

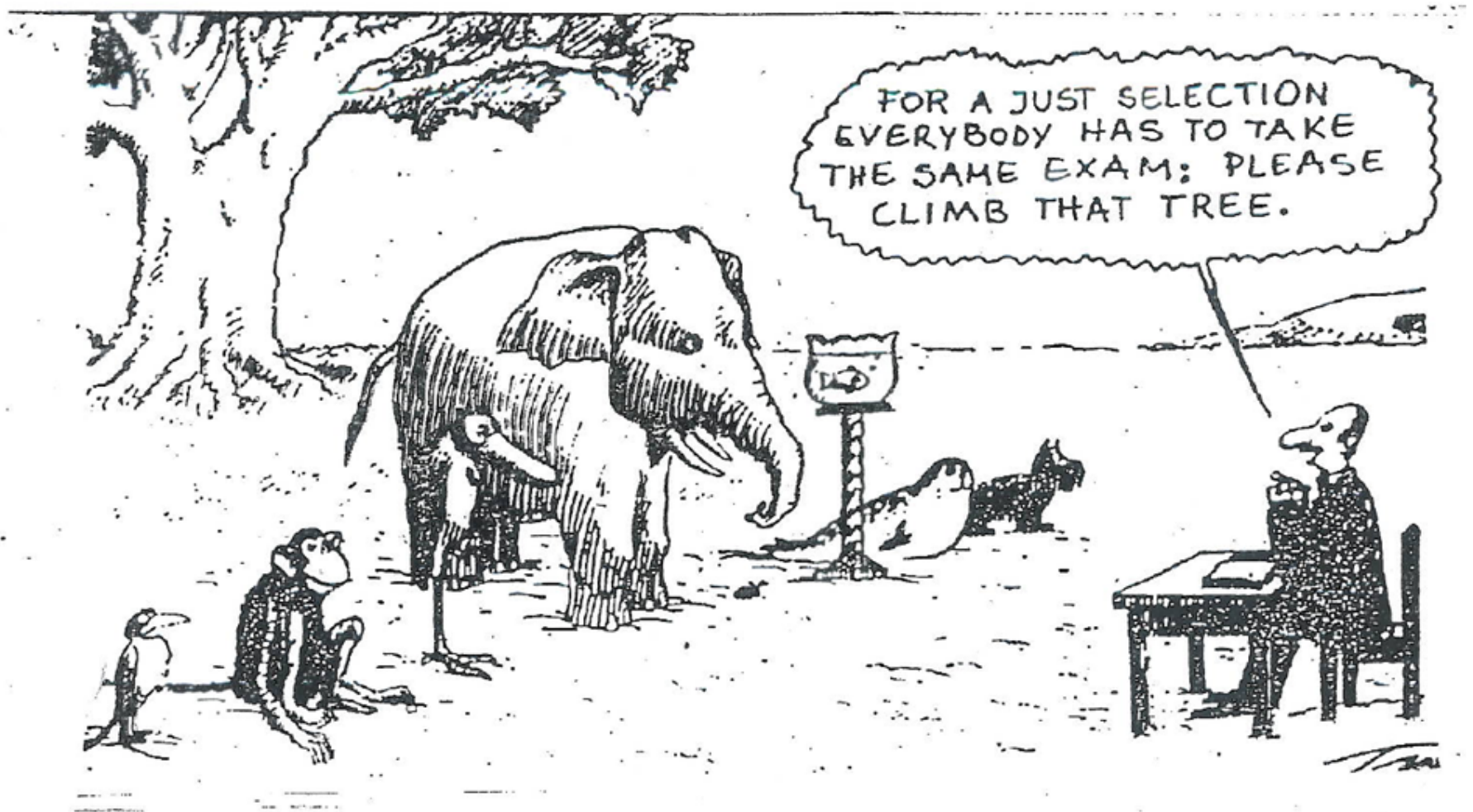
The Politics, Context, and History of National Standards and Testing in New Zealand Primary Schools



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A Just Selection?



OVERVIEW

The (Re)Emergence of National Standards

- What are National Standards and why are they being introduced?
- Why ‘National Standards’?
- Minister’s rationale for National Standards
- Principals’ and NZEI responses
- Defending National Standards
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National Standards in our Educational Past: Some History, Examples, Observations, Lessons and Warnings

- Educational Standards – 1878 National Curriculum and The Standards
- Measuring school ‘efficiency’
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- National exemplars
- New externally referenced tests
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SUMMARY:

The Future of National Standards in New Zealand

- Standards (Outcomes)-based education
- What are league tables?
- Limitations of League Tables
- League Tables – Does “One Size Fits All”?
- Concluding comments



INTRODUCTION:

The (Re)Emergence of National Standards

On 10 April 2007 the National Party launched its National Standards [NS] policy, outlining three key requirements for all primary and intermediate schools:

1. Clear National Standards in reading, writing and numeracy, designed to describe all the things that children should be able to do by a particular age or year at school. They will be defined by benchmarks in a range of tests.
2. Effective Assessment that will require primary schools to use assessment programmes that compare the progress of their students with other students across the country. Schools will be able to choose from a range of tests, but there will be no national examinations.
3. Upfront reporting (in plain language) to give parents the right to see all assessment information, and to get regular reports about their child's progress towards national standards. Schools will be required to report each year on the whole school's performance against national standards.



Rationale for NS

“National Standards will give schools from Kaitaia to Bluff a set of shared expectations about what students should be achieving as they move through primary school. Teachers will use national standards to clearly identify students who are at risk of missing out on basic skills and becoming a permanent part of the “tail” of under-achievement.” (2007 Education Policy on National Standards)



Rationale for NS continued

The Education (National Standards) Amendment Bill was introduced into the House on 9 December 2008.

- Bill never scrutinised by a parliamentary select committee and within one week had received Royal Assent.
- The Act not only tightened the penalties for failing to enrol children at a school (Part 1) but also allowed Minister of Education (Part 2) to set national literacy and numeracy standards against which primary and intermediate students will be assessed.
- In February 2009 Tolley informed principals that while NS had yet to be set, the Ministry would consult on standards throughout 2009, with a view to implementation in 2010.
- Tolley noted further that ERO had informed a Parliamentary Education and Science Select Committee that “the schooling system as a whole was not using the huge potential of these assessment tools to support the creation of programs [sic] to improve the education of students. We want to make sure all schools use these valuable tools and involve the families as well.”



Rationale for NS continued

Tolley denied there would be a single national test:

“Parents want to know how well their children are doing and what they can expect when extra help is needed. This [National Standards] policy is about using effective assessment tools to provide feedback that supports student learning and teacher effectiveness. Consultation will establish who needs access to what information.”

- The public were informed that MoE staff would be “working with small teams of literacy, numeracy and assessment experts to develop draft standards” and consult with schools, parents, and the community over a six-week period (25 May to 3 July 2009).
- During this time a Standards Reference Group met with representatives from the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), the Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), and the NZ School Trustees’ Association (NZSTA).



Why ‘National Standards’?

- Tolley has argued consistently there is an urgent need to “raise student achievement” and for parents to be better informed about what their children can and can not achieve in literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy at each year of their primary and intermediate schooling.
- By introducing NS — one of the Government’s “flagship policies in education” — and assessing children against these standards, Tolley claimed parents would know how well their child is doing against each NS, how their child compares with others in the same age group, if their child is experiencing any difficulties and how the teacher and school will address this, and the steps parents can take to support their child’s learning at home.
- The NS in literacy (reading and writing) would not only be tied closely to the *Literacy Learning Progressions* but also would “describe the level of complexity and challenge in texts and tasks that students have to work with to meet the demands of *The New Zealand Curriculum* at specified times in their schooling”.



Why ‘National Standards’? continued

- For mathematics the NS would “make explicit the complexity and challenge of the problems and processes that students need to understand”.
- Each NS has three parts: a description of what achievement in the standard should look like; an exemplar of that level of achievement; and assessment tasks and tools for measuring that standard.
- The curriculum therefore provides a range of learning outcomes for each year level that indicates progression while NS provide a reference point for achieving these outcomes by specifying what can reasonably be expected of most students by the end of the year.



The Minister's rationale for National Standards

- The Minister admitted that her endorsement of NS owed much to the survey data contained in two 2007 ERO reports that explored the extent to which primary (and secondary) schools used assessment information effectively to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- These reports — *The Collection and Use of Assessment Information in Schools* (March 2007) and *The Collection and Use of Assessment Information: Good Practice in Primary Schools* (June 2007) — provided the Minister with empirical evidence needed to justify introducing NS into every primary and intermediate school.



