

National Standards

PPTA background paper

January 2010

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PPTA represents the professional and industrial interests some 18,000 secondary teachers in state secondary, area, manual training and intermediate schools, as well as tutors in community education institutions, alternative education and activity centres, and principals in secondary and area schools. More than 95% of eligible teachers choose to belong to the Association.

PPTA background paper on National Standards

The government seems bent on implementing National Standards in New Zealand's primary schools from 2010, yet there is no robust evidence to show that this policy will result in improved achievement for the students currently "falling behind"¹. In fact, there is ample evidence that this will be a misguided approach to a manufactured "crisis"², with disastrous effects on student and teacher wellbeing. In a policy environment where "evidence" is normally required to justify the expenditure of scarce government resources, it is extraordinary that a policy would proceed on the basis of simple assertion. PPTA is forced to conclude that this policy is based on ideology rather than fact.

Criteria for quality assessment

In 1997, PPTA's Qualifications Framework Inquiry³ established eight criteria for an educationally valid qualifications system. All of those criteria also apply to assessment for other purposes, and can be restated as follows:

- **Fair:** The assessment must accurately describe learner achievement in a trustworthy fashion.
- **Inclusive:** The assessment must take into account the diversity of needs and aspirations of learners, and the variation in their abilities and disabilities, attitudes and needs.
- **Cumulative:** The assessment system must recognise and build on learning achieved across all areas of the curriculum.
- **Clear:** Learners and teachers can readily obtain clear and helpful information and guidance about what is required to succeed, but this should not result in dilution or narrowing of goals in the interests of precision.
- **Motivating:** Assessment must be empowering and motivating for both learners and their teachers.
- **Coherent:** Assessment must involve models and strategies which do not result in fragmentation of learning but allow learners to see and

¹ Tolley, A. (2009) *National Standards: Information for schools*, Wellington: Ministry of Education.

² For example, in both PISA 2003 and 2006 for literacy -, while it is true that the gap between students at the 95th and 5th percentiles was larger than for some similar countries -, even our lowest 5% of students performed better than the OECD average (e.g. MOE (2009), *Reading Skills for Tomorrow's World*, Wellington: Ministry of Education). This is far from being a crisis.

³ Allen, Crooks, Hearn and Irwin (2007) *Te Tiro Hou: Report of the qualifications Framework Inquiry*, Wellington: PPTA.

understand the big picture. Easily measurable outcomes should not predominate at the expense of outcomes that are more difficult to assess but still important.

- **Constructive:** Assessment must promote learning by helping students understand their strengths and to identify areas where further learning is needed.
- **Manageable:** The assessment system must not create undue workload or stress on teachers or students, because this will undermine teaching and learning.

The government's policy on National Standards fails to measure up to these criteria:

- They will not be **fair** because, while teachers are encouraged to use a range of assessment tools to generate their final judgement, there is not a comprehensive system of moderation to ensure that teachers' judgements are nationally consistent. The Standards have undergone no trialling, which raises questions about their credibility and therefore fairness. They are referenced to the levels of the New Zealand Curriculum, levels which themselves were never based on empirical evidence and have proven problematic, e.g. in the norm referencing of Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle) assessments. The Standards are therefore "shots in the dark", but with serious negative consequences for students.
- They will not be **inclusive**, because they make the assumption that all students at a particular year level should be achieving at the level of the standards or higher, and students who may have been making significant progress throughout their schooling but started at a lower level of achievement will have to be reported as achieving below or well below the standard.
- They will not be **cumulative**, because although assessment exemplars from across the curriculum areas have been provided, the high stakes nature of the Standards may force schools to exert pressure on teachers to focus excessively on literacy and numeracy in isolation rather than within the context of the whole New Zealand Curriculum.
- They may be **clear** in terms of stating and exemplifying the standard desired, but this will be at the expense of a broader curriculum being offered to students.
- They will not be **motivating** for students who fail to achieve at their year level. Being labelled a failure year after year is not motivating. The emphasis should be on measuring and reporting progress, not on measuring achievement against a pre-ordained level. The Standards will also not be motivating for teachers who do everything in their power to help their students succeed but still have to label some of them as achieving below or well below the standard.
- The assessment will not be **coherent** because of the increased high stakes for achievement in reading, writing and maths. This may lead to narrow teaching to the Standards in many classrooms, and a tendency to rely on nationally standardised assessment tools rather than rich tasks.
- The new reports required by the policy may, in some respects and in some limited areas of the curriculum, prove **constructive** by identifying aspects

of learning where the student could improve. However, the global nature of the grades to be reported (*below, well below, at, above or well above the standard*) will be the part of the report most focused on because it is most high stakes. This will not prove **constructive** for families, schools, and large numbers of students. We need to go no further than to look at the effects of NCEA league tables on secondary schools to observe their destructive and reductive impacts.

