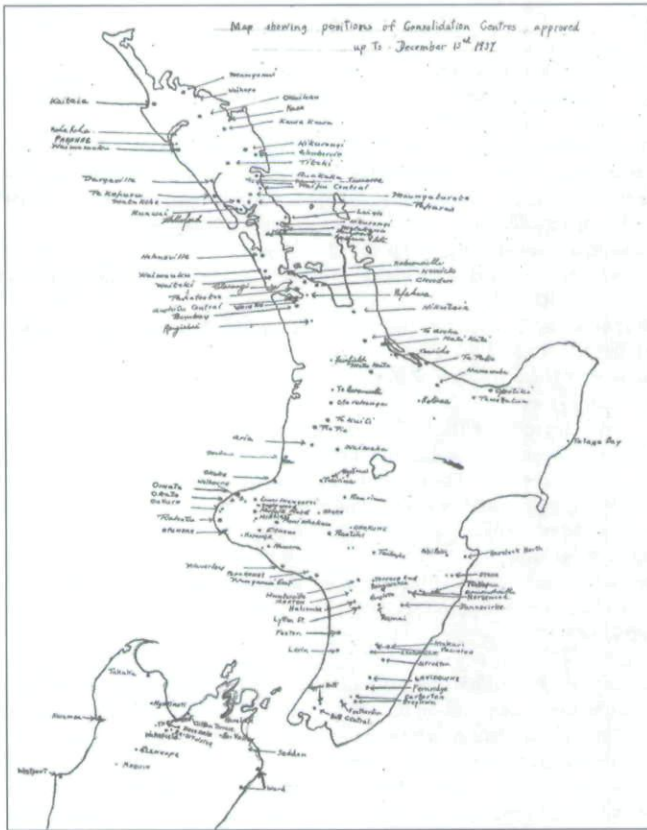


Figure 5: Department of Education sketch map showing school consolidation centres to 1937.⁷²

The decline of the small sole-teacher school has continued. Now fewer than 100 remain.⁷³ Of course there have been other factors apart from the impact of consolidation and the school bus. In many places such schools have closed simply because there is nobody left to attend them. The drift of population into towns and cities has seen to that. Also, views have changed about what is an appropriate pupil-teacher ratio. The 40 or more pupils in a 1920s sole-charge rural school would today be in a two or three teacher school and no longer would they expect to be taught in a single room. In New Zealand, as in North America, the advent of the school bus from the 1920s onwards contributed significantly to changing the educational experiences of rural children and redefining the nature of rural communities.

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NOTES

1 'Schooling In New Zealand — A Guide', Ministry of Education, http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=6169&data=1&goto=00-04#P394_36503
Last updated 24 November 2005.

2 *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1913 E-1, pp.3–4. These figures do not include the native village schools, which were reported on separately each year, generally in AJHR, E-3. While almost all these schools were rural, the proportion of sole-teacher schools was actually lower; in 1912 there 108 native village schools, of which only seven were in the charge of a sole-teacher. AJHR, 1913, E-3, pp.2–12.

3 AJHR, 1923, E-1, p.6. In the same year, 17 of 127 native village schools were sole-teacher schools. AJHR, E-3, 1923, pp.1–11.

4 David Thorns and Charles Sedgwick, *Understanding Aotearoa/New Zealand: Historical Statistics*, Palmerston North, 1997, p.54.

5 Jon Addison, *A History of School Buses*, Wellington, 1977, p.7.

6 AJHR, 1923, E-1, p.12.

7 Florence Woodhead (b.1891), who used the train when she was not quite 13 to get from Norfolk Rd, near Inglewood, to school in Stratford, had to leave school at 3p.m. each day, half an hour early, to catch the train. She remembers the boys sometimes 'spiking' the clock to make it slightly fast so that they would be out on time and would not have to run for the train. Colonial Childhoods Oral History Project, Interview No.69, Tape 4, Side 1, in possession of Jeanine Graham, University of Waikato.

8 'Report of the Commission to Inquire into and Report on Certain Matters Relating to the System of Education in New Zealand', AJHR, 1912, E-12, p.22.

9 *ibid.*, pp.21–22.

10 *ibid.*, p.22.

11 Department and Education Board files, both before and after consolidation, contain no mention of the children's views nor of how they perceived the changes involved in travelling by bus to a school many times larger than the one with which they, and their parents, were familiar. The same is also true of the newspaper reports. What information there is about the children's experience appears to have been elicited from either Board or Department officials, headmasters or the occasional school committee member. The closest one comes to the children are the many photographs of them travelling on buses, but one looks in vain for echoes of their chatter, which must have filled those buses. Such accounts of the experience as do exist are invariably the reminiscences of adults recorded many decades later, and usually little more than a brief reference in a school or district history.

12 J.A. Hanan to W.J. Anderson, 1 March 1916, Education, E2 1937/2a Consolidation (of Schools) General, Archives New Zealand (ANZ), Wellington.

13 W.J. Anderson to Senior Inspectors, 4 March 1916, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

14 E.K. Mulgan to W.J. Anderson, 27 April 1916, Education, E2 1924/1a Consolidation of Schools Auckland 1916–24, ANZ, Wellington. Interestingly, Mulgan did not mention any of the schools which were to figure in subsequent discussions on consolidation within the Board's area, namely those in the Otorohanga and Piopio districts.