The Minister's rationale for National Standards continued

The March 2007 report presented the results of a detailed ERO survey of 314 primary, intermediate, and secondary schools during the first half of 2006.

- Having evaluated the quality of assessment information provided in 118 full primary, 125 contributing, and 10 intermediate schools, the report declared that schools' effectiveness in collecting and using assessment information varied widely, with approximately half the schools exhibiting effective practice across the whole curriculum.



The Minister's rationale for National Standards continued

The data further revealed that:

- 58% of schools had developed and implemented an effective, integrated school-wide approach to assessment processes and information;
- over 80% of primary schools had developed effective assessment processes and tools for literacy and numeracy;
- the achievement information in 57% of schools demonstrated students' achievement and progress;
- the interaction of assessment with teaching and learning was effective in 54% of schools;
- in 42% of schools, students used information about their achievement for further learning;
- 43% of schools were establishing and using school-wide information to improve student achievement; and
- 51% were effective in reporting information about students' achievements to the community.



Analysis:

- This data suggests there were few assessment-related issues that warranted urgent attention, particularly in the primary sector – e.g., more than 80% of the primary schools surveyed were regarded as having developed “effective assessment processes and tools for literacy and numeracy”.
- Buried deeper in the same report was evidence that “most primary schools did not collect and analyse their students’ achievements in curriculum areas other than mathematics and English”.
- If these findings are reliable and broadly representative of all New Zealand primary schools, then why would the Minister wish to introduce NS in literacy and numeracy when, by comparison, the quality and quantity of assessment data being gathered and reported in the other curriculum areas is demonstrably inadequate?
- Is this evidence of the government’s preoccupation with NS in literacy and numeracy at the expense of other curriculum areas regarded as being of lesser importance?



Analysis continued:

The data also indicated room for improvement in other aspects of assessment:

- Barely one-half of the schools had initiated effective, school-wide assessment processes and information, could demonstrate students' achievements and progress, relate assessment to teaching and learning, and able to report information about their students' achievements to their communities effectively.

Perhaps not surprisingly there was a statistically significant difference between low and high decile schools, with low decile schools performing poorly in all areas investigated.

Aware of ERO's criticism that schools were underperforming in terms of gathering, documenting, and disseminating assessment information the Minister singled out for special attention the inadequate reporting by schools of achievement information to their communities.

In almost all of her numerous public pronouncements on NS, as reported in the national media, the Minister has been adamant that parents want clearer information about their children's school achievements.

However, such an observation is hardly radical, given that it would be the rare parent who would be disinterested in his or her child's achievements at school.



The Principals' and NZEI Responses

Given the heightened publicity surrounding the introduction of NS, how have the nation's primary school principals and teachers responded to the Govt's initiative?

- While some principals welcomed NS as a tool to assist teachers in evaluating what level their students should be working at, most have expressed grave concern over reporting such data to the Ministry of Education.
- Many believe it highly likely that data could be compiled and/or manipulated to create league tables – e.g., Philip Harding, Principal of Paparoa Street School in Christchurch, observed that whilst schools would still be able to use a variety of assessment tools to measure children's achievements under the NS, the US and British experience revealed that because “you get what you measure, you better be sure that what you want to measure matters most”.
- Denise Torrey, Canterbury Primary Principals' Association President, regarded the NS as antithetical to the new curriculum focus that sought to give teachers greater autonomy to respond to and plan for their students' learning needs.



The Principals' and NZEI Responses continued

- Ernie Buutveld, President of the NZ Principals' Federation that represents approximately 2300 schools throughout New Zealand, observed that:

“Britain is just realising its mistake in narrowing its curriculum and undermining its curriculum with testing. New Zealand does not want or need its curriculum undermined by short-sighted election promises. This is an area where the NZPF has grave concerns – concerns around how school data will be used by the media and in relation to performance based pay. These could become the shell holes in a no man's land without winners.... Given the speed with which it is being pursued, the urgent will drive out the important.”



The Principals' and NZEI Responses continued

- NZEI President, Frances Nelson, was optimistic NS would be a marked improvement on assessment tools already used in schools. Having been told by Mary Chamberlain, Group Manager of the MoE, that about 84% of Year 1 children would be expected to achieve the numeracy standards set for that age group, compared with a figure of 61% for Year 8 boys and girls, she seemed unconcerned because, she reasoned, the achievement rates were based around an average which not all students were capable of achieving.
- By June 2009 Nelson appeared more pessimistic about NS, noting they would be acceptable to the profession only if they put children's learning first and supported high quality teaching.
- Any steps taken to make school assessment information available nationally for league tables comparison purposes would be “destructive and defeat the purpose of implementing the standards”, because league tables shifted the focus away from the learning needs of children across a broad range of areas to ranking schools solely on the basis of literacy and numeracy results.



The Principals' and NZEI Responses continued

- Echoing the NZEI's position, Geoff Lovegrove, Editor of NZ Principals' Federation monthly magazine — *NZ Principal* — reminded fellow principals of the former Prime Minister's address to the World Convention of Principals in Auckland in 2007 where Helen Clark promised “No National Testing; No League Tables” under a Labour government.
- Lovegrove alerted readers to the British scene where primary school teachers were refusing to administer high stakes national tests, declaring these to be driven politically rather than educationally. His editorial concluded by warning educationists about the ongoing political tension between reporting student achievement and NS:

“We have a duty to assess thoroughly, interpret, and use the results to enhance teaching and learning. That is the only reason to test. Our duty includes reporting accurately and honestly to parents on the actual progress and achievement of our students. An informed school community will be supportive of our stand on any national testing regime. Politicians will play games that encourage people to vote for them, and keep them in power.... We want to attract and retain the very best people to teach our students, and belting them around the ears with league tables, in the guise of “national standards” will not help.”



Defending National Standards

Interviewed by *The Press* during her Christchurch visit in early April 2009, Tolley predicted that while individual pupil achievement details probably would not be sent to the MoE, information about each school's performance would be.

Asked about inter-school comparisons and how this might be prevented and/or managed, Tolley conceded that Government was in fact powerless to prevent the media from accessing information and compiling and publishing their own league tables.

Tolley reiterated that communities had the right to access all achievement information available because “the more information that's out there the better... The best disinfectant is fresh air” (*Christchurch Press*, 7 April 2009).

Six weeks later the Minister announced that any information obtained had to be used responsibly “to raise student achievement”, and that “just what information is needed and who needs to have access to it is a matter for discussion during the consultation period”.



National critiques of National Standards

Some New Zealand-based assessment specialists remain much less confident than Tolley about the purported benefits of NS.

- Lester Flockton, formerly co-director of The University of Otago’s NEMP (National Education Monitoring Project) unit, criticised both the speedy introduction of NS and the claim that “standards raise standards”.
- Flockton believed the introduction of NS was politically motivated — the Ministry “had a mind-numbingly tough and highly pressured timeframe to formulate and package up standards” — and that it ignored the overarching reality that socio-economic factors were the strongest predictor of student achievement.
- Flockton did not comment on the potential for NS to lead to a system of national tests, as in Britain, and state-wide tests in the USA.



International critiques of National Standards

What lessons might be learned from the international experience in general and from national testing in particular?

Experts attending the international assessment symposium held in Queenstown (16-17 March 2009) advised caution before launching a NS strategy:

- Jim Popham, Emeritus Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, declared that the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) in the United States resulted in schools becoming fixated on tests scores rather than providing broader curricula and learning experiences for their students.

- Under the NCLB Act existing state-wide accountability systems are aligned with specific state education standards. States are legally responsible for developing content and performance standards, measuring improvement, implementing and administering assessment (including assessing students with limited English proficiency), reporting this assessment data, and applying sanctions when performance goals are not met.



International critiques of National Standards continued

- Having listened to Tolley’s “very thoughtful analysis of what was possible in [New Zealand] and what they were going to avoid”, Popham felt confident there was a “very strong recognition of the perils of ill-conceived national testing”.
- Professor Terry Crooks, co-director of The University of Otago’s NEMP unit, stated that in setting a standard all that is identified is a child who is either above or below that standard. In order to avoid recording and reporting a child’s achievements merely in terms of success or failure Crooks advocated using five bands of achievement—well above average, above average, average, below average, and well below average.
- Tolley, it appears, was persuaded by that view. Recent iterations of the NS in fact include five broad levels of achievement: well above standard, just above standard, at expected standard, just below standard, and well below standard.



From rhetoric to reality: Consultation to implementation

During the consultation phase (25 May to 3 July 2009) vigorous debate continued about the merits (or otherwise) of NS and the very tight timeline allowed for their introduction.