- The policy will not be **manageable** for teachers, involving a huge increase in administration due to the high stakes nature of their judgements against the standards. Extensive and ongoing professional development for every teacher will be required to enable them to make reliable judgements against the standards. This needs to be at the *beginning* of implementation to avoid problems developing.

Impact on implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum

There is a huge risk that introduction of the National Standards will do serious damage to implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum. This is because the Standards will be more high stakes for teachers than the rest of the curriculum. Teachers will feel pressure to focus on the Standards at the expense of delivering a broad and balanced curriculum. What will be lost will include the new focus on the “front end” – the principles, values and key competencies – and the delivery of the full range of disciplines. This could lead to students moving into secondary schools with serious learning deficits in areas such as Sciences, the Social Sciences, Technology and the Arts, because students will have had even less access to them at primary level than they currently have. The government should take note of the recently published Cambridge Primary Review of the English curriculum⁴, and its recognition that the heavy focus there on literacy and numeracy has had significant negative impacts.

Impact on innovation in assessment

While there has been significant progress made in both primary and secondary schools in terms of more innovative assessment processes - via National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) in primary and National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in secondary - this will be lost as primary teachers resort to standardised testing tools to make judgements. Students will come through to secondary without experience of wide-ranging assessment tasks.

NEMP has been providing New Zealand schools and the system with rich information about student achievement across the learning areas since 1995. It uses a light sampling methodology and practising teachers are trained to be assessors. NEMP is highly regarded internationally and seen by assessment experts as hugely superior to the various experiments with national standards and standardised testing embarked upon by more misguided governments.

⁴ <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/>

Impact on professional learning for curriculum areas

Funding to School Support Services (SSS) for professional development across the curriculum for primary has been cut for 2010, and SSS is required to focus entirely on literacy and numeracy in their work with primary teachers. While disastrous for the broad and balanced curriculum in primary, including PPTA members in Years 7 and 8, this will also reduce access to professional development across the curriculum for year 9 -10 teachers.

Impact on student behaviour at secondary level

The government appears to believe that telling students they are achieving “below” or “well below” the expected level will motivate them and their parents to do better. There is a huge body of evidence that the effect of this will be quite the reverse, and there will be an increase in demotivated and disengaged students coming through into secondary schools, seeing themselves as chronic failures. (Again, the Cambridge Primary Review provides up-to-date evidence of this.) This will mean the government’s efforts on behaviour will be countered by its own policy!

Unproductive use of teacher time

The stress and workload impacts on teachers from the National Standards will be immense. Not only will teachers be expected to learn to assess against the standards, but no robust moderation system has been provided to give them guidance on consistency of judgements. The experience of secondary schools with NCEA assessment is that processes are needed to ensure assessors are “socialised” into an understanding of the standard: “Research has demonstrated that standards cannot stand alone, and that they will only exist when they have found their way into assessors’ heads – the ‘socialisation of the assessors’. The pre-requisites for this are training, the use of exemplars, and good moderation systems”.⁵

Teachers have also been asked to use a range of assessment tools to inform their summative judgement against the Standards, but they have been offered no professional development about how to triangulate multiple sources of information to form a single judgement.

The materials supplied to schools provide a very “fuzzy” message about how to make the judgement. In the reading and writing standards, teachers are told to “make an informed, balanced judgement about what constitutes the **“best fit”** in terms of the student’s actual performance” (p.13). In the maths standards, teachers are told instead to “base their decision about a student meeting a given expectation on whether the student solves problems and models situations in the expected way **independently and most of the time**”, but then they are told that “the expectations for Number are **the most critical requirement** for meeting a standard” (p.12).

⁵ Allen, Crooks, Hearn & Irwin (2007), op. cit.

All this confusion will create high levels of anxiety and unproductive extra work for teachers, and take their attention away from the important task, which is to address the learning needs of their students.

