

Why National Standards worry teachers

As children returned to school this week a major reform of education was launched. It was the New Zealand Curriculum, the result of years of careful development, consultation and training. It is a unique document to bring New Zealand education into the 21st century. Teachers, principals and Boards of Trustees are excited about its potential.

The launch of the new curriculum has of course been completely overshadowed by the introduction of National Standards. This is no surprise considering the government's determination that National Standards, not the Curriculum, will be the most important educational change in 20 years.

Debate around National Standards puzzles the public. Why are government and teachers at odds over a policy that seems so obviously good for children? Surely it's a no-brainer to want to know how your child is achieving against a standard and to have that information reported in plain language?

So why the fuss? John Key tells us the opponents of National Standards are just grumpy teacher unions defending a vested interest in keeping their members comfortable. In fact concerns about the Standards began among academics and include a growing number of school Boards and at least one of Mr Key's own cabinet ministers.

The most immediate concern is that the Standards have not been trialled. The government's haste to implement an election promise saw National Standards written and introduced within twelve months, a timeframe that made a mockery of consultation and a stark contrast to the introduction of the New Zealand Curriculum.

The roll out of NCEA into secondary schools should have taught us the errors of introducing complex change without sufficient trial. The fact is we don't know how well the Standards reflect what children can achieve. They draw together a range of assessment methods currently used in schools but not designed to work together to make a definitive (or simplistic) generalisation about a child's achievement against a National Standard.

Another concern is lack of training. Teachers are experts in assessing children's learning but the government believes too many are not up to scratch. Unfortunately this is not matched with resources for implementing National Standards. The \$26 million announced this week for teacher development, along with a similar sum announced last year, are to support poorly performing schools identified by National Standards results. As this information will not be available until 2012 it is hard to see how the money will be allocated. In the meantime, apart from some on-line resources, most schools are receiving no support.

A grave concern of teachers is that data showing how their school performs will eventually be available for the media to construct league tables. The concern springs not from fear of accountability but from the real damage

league tables do to student achievement.

The threat in league tables stems from the tendency of National Standards to become minimum standards. Schools under pressure to look good in the league table will devote their resources to lifting the greatest number of children up to the bar. This means they will concentrate on children just below the Standard, to the neglect of those above or well below. So both the bright and the most needy children suffer, with the ironic result that National Standards produces the very mediocrity and inequity it aims to eradicate.

This has been the experience in Britain and the USA. Both countries are now scrambling to extricate themselves from the disasters of high-stakes assessment. Anne Tolley claims we will not reproduce their mistakes because we have not opted for a single national test, but the danger lies not in how children are tested but in the use of the data to create league tables.

Teachers are frustrated by the Minister's determination to make our education system appear broken. Mrs Tolley creates the impression that National Standards fill a gaping void. This is far from the truth. Teachers already know who is not achieving and are working effectively to support those children, often in the most trying conditions.

Mrs Tolley justifies her policies by repeating that 20% of students are failing. What she means is that currently 20% of students fail to achieve literacy and numeracy standards at University Entrance level (NCEA level 2). This figure has been dropping for some time and those groups at greatest risk of failure, Maori and Pasifika students, are the focus of a range of interventions.

Education in New Zealand is world class, our teachers are professional and open to change. If the government agreed to trial National Standards and to legislate against league tables the opposition would largely vanish. Is that too much to ask?

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