- It was envisaged that after public consultation the draft NS would be refined further and published in October in readiness for implementation in schools by early 2010.
- However, throughout the six-week consultation period school principals, individually and collectively, took every opportunity to publicise their concerns about NS.
- By late June 2009 for example, the NZEI, the Canterbury and Otago Principals' Associations, and the NZ Principals' Federation urged the Minister to delay implementing NS because approximately 90% of primary schools already used a range of nationally and internationally recognised assessment tools to monitor students' achievement.
- Concern was expressed that information gleaned from the NS would enable schools to be compared via league tables, thereby creating 'winning' and 'losing' schools.



Could NS information legally be withheld?

- Ombudsman, David McGee, informed Education and Science Select Committee in June that schools' NS results would probably have to be made available to the public, even if retained by individual schools and not forwarded to the MoE.
- Citing the Official Information Act McGee acknowledged that the public could argue legitimately that it was in “the public good” for data to be released by individual schools and/or the Ministry, unless government legislated to stop league tables from being compiled and disseminated.
- Labour Party education spokesperson, Trevor Mallard, wanted to avoid “pitching wealthy schools against those from low decile areas” and proposed the law be changed to prevent the release and subsequent publication of school-level achievement data.
- He suggested that if this change in law eventuated then parents still would receive information about their children's progress and principals would obtain information to assist with teachers' professional development. There would be “clear nationwide measures of progress to hold ministers to account”.



Professional vs public critique

On 1 July the Editor of *The New Zealand Herald*, in an article entitled “Govt mustn’t give way on league tables”, defended Tolley’s stance on league tables:

“League tables are a perfectly legitimate tool from the parents’ point of view. A good school for their child is one where high standards are maintained and if pupils come with advantages, so much the better. If some schools have to work harder than others to bring most of their pupils to the desired standards, so be it. Parents want results....

Comparative school ratings are not the primary purpose of the tests, but they are a useful byproduct. National must not give way to the principals. Education has been dominated for too long by a profession which treats parents as children incapable of reading a league table or much else....

Parents like league tables. They are helpful when it comes time to choosing a school. They are also helpful in keeping the pressure on all schools to perform to the best of their ability. If the profession dislikes that pressure, or considers it unhelpful to educational effort, its customers disagree. And ultimately the customer, even of public education, is always right.”

The Dominion Post Editor echoed a similar viewpoint the following day.

Professional vs public critique continued

In the wake of critical media attention the NZ Principals' Federation held its annual conference in Palmerston North in July.

- Addressing the conference Tolley immediately dismissed any suggestion of a law change to prevent the NS data being translated into league tables, believing that it was vitally important for parents to have access to all information about their children's progress.
- Tolley's rebuked the Federation for having spread misleading information about the Government's policy on NS. "National standards do not mean standardised national testing", the Minister declared. "They are about consistent assessment throughout the country".
- Having listened to the Federation's President, Ernie Buutveld, outline the principals' concerns over NS, Tolley made it abundantly clear to the 400 delegates that "the Government will not resile from National Standards. Parents want them, they have a right to them and this government is going to deliver them".



Professional vs public critique continued

The Minister's resolve contrasts sharply with the findings of a comprehensive Standards Survey undertaken by the Principals' Federation, the key points of which were summarised by Ernie Buutveld at the July conference.

- Of the 1000 primary school principals surveyed 23% reported being opposed to NS with a further 72% expressing serious reservations about their introduction, the potential for the data to be captured in league tables, and the very short timeline allowed for their implementation.
- Asked what they would do if instructed to report data that the media could use to compile league tables 2% of principals said they would comply fully, 20% would comply because they were legally required to do so, and 77% indicated that they would comply partially by maintaining their current planning and reporting policies.
- The survey also asked whether boards of trustees and school communities would support their principal's stance regarding NS. Of the 56% of boards who had discussed the principal's stance 96% affirmed their support; of the 32% of communities who had discussed the issue 91% said they would support their principal.



Professional vs public critique continued

- Tolley dismissed NZEI's claim that Government was being forced to backtrack on its timeline to introduce NS in literacy and numeracy by postponing their implementation for another 12 months, until 2011. Tolley explained that schools would phase in NS in 2010, with reporting to begin in 2011.
- Frustrated at Tolley's ongoing refusal to acknowledge that NS would lead to high-stakes assessment and league table reporting by media, Buutveld outlined the Federation's position in an opinion piece published in the *NZ Herald*. He agreed that parents deserved access to all assessment information gathered about children's achievements and progress, and fully supported any process that involved reporting individual student's achievements to parents and the provision of aggregated data to the boards of trustees.
- *Dominion Post* Editor urged Tolley to “stick to her guns” over NS. Parents had every right to “march [their children] off to a school that is performing better, taking the state funding attached to him or her with them ... What is it exactly that teachers and principals so fear? What is wrong with sharing with taxpayers—those who pay to keep state schools operating—just which schools do well and which do not?”



Professional vs public critique continued

Other advocates of NS (and league tables) joined in the public debate, citing the need for greater monitoring, control, and accountability of teachers and schools.

- Deborah Coddington: “The militant teacher unions had gone spastic [sic]” because “this will expose teachers who are thick. You and I know them: we’ve read their totally illiterate reports and listened to their bureaucratic bovine manure at parent-teacher interviews. We tried to be patient but eventually we removed our kids from the school”.
- Pamela Stirling, *NZ Listener* editorial: because teacher unions and the Principals’ Federation represent the interests of teachers and principals respectively, they engage in politics on behalf of their members and not their pupils.
- Stirling also suggested that while there was no guarantee that NS data would in fact end up in a league table, they could help to identify schools experiencing problems and needing additional assistance. The great advantage of league tables, she surmised, was they provided an excellent incentive for schools to compare their performance with neighbouring schools of a similar decile and thus “to lift their standards”.



Professional vs public critique continued

Other media commentators joined in the debate, inviting the public to answer the question: who controls the schools — the teachers or the public?

- Karl Du Fresne, writing in the *Manawatu Standard*, reprimanded teachers for believing they should somehow be “absolved from the performance measurements and competitive pressures that other industries and professional groups are subject to.”
- According to Du Fresne teachers need to understand they are “paid servants of the education system, not its masters”, and that league tables enable parents to make intelligent choices about which school would be best for their children to attend.



An independent research-informed voice

In July 2009 NZCER sent a 4-page submission to MoE that addressed three issues regarding NS: their use, the timing of their introduction, and the need for ongoing research into how NS policy is being translated into practice.

- NZCER claimed that, done well, NS had the potential to act as a catalyst for improved learning and teaching. Concern was expressed about the validity of using these standards to identify schools that needed to improve their students' levels of achievement, owing to the imprecision of the standard — that is, a student is above, at, or below it — and the potential for standards' results to be reported in simplistic league tables acknowledged as being an unreliable and invalid indicator of educational quality.



An independent research-informed voice continued

- The NZCER submission also called for NS to be “road tested” for at least 1 year prior to their introduction, citing the need to consider their likely impact on implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007):

“Much work is still needed to implement the curriculum in schools, and the considerable investment and gains made so far should not be jeopardised. Literacy and numeracy are important, and occupy a fundamental place in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, but it would be a mistake to narrow professional development and support for schools to literacy and numeracy, or to make literacy and numeracy the sole focus of school accountability. Given the tight fiscal situation, and depending on the uses to which national standards will be put in judging schools, there is a danger of that occurring and of schools consequently feeling unsupported in the task of implementing the wider curriculum. National standards must not become a straitjacket that prevents schools from providing students with engaging and enriching curricula.”



An independent research-informed voice continued

- NZCER identified the need to design and phase in systems and processes schools will require to “bed in” the standards and develop a purpose-built independent and secure student management system capable of storing any data generated by schools and accessible only by the schools.
- The NZCER’s final recommendation — that a robust and continuing programme of research be undertaken — intended to bring Ministry and teachers together, and allow student performance and teacher workloads to be monitored and evaluated longitudinally.

The NZCER’s submission was warmly welcomed by the NZEI and the Principals’ Federation, both of whom felt the consultation process had simply been an information-sharing exercise and that their views had been ignored.

To date, Tolley has made no public comment about NZCER’s submission, despite the fact that the NZCER had been contracted by the MoE not only to assist in the development of NS but also to analyse and report on the submissions following the public consultation process.



The National Standards timeline

Despite repeated calls from educationists for NS implementation in primary and intermediate schools to be delayed by one year Tolley insisted that standards would still be gazetted and distributed to schools in October 2009, with BOTs expected to embed them in their 2010 Charters.