New Zealand already has an excessive emphasis on summative assessment. We have more years of qualifications assessment than most other OECD countries, many of which have only one year, the graduating year, or at most two years. To continue this down into Years 1 to 8 is counter to what we know about quality assessment, i.e. that summative assessment should be used sparingly, and most effort should go into diagnostic and formative assessment as the major contributors to student learning.

Teacher morale will be negatively affected when students who have made significant progress from where they started have to be labelled as achieving below or well below the expected level. This will particularly affect teachers in low decile schools with a significant proportion of their students coming in with educational disadvantages, but it will affect all teachers because every teacher has some students who try really hard but just can't get to the Standard within the timeframe set.

Impact on schools

The government continues to insist that it will require schools to collate and report data on their students' achievement against the National Standards, as well as reporting to parents on the achievement of individual students. (While this has been deferred until 2011 for collection of data and 2012 for reporting to government, there is no indication that the government will resile from this aspect of the policy.)

Although the government claims it does not intend league tables to result from this, it has offered nothing to prevent this happening. As secondary schools know well from their NCEA experience, if the data is available the media will create league tables. This becomes a form of "naming and shaming" schools, and creates huge pressure on teachers to interpret the Standards as generously as they can in order to minimise the "shame" to the school.

The likely outcome, in the flawed competitive context of Tomorrow's Schools that schools are forced to operate under, would be development of a "school down the road" syndrome, similar to the one that has developed around NCEA internal assessment, where schools claim that they themselves are doing everything right, but some other school (usually unnamed) is making it easier for students to succeed. In the end this can lead to demands from teachers themselves for national tests, similar to those that have been so discredited internationally, so that a sense of "fairness" can be restored and manageability achieved.

There is also ample evidence internationally that league tables have perverse effects, leading teachers to play various "games" to help the school to perform well on the league tables. Some of these games are listed by John Hattie in

his recent paper⁶, and include the exclusion of certain students from the data and retaining students at a level for a further year. Game playing of this kind has reached its peak in the United States under the No Child Left Behind policy of standardised testing. Australian academic Professor Alan Reid, University of South Australia, argues that league tables have been shown to:

- Narrow the curriculum, by focusing on a small number of areas, and cause teachers to teach to the test;
- Force schools to hide issues and problems and even manipulate data to improve outcomes, thus eroding genuine quality;
- Make the focus of teaching those students who are at the cut-off, thus causing students of high ability and low ability to be neglected;
- Tell educators what we already know, at great expense – that is, that the results largely reflect the student demographic⁷.

Do parents want the standards?

The government has claimed that parents want National Standards, but there is no evidence for this. NZCER research, commissioned by the government⁸, elicited 3011 responses from parents - an excellent response rate and a good cross-section of parents. There was **no** demand from parents for standards, in fact significant numbers of parents expressed anxiety about the proposal, citing negative impacts on students, teaching, teachers and schools. Only 3% of parents made positive comments about having information that compared their child's achievement with national benchmarks.

The things that most mattered to parents were schools sharing information about their child's progress in a timely way by ensuring parents had good access to teachers, motivating and respecting the individuality of each child, giving parents ideas and resources for helping their children at home, and working with parents in a respectful way. None of these require National Standards. A simply policy message to schools, to the effect that school reports should be in plain English and constructive for parents, would have delivered what parents want, especially if it was supported with some "good practice" examples.

⁶ Hattie, J.A.C. (2009, October). *Horizons and whirlpools: The well travelled pathway of national standards*. Working Paper from Visible Learning Lab, University of Auckland.

⁷ Reid, A. (2009) *Is this a revolution? A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda*. Paper presented to Australian Curriculum Studies Association conference, Canberra, 8-10 July.

⁸ Wylie, C., Hodgen, E., Darr, C. (2009) *National Standards consultation analysis: Report for the Ministry of Education*, <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EducationInitiatives/NationalStandards/SummaryOfResponses/EducationSector.aspx>

Academic critiques of the policy

In a position paper of this length, it is impossible to give full expression to the range of academic critiques of this particular policy, or of national standards/standardised testing policies in other countries. However, the evidence is clear. Many countries that have gone down this route in the past are now turning away, most notably the United Kingdom.

