



CHiLD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

National Standards: Supporting Children's Learning or Tolley's Folly?

Professor Martin Thrupp (2010)

Next week the government begins nationwide public consultation around its controversial plans to introduce National Standards into all primary and intermediate schools from 2010. Depending on the form they take and the way they are used, National Standards could be a very damaging development for New Zealand or they could be more useful. The consultation will certainly warrant attention by all concerned with the wellbeing of New Zealand's children and its future prosperity.

If they are done badly, National Standards will introduce some kind of high-stakes testing regime into New Zealand primary schools. Countries like England and the US have had such approaches for many years and there is much research evidence to show how damaging their testing policies have been. What happens in high-stakes testing regimes is that the 'tail wags the dog'. Teachers, under external pressure to get good results, begin to teach to the test/standard, substantially narrowing the taught curriculum and making teaching and learning less authentic. Test results increase for a few years but then flatten out once the 'testing to the test' effect gets used up. This is because there have been few genuine learning or creativity gains to sustain further improvement.

Teaching becomes a less rewarding occupation and it becomes harder to recruit teachers, especially in those low socio-economic settings where the pressures are greatest. For individual children in high-stakes testing cultures, lessons become less interesting and less likely to address their needs. They become labelled by their achievements and subjected to 'educational triage' where schools focus on some children at the expense of others depending on whether or not they have the potential to pass the tests. Children also become a commodity for schools when they try to recruit high achievers who can enhance their school's test results. They try to avoid taking on 'expensive' special needs students and those with behavioural problems.

In contrast to this disastrous scenario, the New Zealand Education Institute, the New Zealand Principals Federation and the New Zealand Assessment Academy (a group of education academics) are all calling for approaches which would see National Standards providing assessment information in ways which do not set up harmful and controlling performance cultures in schools. They are asking for a focus on supporting and enhancing teaching and learning rather than taking a heavy-handed approach which displaces teachers' professional expertise. Their arguments offer sensible responses to the paradox that the more performative

pressure is placed on teachers, the less authentic their teaching will often become. For this reason high-stakes National Standards will be deeply counterproductive.

The consultation will no doubt raise more of the same from the sector but it remains to be seen how much the government will trust this advice. One reason to be concerned is the way National Standards have come about to date. They follow a decade of National Party proposals for some kind of national testing in schools which have always emphasized the need for more public accountability of schools and teachers. In the last election National had difficulty differentiating its policies for schools from Labour. National Standards may be seen as crucial for putting this Government's reforming stamp on the education sector.

There is also a poor record of National wanting to listen to concerns about National Standards. The Minister of Education, Anne Tolley, has often argued that the sector is largely supportive, although the New Zealand Council for Educational Research has provided research evidence to the contrary. The Minister has also been dismissing concerns based on the experience of national testing in other countries on the grounds that National Standards will allow for a range of tests rather than a single one. But this doesn't mean National Standards would not set up the kinds of perverse consequences evidenced under other national testing regimes and it would be Tolley's folly not to recognise this.

It is also of concern that while there is to be consultation now, the Bill establishing National Standards was pushed through under urgency before Christmas, bypassing the need for select committee consultation in the first instance. Mrs Tolley is so far offering few assurances about the way the National Standards will be used by government. While she was recently forced to state in the House that the Ministry of Education would not create league tables from the data, some of her comments suggest that the Minister does not really understand the concerns of the sector in this area.

Other reasons for concern revolve around the wider views expressed by the Minister. These often suggest this Government is operating with simplistic notions of poorly performing teachers needing to be made more accountable. For instance on a recent National Radio interview, Mrs Tolley was arguing that poverty is too often used as an excuse for underachievement. Good teachers are clearly expected to win through irrespective of the socio-economic contexts they operate within. It is hardly realistic and could easily see a return to the politics of blame we saw in the 1990s where schools in low socio-economic areas were publicly castigated by ERO.

Finally, the Government's rationale for bringing in National Standards remains unclear. For instance there is an obvious mismatch between National Standards for all New Zealand children and the claim that National Standards are most needed to address the problem of the 20% of children, especially Maori and Pasifika, who make up New Zealand's so-called 'long tail of underachievement'. If the primary intention of the policy is really to address the achievement of these students, it would make sense to take a more targeted approach. This approach should go beyond education to recognise the wider context of child poverty the 'long tail' undoubtedly reflects.

Overall the National Standards consultation will be one to watch - and take part in. It is an area where there are powerful lessons from mistakes made overseas which should not be ignored. Parents, communities and educators should demand a cautious, critical approach from policymakers.

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