- From 2010 schools would be required to use the Standards to guide teaching and learning; to report children's progress and achievements against the Standards to parents; and to include baseline data and targets in their 2011 Charters.
- Tolley made one important concession: having listened to feedback from education sector she agreed to postpone until 2012 the reporting annually of school-level NS data to the MoE.
- Kelvin Smyth, a former school inspector and education commentator, maintains Tolley's "concession" was purely pragmatic, given that the MoE has encountered problems in "mapping" the standardised tests, the curriculum levels in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), and NS with the asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) assessment tools.



John Hattie's critique of National Standards

In early August Professor John Hattie — the architect of asTTle — launched a concerted attack on NS:

- They were likely to force teachers to teach students according to their school year, rather than their ability level.
- The NS were at odds with a levels-based curriculum; that they would lead to a clash between age-based standards and ability-based learning; and this situation would encourage mediocrity because students who met a minimum standard would invariably move mechanically through all subjects at the same pace, as evident in the USA.
- Concluded that most teachers would “teach to the test” and, in so doing, “set education back 50 years”.
- Hattie's views resonated with many educators, including school principals, the Principals' Federation, teachers, and NZEI.



Post-consultation resistance

Prior to the release of NZCER report for the MoE on NS consultation phase some principals announced they would deliberately “fudge the results” by finding the easiest test possible to boost their results, thereby undermining the Government’s NS policy. The media responded quickly.

- That some principals dared to suggest subverting the Government’s “flagship” education policy outraged the *Dominion Post* Editor who reminded readers that teachers, whose job is to prepare youth for the future, “believe they are at the wheel. They need to be bluntly disabused of that notion”.
- The Editor hoped that by “unmasking” those principals who sought to derail the Minister’s plans, the public would begin to question why these “public servants” should retain their jobs. Citing research that revealed that 90 per cent of prison inmates were “functionally illiterate”, Editor then asked why this had occurred when most prisoners had received at least a primary school education. The explanation offered by Editor was simple — teachers knowingly had failed children — as was the suggested remedy: ensure that all children “learn the basics at primary school, rather than have taxpayers pay for remedial education later in life”.



Post-consultation resistance continued

- Joanna Black, *NZ Listener*, echoed the popular view that because parents are seldom in any position to evaluate school quality they need “real information” about how well schools are doing in relation to NS. Were principals to withhold NS results then parents could not gain a well-informed view of a school’s overall performance.

What was missing from *Dominion Post* and *NZ Listener* commentaries — indeed, from almost all media reports — was any robust research-based *evidence* that NS would deliver in practice the much hoped for improvements in students’ literacy and numeracy abilities.



The NZCER consultation report

In response to MoE's public consultation exercise (May to July), 4968 responses (representing 9526 individuals) were received by MoE regarding proposed NS for literacy and numeracy.

The Ministry contracted NZCER to analyse submissions and report their findings in relation to four key themes: stakeholder understanding of the intent of NS; areas of concern and/or areas for improvement; barriers to implementation of NS; and information that parents need to engage with their children's education.



The NZCER consultation report continued

Some overall patterns were evident from submissions:

- Respondents' opinions differed whether criteria to evaluate student achievement in draft NS were set at appropriate level; 23% respondents expressed concern about potential identification and subsequent labeling of students, particularly those who were making progress but not at level required to meet or exceed expected standard. One in five respondents thought emphasis on NS would lead to narrowing of school curriculum and consequent loss of school autonomy that underpinned *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007).
- Despite assurances by Minister that Government did not want comparative league tables of schools' performance in literacy and numeracy standards constructed, 33% respondents expressed considerable apprehension over potential for media to compile such tables and for parents and school communities to make unfair comparisons between schools without acknowledging different demographic contexts.



The NZCER consultation report continued

- Submissions on NS indicated strong support across all sectors for providing parents with information they could understand and use to support children's progress. Given that schools are supposed to have autonomy regarding which assessment tools they can utilise, an overarching concern is whether all schools would in fact be measuring the same things, in the same way, for all students.
- Moreover, wide screening nature of many of the assessment tools commonly used in schools tends to provide insufficient diagnostic information about *why* students are not achieving in literacy and maths. The data produced might well be invalid and unreliable, and therefore of little use in determining whether or not a child has met the prescribed standard of achievement.

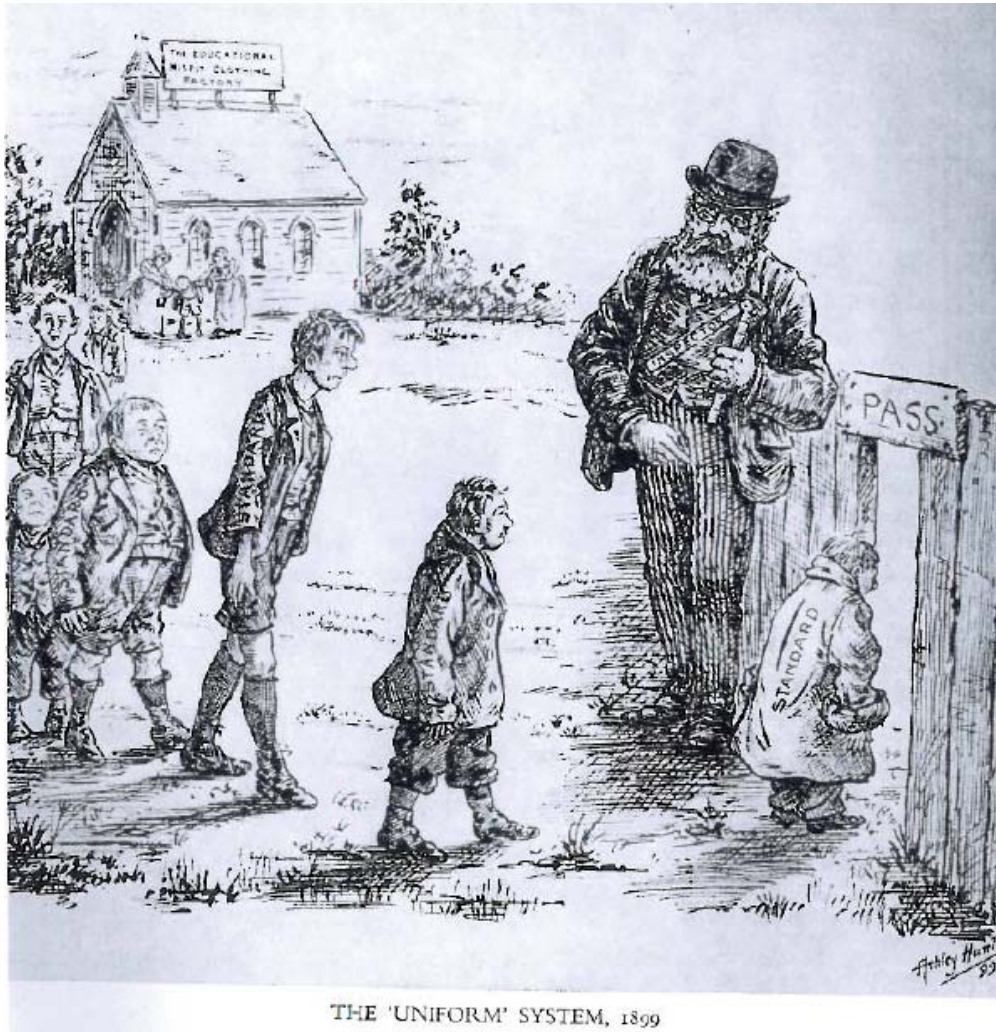


Looking back: Some lessons from the New Zealand primary school standards

- Education Act of 1877 launched a national system of curriculum and exam “standards” for all state primary schools.
- To ensure that education would truly be universal a common prescription of work had to be specified for all school-age pupils — one that could be audited externally.
- An elaborate system of “education standards” was formulated early in 1878 and gazetted in September.
- These standards, coupled with the arrival of standards exams from mid-1879, provided the DoE with a means by which to gauge the performance of nation’s primary schools in general and the “efficiency” of individual teachers in particular.
- The results of the schools’ annual standards exams were publicised, discussed, and compared widely.



