

Principals Breathe Life Into National Standards

Presentation to the Canterbury Primary Principals Association forum on National Standards

12th March 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. They say your colleagues can be your toughest audience, but the advantage of talking to fellow professionals is that they are familiar with the issues.

The arguments about the National Standards are well known to you:

- They are untested
- They take creditable assessment tools and cobble them together into a hybrid that may or may not perform
- Their implementation is grossly under resourced, ambiguous and contradictory
- They divert our attention from developing the New Zealand Curriculum as a positive force in our children's education
- They will lead to league tables and the many vices that attend league tables.

As I say, you know about these things so I'm not going to dwell on them. Instead I have called this presentation, "Principals breathe life into National Standards" and I want to start with a story.

I know a school not too far from here where the principal is familiar with the arguments and is as concerned about the negative potential of the Standards as you or I. But he is a diligent and well meaning public servant. Furthermore he is expecting ERO early next term. So he and his management team have been making a few changes to accommodate National Standards in his school.

They have replaced PM Benchmarks with Ready to Read as their running record tool and required teachers to use seen texts for all running records. This means that whereas in the past teachers could determine a child's reading level with one or two running records it now takes them four or five.

This principal has decided that to accommodate the reporting requirements of National Standards they will no longer send out reports for the whole school twice a year. Now each child's progress is reported every six months from the date of that child's entry to school. This is not just for years 1-3, but right across the school. Furthermore, teachers must report face to face at a learning conference with parents and must be available to hold these conferences up to 7.30 in the evening. So teachers are constantly assessing in a never-ending cycle and potentially spending at least one evening a week reporting to parents.

This school has changed its report forms. It no longer reports on PE, Health and The Arts. It reports almost exclusively on literacy and numeracy.

Remember, National Standards have been in our schools for just six weeks.

This school is extreme – we hope. But ask yourself this: how have National Standards already changed my school? How have I already increased the burden of assessment on teachers and students? What programmes and initiatives that were so dear to our hearts a few months ago are quietly withering as our energy is consumed by National Standards?

If you can honestly say that National Standards have had no effect on how you do things at your school then I praise you. But I doubt you can. At Southbridge we're not even doing the National Standards but I know they have affected the expectations I have of myself and my staff.

This would not be a bad thing if the Standards were the excellent tool they might be and could be. But we know they are not.

So I ask another question: why should we take responsibility for making a silk purse out of a sow's ear? It is the Ministry of Education's job to come up with robust, workable and educationally sound policy. National Standards at this time is none of these and by simply putting our heads down and quietly getting on with it we are shouldering the burden that should be theirs. It disappoints me that not only do we appear to accept a policy that we know in its present form cannot improve student achievement, some of us are actually running towards it with arms outstretched.

I was at a meeting in Wellington recently where Malcolm Hyland, a senior manager at the Ministry of Education, reminded us that the NZC remains the most important piece of work on the table. I urge you to keep National Standards in perspective:

- You do not have to be the first cab off the rank – or even the 21st
- It is not your responsibility to solve all the riddles of National Standards
- You cannot successfully apply National Standards in your school without time and training
- You are the educational leader in your community and this gives you the responsibility spelled out in our code of ethics to “contribute to the development and promotion of sound educational policy.” You must subject National Standards to the same scrutiny you give to all the bright ideas that come through your door, to promote the productive aspects of the policy and shield your staff, students and community from the damaging effects.

I want to consider the political context of National Standards because, however much we seek to confine this issue to our children's education it is, and always has been, politically motivated.

I think this is evident in how the government's rationale for National Standards has changed over the past twelve months. At first it was all about getting schools to report to parents in plain English – this was Mrs Tolley's "good, bad and ugly" catchphrase. Then it became the driver to improve student performance – to remove the so-called 20% failure rate. Lately, however, the rhetoric has morphed again and increasingly we hear not about student performance but about teacher performance. The Standards are emerging as the government's mechanism for holding teachers to account and for setting schools in competition against each other.

I predict the next transformation we will see is the shift of the Standards into the industrial arena as the government's tool for measuring teacher productivity. I have heard premonitions that performance pay linked to National Standards will be on the table when we sit down to negotiate our contract in May or June.

The eagerness with which both the Minister and the Prime Minister pounced on the ERO report about reading and writing in years 1 and 2 was significant in this unfolding story. It's as if there has been a veil across the government's real intentions with National Standards and every now and then the veil flickers and we get a glimpse of what lies behind it.

If you think I'm exaggerating here are some other glimpses:

- The statement in John Key's recent pamphlet asking parents if they want to know "how your child's school is performing in National Standards when compared with other schools."
- Bill English's consistent comments about linking pay settlements to increased productivity, backed by a similar instruction from the State Services Commission to all ministries.
- Comments from David Grimmond, a leading economist and advisor to the government that the Standards would be "an objective measure of teacher performance, which could potentially be used in a reward system."
- The proposal by the ACT party to provide what effectively would be a voucher system for high and low achievers.
- Steven Joyce's announcement this week that funding of tertiary programmes will be linked to pass rates.

Education is a public good, which it must be because it is too important to be left to private interests, and as a public good it is inevitably political. We don't learn about that at teachers' college but we are naïve if we think we can work away quietly in our schools and avoid engaging from time to time with the political context. We are public servants but that does not mean we blindly accept everything that is dished up to us. We have a duty to our profession and to our children to probe, question and comment.

In the National Standards debate our duty is to make the connection between the actions we take today to introduce the Standards and the consequences that will follow in two, five or ten years time.

Countries that have embraced high stakes assessment programmes like National Standards have all regretted it. How will we feel a decade from now if National Standards has led to a curriculum shrivelled to a diet of reading, writing and mathematics, when our brightest are bored, our neediest are neglected and those in the middle are harassed, hot-housed and assessed to within an inch of their lives? It will do us no good then to blame Anne Tolley – she will be long gone. The blame will be ours for our complicity in breathing life into a deeply flawed idea. Let us not close our minds to the good stuff in National Standards but we must walk very carefully into this minefield, take our time, challenge everything and defend ourselves, our profession and, above all, our children.

Thank you.