15 C.R. Richardson to W.J. Anderson, 10 April 1916, Education, E2 1938/10f Consolidation Otago 1916–38, ANZ, Wellington.

16 W.J. Anderson to Senior Inspectors, 30 June 1916, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

17 J.M. Caughley (Asst. Director) to Senior Inspectors, 1 August 1918, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

18 'Notes on deputation from the Executive of the New Zealand Educational Institute to the Minister of Education on the 19th February, 1917', E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

19 *ibid.*

20 Otorohanga Chamber of Commerce to Director of Education, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.

21 N.R. McKenzie to E.K. Mulgan, 23 June 1917, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.

22 E.K. Mulgan to Director of Education, 10 July 1917, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.

- 23 J.A. Hanan to Otorohanga Chamber of Commerce, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 24 N.R. McKenzie to E.K. Mulgan, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 25 J. Boddie and D.W. Dunlop to Auckland Education Board (AEB), 19 June 1919, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 26 J. Caughley to J.A. Hanan, 8 July 1918, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 27 T.B. Strong to J. Caughley, 13 July 1920, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 28 Boddie and Dunlop, 19 June 1919.
- 29 Strong to Caughley, 13 July 1920.
- 30 Report of Mr T.U. Wells, M.A., New Zealand Representative to the Imperial Conference of Teachers, Toronto, AJHR, 1922, E-11.
- 31 *ibid.*, p.9. There was strong awareness in New Zealand throughout the early twentieth century about educational developments in both Canada and the US. Departmental files include numerous references to these and the annual reports of the Department invariably contained some comment about them. However, comparative studies of New Zealand and North American education are still rare and this is certainly the case in respect to buses and school consolidation.
- 32 See, for instance, the *Otorohanga Times*, 26 July 1922 and 2 August 1922, for a report and editorial which discuss addresses given by Wells at a number of places in the King Country.
- 33 *Dominion*, 15 August 1923.
- 34 AJHR, 1924, E-1, p.5.
- 35 Kohua Road School was eventually closed and consolidated on Piopio in 1939. This 1927 photograph was published originally in the now defunct *King Country Chronicle*, and was subsequently reproduced in the *Piopio District High School Sixtieth Anniversary 1909-69* booklet, edited by D.S. Loder, Piopio, 1969, n.p.
- 36 T.U. Wells and D.W. Dunlop to AEB, 16 July 1923, Education, E2 1926/2a Public Schools Consolidation, Piopio, Auckland, ANZ, Wellington
- 37 *Otorohanga Times*, 3 October 1923.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 49 *ibid.*
- 40 A.K. Closey to C.J. Parr, 22 September 1923, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington. Closey was also a member of the Otorohanga School Committee.
- 41 *Otorohanga Times*, 3 October 1923.
- 42 T.U. Wells and D.W. Dunlop to AEB, 16 July 1923, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 43 D.W. Dunlop to AEB, 19 September 1923, Education, E2 1924/1a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 44 C.J. Parr to AEB, 8 October 1923, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 45 *ibid.*
- 46 T.U. Wells and D.W. Dunlop, 6 November 1923, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 47 During the following 25 years six more sole-teacher schools within a 20 km radius would be closed and consolidated on Piopio.
- 48 J. Caughley to W.A. Anderson, 5 December 1923, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 49 A. Bell (for Director) to AEB, 14 December 1923, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 50 Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 51 A. Bell to Mr Beck, 17 March 1924, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington. The Department had considered railing the buses to Te Kuiti and driving them from there to Piopio. However, after receiving advice on the state of the roads from the Taranaki Education Board, it was decided to drive them to Piopio through Mokau and Awakino via Stratford and Waitara.
- 52 R.S. Webster to C.J. Parr, 1 April 1924, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.
- 53 Addison, p.5.
- 54 *ibid.* p.7.
- 55 The buses were driven by the headmaster, a male teacher and, initially, the son of the proprietor of the local garage, Mr Old. The latter was replaced during the year by a full-time mechanic, Brian Moss, employed to maintain and service the buses.
- 56 The table is reproduced from a report sent to the Department by the headmaster of Piopio School after the bus service had been running for a fortnight. R.S. Webster to A. Bell, 13 April 1924, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

57 R. and M. Nicholas, 'Education Advanced with Consolidation', in S. Frederikson, ed., *Waitanguru The Great Transformation*, Taumarunui, 1990, p.89. Waitanguru was closed and consolidated on Piopio in 1949.

58 Addison, p.7.

59 A. Bell to J. Caughley, 22 April 1924, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington

60 D.W. Dunlop to AEB 13 August 1924, Education, E2 1926/2a, ANZ, Wellington. Fifteen children also travelled from Wairiri Falls, carried by a private contractor, but this and the conditions of their journey are not mentioned in Dunlop's report.

61 *ibid.*

62 Addison, p.6.

63 *New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 8 March 1924.

64 NZH, 11 April 1924.

65 *ibid.*

66 *ibid.*

67 For instance, the Foxton School Committee wrote to express its 'appreciation and congratulations . . . in connection with your proposed consolidation of country schools', and to advise him that he had its 'hearty . . . and undivided support'. 14 August 1929, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

68 H. Christian to Minister of Education, 24 August 1927, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

69 RSA to Minister of Education, 12 November 1936, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

70 Tabulated results of Department survey of school consolidation, 1936, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

71 Speech notes, c. 20 April 1936, Education, E2 1937/2a, ANZ, Wellington.

72 Education, E2 1943/9E List of Consolidated Schools 1937-43, ANZ, Wellington.

73 It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many sole-teacher schools are currently operating in New Zealand. The 31 July 2003 roll return showed 99 state schools with a roll of 20 or fewer and hence, potentially sole-teacher schools. However, the subsequent closure of a number of these as a result of the Ministry of Education's Network Reviews means that the number is probably now well under 100 or less than 5% of schools compared with the more than 60% in the early 1920s.

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