Looking back: Some lessons from the New Zealand primary school standards continued



THE 'UNIFORM' SYSTEM, 1899

Looking back: Some lessons from the New Zealand primary school standards continued

- A direct curriculum-examination relationship was forged, one in which mere *instruction* rather than *education* was likely to result from the relentless pursuit of national primary school exam passes in late 19th century NZ society.
- Standards regulations designed principally to *classify* Standard 1 to 6 pupils according to attainments on measured scholastic tasks. Every school subject for each of the six standards was broken down into performance tasks to be mastered annually before pupils were allowed to advance to next standard class.
- In so doing, the central DoE could claim that “in every part of the colony the same standard of education was maintained” because all primary school pupils were taught the *same* subjects and subsequently evaluated on a *uniform* basis. This was a legitimate expectation, given that primary schools were now publicly funded institutions.



Looking back: Some lessons from the New Zealand primary school standards continued

- Moreover, the concept of a centrally prescribed national primary school curriculum appealed to colonial egalitarian ethos of the day wherein children from a town school would (theoretically) receive the *same* education as children attending a small, often remote, one-teacher country school.
- Originally intended solely as a “check” upon the accuracy of teachers’ estimates of their pupils’ abilities, the 1878 regulations further required that inspectors make twice-yearly visits to each primary school: a ‘surprise’ inspection visit, and an annual exam visit wherein all pupil promotions were decided for the following twelve months. Pupils under the age of exemption (13 years) who failed the inspector’s exam were obliged to remain in that standard for a further year, at the end of which they would again sit the exam and, if successful, be promoted to the next standard.



Educational Standards

To maintain ‘educational standards’ the Department outlined in minute detail subject requirements for each of the six standards classes in the 1878 regulations. The prescription for Standard 2 Arithmetic, for example, was both precise and comprehensive. It read:

“Numeration and notation of not more than six figures; addition of not more than six lines, with six figures in a line; short multiplication and multiplication by factors not greater than 12; subtraction; division by numbers not exceeding 12, by the method of long ...and short division, mental problems adapted to this stage of progress; multiplication tables to 12 times 12.”



Educational Standards continued

- As pupils advanced through the standards, syllabus requirements became more demanding. Rote learning masses of often imperfectly understood facts and prescribed tasks to be reproduced on exam day soon became the defining characteristic of teaching and learning in NZ primary school classrooms.
- Having clearly specified the curricular objectives to which all teachers would have to adhere, and by which their pupils' attainments would soon come to be judged by inspectors, parents, public, and employers alike, William Habens, the Inspector-General of Schools (1878-1899), wrote and issued a pamphlet entitled *The Standards* (1881) containing detailed notes on the 1878 standards requirements. Habens also warned teachers against “cramming” (rote learning) facts in preparation for the inspector’s exams.

“The standards are not meant to be used as a rack, to extort from children a broken utterance of the last facts and ideas that have begun to take hold of their memory and intelligence. Children are not sent to school to pass in the standards, but to be educated.”

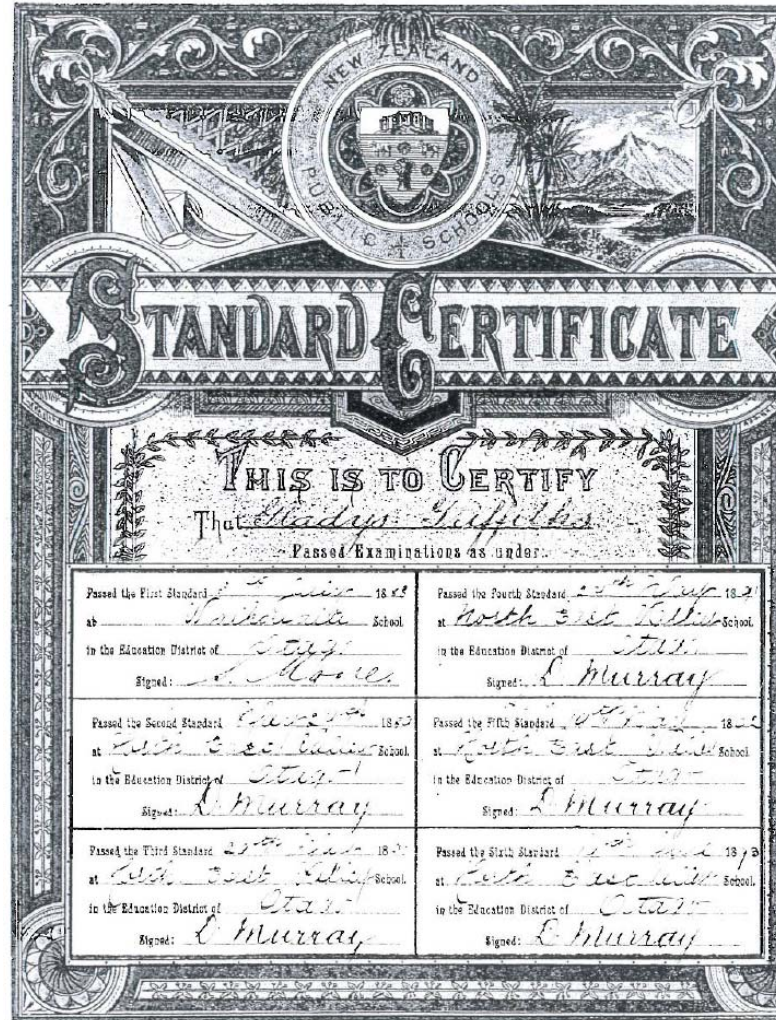


Educational Standards continued

- Although he implored teachers to set meaningful work for their pupils, Habens' concerns were promptly forgotten in the “drive for results”. By the early 1880s Habens and his Departmental staff knew they were powerless to correct the situation whereby only that which was examinable was valued and taught. The race for “percentage passes” had now begun in earnest.



Standards Certificate



Measuring School 'Efficiency'

While primary school teachers and DoE struggled to cope with burgeoning enrolments from 1878, standards exams assumed a new importance. As early as 1879 the Minister of Education, William Rolleston, identified the efficacy of using the results of annual standards exams to assess the efficiency of individual schools:

“Other things being equal, the best school in a district was the school which passed a larger proportion of children than any other in the district; and at a lower age; and a district was making progress if year by year the proportion of passes increased and the average age of passing became lower.”

- Because schools' reputations stood or fell on the results of inspectors' annual exams, fierce rivalry existed between schools to produce the highest percentage of passes. Competition was openly and actively encouraged by some education boards, with one Napier school announcing it would pay a bonus to teachers in line with their students' performance in the annual standards exam. Ambitious teachers often quoted favourable exam statistics when applying for positions, knowing this would impress appointment committees.



The Inspectors and the Standards Examinations

By 1881 William Hodgson, the Nelson and Marlborough Education Board Inspector, began to witness mechanical, highly prescriptive, formal teaching and learning methods. Concluding his report, Hodgson lamented the “sweet simplicity of a list of passes and failures” and

“the growing tendency, not only on the part of the general public but on the part of many teachers who ought to know better, to gauge the success or failure of a school exclusively by the tables of results.... The undoubting faith with which the majority of mankind will bow down before an idol of their own setting-up is simply astounding. The [examination results] of an Inspector ... are almost universally accepted as though they gave a mathematical demonstration of the exact status of any given school.”



The Inspectors and the Standards Examinations

continued

- Two years later the Hawke's Bay Inspector, Henry Hill, noted that “much of the standard work in the [region's] schools is prepared on a kind of examination-probability basis”, resulting in “great and lasting injury to both teachers and pupils”.
- Hill's Wanganui counterpart, William Vereker-Bindon, recorded similar misgivings in his 1884 report. The standards exams, he observed, exerted influence “in all subjects, all standards, and the majority of schools” to such an extent that pupils were being “forced like so many hot-house plants” to regurgitate answers on inspection and exam day, with no thought about whether or not pupils actually understood what they were rote learning.
- Significantly, when pupils failed the annual exams (and many did), inspectors promptly identified teachers' lack of knowledge of syllabus rather than any inability or laziness on the part of pupils as being the chief explanation for their pupils' failure.
- Despite protestations, inspectors' criticisms were short-lived. Barely 10 years after standards regulations had been introduced high exam pass rates became the sole arbiter of school “efficiency” and “effectiveness”, with the nation's education boards and newspapers now reporting standards pass percentage rates. Teachers and headmasters were appraised by the simple expedient of whether or not they got most, if not all, of their pupils through the standards exams.



