

Why National Standards worry schools

Presentation to NZEI forum

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- Schools do not oppose standards – we have had them for a long time, we use them and report against them to parents, Boards of Trustees and Ministry of Education
- National Standards have some positive aspects – the Standards draw upon and add to a stream of work that has developed in recent years around providing more robust and useful assessment tools for schools.
- So why are principals and teachers concerned?
 1. The Stds are untested. As a school leader I am being asked to apply an innovation that is unproven. It is like a car maker launching a new model without a single test drive. We wouldn't do it to motorists, so why do it to children? The Stds draw on assessment material that generally has been available to schools but they bring these various pieces of assessment together in ways they were not designed for. To take the motoring metaphor further, the Stds are a hybrid car cobbled together from bits and pieces of a dozen different models. Apart from the fact that such a hybrid would look a fright can we have confidence that it would perform well?
 2. The Standards raise more questions than answers for schools. Remember, teachers and school leaders had no input into the development of the Standards. They arrived in schools in November and now as we are beginning to look closely at them we find that they are ambiguous in some places and contradictory in others. School leaders are only now beginning to receive training to use the Standards and even this reveals the ramshackle nature of the process. At a Stds training workshop last week we were informed that schools do not need to report to parents using the terms "at, above, below, or well below." According to the new National Administration Guidelines, these terms, so beloved of Mrs Tolley, are only required when reporting to school Boards of Trustees. Apparently we can develop our own language for reporting to parents. This does not fit with the messages we've been hearing up to now. Again, as a school leader I am reluctant to expose my staff and children to the additional work and pressure that comes with implementing new policy if that policy is full of holes.
 3. We have better things to do. National Standards were introduced at the very moment the New Zealand Curriculum was also going live in

schools. The comparison between the implementation of these two ideas is instructive. The NZC has been put together over several years, with extensive consultation with teachers, school leaders and educationalists. There is strong buy-in from the profession, from Boards of Trustees and from communities. At my school I would consider it an opportunity lost if we were to divert our attention from implementing the NZC at this time. We are told that the Nat Stds are aligned with the NZC and should not derail our work with that innovation, but the practicalities of workload prohibit the successful launch of two major initiatives at the same time. We simply cannot do justice to both while continuing to teach our children and manage our school, and in my view we will improve student achievement more by seeing our course with the NZC than diverting to National Standards.

4. National Standards distort the balance of teaching and testing. To do National Standards well schools must divert considerably more resources into assessment. The thorny issue of moderation will be described by other speakers tonight but, as an example, in the past week I have spent close to \$2,000.00 on relieving teacher costs to allow my staff to be released to mark and moderate children's writing samples. This is from a total annual reliever budget of \$10,000 to cover all staff absence. We do this twice a year as part of our normal practice at Southbridge School but this is only a fraction of what is expected of us under National Standards. We will receive no additional funding to cover the extra load. In addition, every day those teachers are out of the classroom is a day less that they can focus on the instruction of their students. As the old saying goes: simply weighing the pig more often will not make it grow faster.

These are simply the immediate issues confronting schools. Of more concern to me and many school leaders and teachers are the longer term implications of heading down the pathway of high stakes assessment. I will mention just one of these, one you have perhaps heard about before – the issue of league tables. By this I mean the publication of lists of schools ranked by their results.

We are told that secondary schools have been subject to league tables for years and it does them no harm. I disagree. It seems to me that schools which frequently appear at or near the bottom of these lists are forever labouring under the stigma of being 'bad' schools. These schools have to work much harder than others to justify themselves, to present a positive image, to bolster confidence and school pride among their staff and students. It is a credit to many that they are able to do this.

The refusal of government to offer guarantees that school data generated by National Standards results will not be available for the media to build league tables immediately makes National Standards very high stakes for schools. Suddenly National Standards is not about reporting to parents in plain language or even about improving student achievement. The prospect of league tables makes it a policy about the accountability of teachers and schools.

So what? Teachers and schools should be accountable. Yes, but if the measure of accountability is the number of children achieving a standard we must ask ourselves what is the price to our children of making this the measure. The price is that the Standard becomes a minimum standard. When schools are under public pressure to perform to a standard (and remember, for schools the stakes are high – being labelled a poor or failing school means losing students, and with them the funding to maintain staff and programmes, to serve the local community with the quality of education it deserves). If, as I say, they are under pressure they will focus resources on lifting the greatest number of children to the standard. Once they reach the standard they will be neglected. Children above the standard and those considered too far below to reach the standard will lose out. Ultimately National Standards will achieve exactly the opposite of its intention – it will lead to mediocrity, not excellence.

This is exactly what has happened in countries like England and the USA which have had high stakes assessment programmes in place for a decade or more. These countries are now scrambling to extricate themselves from a system that demoralises students, narrows the curriculum and promotes failure.

The government claims we will not make the mistakes of other countries because we have not opted for a single national test. But the important matter is not how the data is gathered but how it is used – and league tables cause the same damage whatever the sources of their data.

I want to finish by reminding you that New Zealand has an excellent education system. We produce students who can read and write and do maths to high levels. We produce students who can think, who are independent learners and who succeed in life. I think it is important to remind ourselves of that because as a school leader I feel a bit besieged at the moment by the rhetoric of school failure coming from our political leaders and others. Education in New Zealand is not broken.

We are told that educators who criticise National Standards are doing so to protect their vested interests. We are told that teachers, like everybody else, need to be held accountable for their work. I can tell you that teachers are accountable: to their school leaders, their Boards of Trustees, to ERO and to their communities. Ultimately, of course, we are accountable to ourselves, and I have met few teachers who are not their own worst critics and their own greatest motivators to succeed. That is called professionalism.

National Standards is a crucial policy – the debate around it is all the evidence we need. I believe the Standards could play a part in improving student achievement. But I fear they will fail because they have been conceived from political and not educational motives, because they are being implemented hastily and with too few resources, and because they are being over sold as the panacea for all the supposed ills of our education system. As a school leader these reservations make me very troubled.

Thank you.