The most significant critique of this particular policy here in New Zealand is a paper published by Professor John Hattie of Auckland University.⁹ In this paper, Hattie argues that it is “not a step forward to adopt policies that are known to be flawed when implemented elsewhere”. He describes the kind of “games” that standards lead schools and teachers to play, and the effects of them on innovation and curriculum delivery.

A group of academics (Professors Martin Thrupp, John Hattie and Terry Crooks, and Lester Flockton) published on 25 November 2009 an open letter to the Minister of Education¹⁰, in which they warned that the policy as being implemented currently would “not achieve intended goals and is likely to lead to dangerous side effects”. They criticised the assumption that a child is failing if they do not meet the standard for their age: “There are many successful New Zealanders with unexceptional school records who would not have succeeded had they been constantly labelled as failures during their childhood.” Instead, they recommended that New Zealand “focus on the progress that children are making”. They warned: “Minister, you are aware the international record on the effects of national testing is damning. We recognise the intended National Standards are not national tests, but our understanding of why national testing has such adverse effects convinces us that the intended National Standards system will suffer most of the same problems.”

An American academic, Rick Stiggins, has published an online paper titled *Five assessment myths and their consequences*¹¹. The myths are as follows:

- The path to school improvement is paved with standardised tests
- School and community leaders know how to use assessment to improve schools
- Teachers are trained to assess productively
- Adult decisions drive school effectiveness
- Grades and test scores maximise student motivation and learning.

Instead of summative assessment in the form of tests, he argues, teachers should be using assessment **for** learning (or formative assessment).

In *Assessment for learning: Beyond the black box*¹², the Assessment Reform Group in the United Kingdom argues that “There is no evidence that

⁹ Hattie, J.A.C. (2009, October), op cit

¹⁰ <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/ED0911/S00107.htm>

¹¹ http://www.childrensprogress.com/documents/2007_10_07_EducationWeek.pdf

¹² <http://www.assessment-reform-group.org/AssessInsides.pdf>

increasing the amount of testing will enhance learning. Instead the focus needs to be on helping teachers use assessment, as part of teaching and learning, in ways that will raise pupils' achievement." They distinguish between assessment **of** learning (for grading and reporting) and assessment **for** learning.

It seems absurd that formative assessment, well known to be the most powerful influence on student learning, has been the focus of much teacher professional development here in New Zealand, e.g. through the Assess to Learn (AToL) project, yet the current government is taking teachers' attention away from that and onto assessment **of** learning, which is well understood to have little positive impact on learning.

In March 2009, a group of New Zealand academics published a paper, *Directions for assessment in New Zealand*, for the Ministry of Education as part of the revision of the national assessment strategy¹³. In this paper, they write: "Parents typically want to know how their child is doing relative to others of the same age and level. Some view national testing as the solution, but where national testing regimes have been put in place they have proven inimical to learning." Later in the paper they write: "When people refer to standards, they typically mean normative descriptions of what students at a particular age or stage of school should know and be able to do... The assumption is that standards are the lever that will have all students achieving at specified levels and that standards can be used to hold the system, including individual teachers, accountable for their performance... [T]his narrow understanding has proven counterproductive to learning when adopted elsewhere ..."

It is a tragedy that the government is refusing to recognise the weight of local and international evidence against National Standards.

Conclusions

The government's National Standards policy is misguided and educationally unsound. Even when offered a compromise by NZEI and NZPF, to pilot the Standards first, the government has remained obdurate.

The policy is clearly driven by ideology, because the huge weight of research evidence is that the policy will not achieve the goals it is claimed to be designed to meet, i.e. to improve student achievement, especially the achievement of students who are currently deemed to be "under-achieving".

Spending precious government funds on the introduction of National Standards is absolutely the wrong choice if the government wants our students to achieve better. There are many better areas to spend money.

¹³ Absolum, M., Flockton, L., Hattie, J., Hipkins, R. and Reid, I (2009) *Directions for assessment in New Zealand: Developing students' assessment capabilities*, downloaded from <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-in-the-classroom/Directions-for-assessment-in-New-Zealand-DANZ-report>

New Zealand has a number of major projects to address literacy and numeracy teaching in primary schools, such as Reading Recovery, the Literacy Project, and the Numeracy Project. All of these projects would be much more effective if they were available to more schools, teachers and students.

Each student is much more than just a test score or a point on a graph. Any policy that leads teachers to see students in that light is doomed to fail.