The Inspectors and the Standards Examinations

continued

- Although NZEI and numerous committees on primary education matters argued that publication of percentage passes should be abandoned immediately, all 12 education boards continued to tabulate pass rates of individual schools in their annual reports.
- Adamant that exam results indicated the relative “efficiency” of its schools the Otago Education Board in 1890 adopted the policy that “in schools with a staff of three or more teachers, a percentage of failures exceeding 20 is considered evidence of inefficient teaching. In schools with a smaller staff, a failure of 25 is similarly judged”. Although OEB abandoned publication of pass rates in its annual reports by 1893 the local newspapers did not. The Otago Inspectors maintained that such publicity provided the “chief lever of improvement in the schools”.



Examination-Beating Strategies

Rising percentage pass rates might well be explained by less scrupulous teachers and pupils becoming increasingly proficient in the use of a variety of exam-beating tactics to outwit the inspector – e.g., children’s artwork occasionally was “touched up” by their teachers with special attention also paid to rote-learning paragraphs in prescribed texts so they could be regurgitated on exam day.

- William Edge and James Cumming, North Canterbury Education Board Inspectors, investigated the reason why so many children were absent on exam day and discovered that “backward children are not only encouraged, but, in some cases, actually forbidden to be present”.
- Given the status attached to exam results by education bureaucracy, teachers often were tempted to use system to their own advantage by ensuring that only those pupils most likely to succeed on exam day would be allowed to be present. Although an unforeseen consequence of the standards exam scheme, this practice nonetheless continued to plague the educational world for decades to come.
- In the face of mounting criticism the 1894 National Conference of Inspectors, while acknowledging that “grave disadvantages attend the existing system of testing the work of our schools mainly by means of standard passes”, nevertheless strenuously opposed the abolition of the standards exams.



Homework

Another outcome of 1878 standards scheme was the practice of “keeping in” children after school hours in the weeks leading up to the inspector’s annual exam.

- Complaints regarding “slavery” to unreasonable amounts of homework that increased significantly as children progressed through the standards were voiced frequently.
- Although the Otago Education Board notified teachers in 1893 that it would no longer tolerate children being “kept in” at school after 3.00 pm, in reality it was powerless to intervene because many parents insisted children be prepared to pass standards exams.
- While this outcome had clearly not been anticipated when standards requirements were first promulgated, teachers who were mindful of their future career prospects would never have dared risk departure from the exam syllabus. In fact they did everything they could to maximise their pupils’ chances of success in the exams. Accordingly, only those pupils were who known to be capable of passing were permitted to be present on exam day.



“Pupil Retardation”

One method commonly used to boost exam pass rates was “retardation” — a practice identified by North Canterbury Education Board Inspectors in 1882.

- By 1909 evidence of the retardation of academically “slow” or “difficult” children in the lower standards until they reached exemption age (14 years) was widespread: the DoE annual report for 1909 revealed that 38% of all pupils left primary school aged 14 without passing Standard 5 (Form 1/Year 7). Southland Education Board Inspectors, James Hendry and Alexander Wyllie, attributed this to the “greater caution on the part of teachers in sending up poorly prepared candidates”
- Retardation became a widespread practice. Otago Inspectors observed many pupils being held back in standards longer than was necessary. They also identified “educational leakage” between Standards 1 and 6 — the result of “slow promotion” whereby children remained in a particular standard longer than 1 year because teachers were “too exacting in their promotions”. This led to children becoming disgruntled with school and leaving as soon as legally possible.



“Examination Coaching”

The extent to which instruction in exam subjects overshadowed all other classroom activities was revealed at the General Education Conference in 1910.

- Headmaster of Westport District High School, James Harkness, produced evidence indicating marked increase in the number of teachers “cramming” and “driving” their Proficiency Certificate candidates through the exam syllabus out of school hours.
- Inspector-General (Hogben) noted that DoE was powerless to intervene because legally it had no authority over what teachers chose to do outside official school hours.
- Ironically, while educationists had singled out the standards exams for particular criticism these same educationists also knew that these exams were responsible for the remarkable expansion of the nation’s primary schools following 1877 Education Act. This reality, coupled with the public’s seemingly insatiable appetite for exam passes, meant that for the time being the rigid standards curriculum and exam system would remain intact, despite repeated assaults by those reformers who sought its immediate abolition.



The rocky road to abolition

Much debate occurred throughout 1920s about appropriateness of standards based primary school curriculum in general and nature and purpose of annual exams in particular. The Standard 6 (Form 2/Year 8) Proficiency Examination — an exam that NZEI had long believed should be abolished — was singled out for particular criticism.

- In 1931, with full backing of Labour Party, NZEI President, Henry Penlington, urged government to abolish the exam on the grounds that many teachers found difficulty freeing themselves from its “shadow” and that parents regarded the annual “full-dress examination as the only bona fide test and guarantee of a child’s progress”.
- In 1936 the newly installed Labour Government abolished the exam, albeit not without criticism from conservative quarters who alleged that it was the teaching profession (i.e., the NZEI) and not the public who wanted Proficiency (and the other standards examinations) abolished.
- Other commentators were concerned that education standards would decline as a consequence of abandoning a “measuring rod” that gauged the academic ability of primary school children.
- Private school authorities similarly were worried they could no longer demonstrate their teaching efficiency, vis-à-vis high pass rates, alongside state primary schools. In truth, what these critics had lost was the key means by which the nation’s primary school teachers could be held accountable and therefore controlled.



Curriculum reform

- The abolition of Proficiency and the standards exams meant that schools were no longer “mere machines” processing pupils for exams. Freed from constraints imposed by exams, schools could now experiment with broader curricular programmes adapted to the varying capacities of individual pupils.
- From 1943 the DoE, in keeping with modern thinking on curriculum development, embarked upon a programme of “rolling revision” wherein each of the primary school subjects was revised (in consultation with teachers) rather than the former practice of overhauling the entire primary school curriculum periodically, as was the case in 1904, 1919, and 1929.



Surveying ‘standards’: The 1962 Currie Commission

After WW2 allegations about lowered standards of school achievement persisted to such an extent they could no longer be ignored. Philip Skoglund, Minister of Education, recognised the urgent need to appoint an independent Commission on Education to “take stock of the educational situation”.

- Appointed in February 1960, and chaired by Sir George Currie, the commission explored contentious issue of “modern education methods”. The Commissioners concluded there was no longer a place in NZ primary schools for teachers who rejected “cardinal ideas of variation in ability and attainment” and who “narrowed all achievements to success in the three R’s” by deliberately withholding children from progressing through the system “until they had reached each year some fixed level or standard of attainment”.
- Addressing the criticism that “standards had declined” in NZ primary school classrooms, Commissioners recommended NZCER be contracted to prepare and administer national standardised tests in the form of “checkpoints of attainment” in basic subjects at five-yearly intervals, “to allow valid comparisons of achievement to be made at particular points [Standards 1, 4, and Form 2] in the primary school curriculum”.
- Commissioners also emphasised that “checkpoints” should *supplement* estimates of class teachers who were uniquely placed to take account of various factors affecting ability and performance of pupils.



Educational Standards post-Currie

Following publication of Currie Commission in 1962 the Minister of Education, Arthur Kinsella, in 1965 invited NZCER to construct “standardised group tests of attainment in basic school subjects” based on NZ syllabuses for all classes. Four years later, the first standardised tests were published by NZCER and sent to all primary schools.

- Over next 30 years several committees of inquiry and working parties explored ways to evaluate achievement levels of NZ primary school students. Three of these — Learning and Teaching (1974), the Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988), and the Reports of the Ministerial Working Party on Assessment for Better Learning (1989-1990) — specifically investigated national monitoring of educational attainment.

- National monitoring of different areas of primary school curriculum was already occurring owing to NZs participation in some comparative surveys of educational achievement undertaken by International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. These surveys compared and analysed achievements of NZ school children alongside learners from other countries, and provided some indication of performance of pupils in NZ school system. Other achievement information, albeit covering selected areas of the NZ primary school curriculum, came from the standardised Progressive Achievement Tests, developed and re-normed periodically by NZCER.



Educational Standards post-Currie continued

By 1997, the then National-NZ First Coalition Government was convinced important “information gaps” existed regarding absence of clear “performance outcomes” for primary school students. They proposed introducing a system of national tests for all primary school students.

- Labour Party caught many off guard when its Education spokesperson, Trevor Mallard, a former teacher, declared that externally referenced mandatory national testing would improve achievement levels of NZ primary school children significantly.
- Citing the mediocre performance of a sample of 9-year-old (Year 4-5) New Zealand school children who had participated alongside 9-year-olds from 26 other countries in the 1994 TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study), Mallard proposed that all Standard 2, 4, and Form 2 children be tested annually in English or Reading, Mathematics, and Science in order to identify relative strengths and weaknesses of individual teachers. Such data, he argued, could then be used to censure poorly performing schools and to remove “incompetent” teachers.
- Mallard apparently approved of parents having access to schools’ test scores so they could choose the “best” school for their children. Primary school teachers and principals viewed the matter very differently. In the face of overwhelming criticism regarding the validity of such tests Labour withdrew its support for compulsory national testing.



The Green Paper on Assessment in Primary Schools (1998)

Within hours of Labour declaring its opposition to national testing Wyatt Creech, Minister of Education, announced that Government would soon issue its own Green Paper on primary school assessment.

- Released on 7 May 1998 with a 3 month deadline for public submissions, the Green Paper on *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools* and the accompanying “Brochure for Parents” outlined proposals for assessing and monitoring the performance of primary school age children against national achievement objectives.
- While GP acknowledged teachers’ access to several Ministry-sanctioned initiatives — e.g., School Entry Assessment; Six Year Net; Assessment Resource Banks; Progressive Achievement Tests; and National Education Monitoring Project — it down played their importance and sophistication deliberately in order to support introduction of national, externally referenced, tests that schools could use to “compare their performance with others and identify both where they are doing well and not so well”.



National exemplars

- GP advocated nationwide introduction of well-designed exemplars of student work and associated assessment activities, linked directly to the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework's* achievement objectives, to provide teachers with another means with which to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and learning programmes.
- What was less clear was the capacity of exemplars to provide information “to help teachers to identify whether their judgements about students’ achievements are consistent with national standards”.
- GP authors failed to provide *evidence* of educational benefits accruing to individual students by assessing them against “nationally consistent standards” and ignored the reality that national exemplars of student work constituted a de facto compulsory curriculum because teachers would use them as “benchmark” indicators of student achievement.



New externally referenced tests

Compulsory externally referenced and administered testing proved the most contentious of the assessment proposals outlined in GP.

- GP proposed that initially every Year 6 and 8 student — about 110,000 boys and girls — would sit national externally set and marked pencil-and-paper tests, based on achievement objectives in literacy (or English) and numeracy (or Mathematics), with Year 4 children tested later.
- GP envisaged an external agency contracted to administer tests; to set test papers; to mark, analyse, and report on test results; and to return papers, marking schedules, and school and national reports to individual schools.



New externally referenced tests continued

- GP suggested 3 types of report be made available: one to government, detailing national and group achievement levels; another to each individual school, comparing its students' achievements with national levels of achievement and those of similar student groups nationwide; and a third report for schools to distribute to parents. The information gleaned from these reports was intended to “help teachers to identify which programmes are most effective for specific groups of students . . . which factors may contribute to that success . . . [and] which programmes need most improvement for particular groups of students”.
- However, the case for national testing became more problematic from the outset owing to GP confusion regarding exact *purpose* of national tests. Readers were told that “teachers need information to help them to identify whether their judgements about achievements are consistent with national standards”, at the same time as being informed that externally referenced tests would “help [teachers] to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and learning programmes”.
- The first purpose clearly involved assessment being used for reasons of *accountability* whereas the second involved assessment to *improve teaching and learning*.



Limitations of national testing

GP conceded that no single assessment system could provide the definitive word on children's achievements.

- GP appreciated that results from schools with small rolls should be reviewed “with caution”; that students should not be “labelled” on basis of “one off snapshot” of achievements in the 2 curriculum areas; and that “valid comparisons between schools . . . need to be based on valid measures of the overall achievements of its students”.
- Further recognition that written tests might be culturally inappropriate for Maori who emphasise oral traditions; that low school scores compared with national norms did not mean necessarily school was ineffective; and that publication of test results for particular groups of students could reinforce low expectations for students who were not achieving highly.
- GP also acknowledged the complex relationship between educational achievement, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and understood that “simply to compare schools serving certain communities . . . with national norms is to misuse the information”.



League Tables

- Having identified numerous problems with national testing, GP ignored these when it concluded that only through *mandatory* national testing could a “comprehensive range of reliable comparative data” be generated.
- Collecting data was intended to help parents “identify the effectiveness of their school’s programmes compared with similar schools and national achievement trends” and to “provide information to schools that will enable teachers, principals, and boards to evaluate the achievement of their children in comparison to national and group levels of achievement . . . via externally set and marked tests . . . in a standardised way to maximise . . . validity and comparisons”.
- It is abundantly clear from overseas literature that when the relative performance of neighbouring schools becomes widely known, publication of national “league tables” inevitably occurs.
- Only those individuals and groups with an understanding of educational assessment would read league tables for what they really were — a compilation of misleading (if not invalid and unreliable) scores on a poorly designed national test limited to two curriculum areas.



High stakes testing

- Absent from GP analysis of national testing was any mention of the consequences of “high stakes testing”.
- Our earlier discussion of standards exams has revealed that in a high stakes environment teachers boosted their annual class percentage pass rates by “teaching to the test” and by excluding “slow learners” from the exams.
- Only those types of tasks (and content) assessable in the national tests were taught while areas not assessed formally were ignored. Such narrowing of instruction today is at odds with the 2007 *New Zealand Curriculum* philosophy of breadth and balance in curriculum coverage.



Green Paper submissions

Following release of GP in May 1998 a 3-month consultation period was provided, during which time Ministry staff met with individuals and groups.

- These submissions were analysed by an independent research team at Canterbury University and a final report was released in November 1998.
- During consultation period Minister of Education sensed public's growing unease with national testing and announced that the tests would be postponed until 2000 to allow further consultation to occur. However, this did not dissuade the School Trustees' Association and some 1400 primary school principals from publicly rejecting national testing.
- The Gilmore Report detected a similar trend — national testing was opposed by 72.8% of respondents on the grounds that such tests had a negative effect on children, teachers, and schools. Moreover they were seen to have limited validity, and to foster misleading comparisons and competition between schools.



Green Paper submissions continued

In September 1999 new Minister of Education, Nick Smith, reiterated the National Government's unswerving commitment to national testing in a speech to NZEI Annual Conference.

- NZ was “behind the pace [because] every State in Australia has National Assessment. So too do England and the vast majority of states in Canada and America”, and that opponents of national testing are “swimming against the tide of education internationally”.
- Smith launched his government's “robust and comprehensive” *Information for Better Learning* assessment policy that mirrored the GP, although national literacy and numeracy tests were to apply to Year 5 and 7 students.
- Executive Director of Independent Schools' Council, Jan Kerr, praised the government for persisting with compulsory national testing in the interests of “raising standards”.
- Labour Party affirmed its strong opposition to compulsory national testing of primary school children and, upon becoming government in late November 1999, announced that national tests for 9- and 11-year-olds would now be abandoned.



Green Paper submissions continued

- In mid-2000 Trevor Mallard, Minister of Education, announced that Auckland University had won the contract to develop new tools for assessing literacy and numeracy for pupils in Years 5 to 7 inclusive.
- Unlike the last government's compulsory testing proposal, the new (asTTle) assessment initiative would be voluntary: Schools would be sent a CD-ROM containing hundreds of closed-and-open-ended items indexed to National Curriculum documents, from which teachers could compile specific items to assess students' skills, concepts, and knowledge.
- Voluntary and open-ended nature of asTTle test items would minimise likelihood that individual schools would be ranked and that league tables would be compiled as is commonplace in England where, since 1989, children have been tested formally at ages 7, 11, 14, 16, and 18 with national testing at ages 7, 11, and 14 in three key subjects: English, Mathematics, and Science.



The Education Standards debates in England, Wales, and USA

- Important lessons ought to be learned from the UK experience following the Education Reform Act of 1988 that ushered in the National Curriculum.
- Conservative's commitment to “standards” spelled out clearly when the Department of Education and Science launched the *Parents' Charter* in 1991.
- Charter required comparative “league tables” of examination and national curriculum test results to be compiled and published for each school and local education authority to assist parents in deciding which schools to enrol their children at.
- League tables listed students' average achievement rankings on a school by school, local authority by local authority, basis using national curriculum test results at ages 7, 11, and 14 years, along with similar scores for 16-year-olds taking the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and 18-year-olds taking A levels.
- Research evidence demonstrates that 1988 curriculum reforms and *Parents' Charter* had profound influence on content and style of schooling in England and Wales - reshaped and redefined the culture of the classroom and the culture and work of teachers.



The Education Standards debates in England, Wales, and USA continued

- Teachers endorsed idea of attainment levels in National Curriculum initially because they provided clear descriptors of what pupils at each of the different levels should attain.
- Support evaporated by early 1990s once teachers witnessed first hand the way performance (assessment) indicators came to dominate classroom instruction.
- The *Cambridge Primary Review* (2009) presents further disturbing evidence that the overemphasis on testing in literacy and numeracy (i.e., reading, writing, and mathematics) has resulted not only in a seriously overcrowded and micromanaged curriculum — with “basic skills” consuming more than 50% of classroom time — but also in a marked diminution in students’ natural curiosity, imagination, and in their love of learning.
- Outcome is hardly surprising. Teachers work in an environment where few other adults witness the quality of their work directly and where they have to confront the political reality that test results provide one of the few available public (and ostensibly objective) indicators of their performance.
- The price to be paid for the introduction of a national testing regime in England and Wales has been its stranglehold over the school curriculum.



The Education Standards debates in England, Wales, and USA continued

Much the same conclusion was reached by Firestone and colleagues (2004) in their three-year study of New Jersey's testing policy.

- Noting the great difficulty in separating the discourses of education reform, accountability and national testing — e.g., the No Child Left Behind policy of the Bush administration — they conclude that:

“Whereas critics see testing as a disease that plagues our education system, advocates see it as central to the current panacea—standards based reform—that is expected to save the American educational system. The ambiguity of practice is that test preparation turns out to have elements of both. Some test preparation is decontextualized drill, a short-term response to raise test scores regardless of what students actually learn. Taken as a package, however, nothing suggests that the kind of state and local policies and practices [we] observed are likely to overcome the achievement gap between New Jersey's rich and poor children.”



The future of National Standards in New Zealand

Will the Government's National Standards' initiative provide achievement information that is meaningful for teachers, parents and students?

- Since the mid-1980s a culture of *performativity* has pervaded NZ primary and secondary schools, driven by the political appetite for ever-increasing monitoring, reporting, and accountability mechanisms to ensure heightened external control and surveillance over school in general and teachers in particular.
- These demands are deeply symptomatic of a market ideology of education and educational provision wherein there will be clear “winners” and “losers”.
- The “standards” mantra is central to any major reform initiatives that embrace narrowly defined, instant quick fix, homogenizing, one-size-fits-all models of accountability.



The future of National Standards in New Zealand continued

- Far from being visionary this policy blatantly disregards most, if not all, of the important lessons that have emerged from the many decades of experience that NZ and other countries have amassed in relation to national curriculum and assessment systems.
- Total historical amnesia has surrounded the debates about NS in NZ – e.g., no mention by educationists or politicians of the 1998 Green Paper on primary school assessment, nor to the substantial body of literature that has analysed the history of the primary school standards (and accompanying exams) in NZ.
- With nearly 60 years national primary school testing experience to draw upon, New Zealanders need to be reminded that the system was abandoned finally in 1936 because most if not all of what was worthwhile educationally was being driven out by the narrow focus on “tests”.
- To suggest, as Tolley and Key do, that NS offer a ready made solution to raising students’ literacy and numeracy achievements and that they should be (re)introduced into primary and intermediate school classrooms is disingenuous educationally. NZ primary schools have “been there” and “done that”, historically.



The future of National Standards in New Zealand continued

Perhaps the penultimate word on NS belongs to the late Dr Seuss whose children's book, *Horrory for Diffendoofer Day* (1998), depicts the scene where Diffendoofer School staff must demonstrate they have taught their students how to perform or have them sent to another school. The future of Diffendoofer rests, therefore, with the success of its students in the forthcoming test:

All schools for miles and miles around must take a special test,
To see who's such and such, to see which school's the best
If our small school does not do well, then it will be torn down,
And you will have to go to school in dreary Flobbertown.
Not Flobbertown! We shouted, and we shuddered at the name
For everyone in Flobbertown does everything the same.



SUMMARY

NS reflect a preoccupation with the mantra of standards (outcomes)-based educational reform wherein achievement benchmarks are specified in advance regarding what learners of a given age should know and be able to demonstrate in a given context. This reflects a fundamental shift from ‘inputs’ to ‘outputs’ and, some critics argue, from ‘teaching’ to ‘learning’.

Two aspects to Standards-Based Education:

1. Content Standards – i.e., what students are expected to know and be able to do (e.g., The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007)
2. Performance Standards – i.e., how well students perform in relation to the content standards (e.g., The National Standards)

Other countries have introduced various kinds of standards-based education reforms – e.g., Key Stage Tests (Britain, 1990s), No Child Left Behind (USA, 2002), and the National Assessment Programme (Australia, 2008).

While there are some differences in approach between what has happened elsewhere and the proposed NS in NZ, one concern that consistently emerges in the academic literature is that of league tables.



What are League Tables?

- These usually refer to a chart or list that compares institutions by ranking them in order of ability, achievement or performance.
- In educational terms, League Tables rank schools on the basis of the relative performance of their students in tests.
- League Tables currently exist in the secondary (e.g., NCEA) and university (PBRF) sectors.
- High rankings result in a school being regarded by the public as being more desirable whereas lower ranked schools occupy a much lower status.



What are League Tables? continued

In the UK this has led to the emergence of a “shame and blame” culture:

- Increased competition between schools, teachers and students creates “winners” and “losers”, “successful” and “failing” schools.
- Resultant narrowing of the breadth of the school curriculum (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009).
- Excessive focus on outcomes /‘results’.
- Schools focus not on the ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ students but on those near or just at the benchmark.
- Inequitable allocation of resources – loss of funding and staffing entitlements.
- Difficulty in attracting and retaining staff (head teachers hired and fired).
- Increased ethnic and social class inequities.
- Schools enter a “spiral of decline” characterised by diminishing resources, higher stress levels and plummeting staff morale.



Limitations of League Tables

If we accept that 20-30% of student achievement can be accounted for by the schools and teachers, then 70-80% is attributable to family/home, socio-economic status, and student circumstances.

Therefore just what are the league tables measuring?
How valid and reliable are they?



Limitations of Leagues Tables continued

- What is being evaluated is the socio-economic (class) background of the student.
- League Tables report assessment results for two curriculum areas only (e.g., Literacy and Numeracy), thus devaluing other curriculum areas that are also important.
- League Tables are based on snapshots of ability at particular moments in time rather than tracing individual achievements over time.
- League Tables provide tangible evidence of “teaching to the test”. Some educationists regard this is acceptable because “good teachers test their students all the time” and because teaching to the test is eminently sound pedagogy.
- However, while some students might have the ability to “do” something asked for in a test situation, they might not necessarily “know” – i.e., they can lack the necessary understanding and thinking skills that underpin effective learning.



League Tables – Does “One Size Fits All”?

The Minister has not acted to prevent the publication of league table data, believing that the public should have access such data and that “the best disinfectant is fresh air” (*The Press*, 7 April 2009).

Alfie Kohn, a vigorous critic of US standards-based curricula and testing, has observed that:

- Knowledge areas are not given equal status - some are prioritised over others.
- Learning is never a linear, neat, hierarchical process that occurs in much the same way for all students.
- Same age learners are not equally ready for the same learning at the same stage.
- Cultural background, social class, cognitive dispositions account for significant differences in league table results.



League Tables – Does “One Size Fits All”?



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We need to understand the government's real agenda for education – i.e., increasing educational 'choice'; increased privatisation; introduction of merit ('performance') pay for teachers, changed employment conditions, standards for teacher registration, etc.

- One way of engaging with the current debates surrounding NS is to explore the real purpose(s) of education; the implications of NS for teachers, Maori students; underachieving students, and the wider curriculum.
- As Albert Einstein once remarked, “Not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that can be counted counts.”
- The Key-led National government might soon be caught between the reality of the post-*Tomorrow's Schools* environment (where schools reflect the views of their communities – e.g., BOTs supporting principals' opposition to NS) and their determination to push on with NS, seemingly regardless of community sentiments. What will the government do? Dismiss hundreds of BOTs and appoint Statutory Managers/School Commissioners in their place?



CONCLUDING COMMENTS continued

- Often ignored is the reality that while administrators determine educational policy, it is parents and pupils (and teachers) who actually shape educational practice. Taking up this point, the late Dr Beeby (Director of Education, 1940-1960) offers a timely reminder to those who seek to institute educational reforms without full and transparent community consultation:

“Whatever purposes politicians and administrators might have had for education, their plans could be deflected when ambitious parents, acting individually but in unspoken accord, decided they wanted the schools to do something different for their children.... There is always some tension between the controllers and the consumers of education and, in the long run, the consumers’ purposes usually prevail.”

This is the dominant and inescapable reality that confronts all governments and Ministers of Education, both past and present. There are many important lessons to be learned but will anyone be willing to listen?



