

National Standards

– the ongoing debate

Damaging and divisive? An exciting opportunity? Or something in between? National Standards have turned the media into a battleground and become the education headline of the year. We present a series of articles by staff in the Faculty of Education showing there is no one opinion held by the University, but rather a diverse range of views based on the right to academic freedom of opinion.

The profession needs to lead



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A concerning feature of the national standards debate is the extent to which possibilities are being claimed as proof.

It is claimed, for example, that standards will solve the long tail of underachievement;

and that they will uncover ineffective teachers and ineffective schools. National standards have the *potential* to assist the *identification* of underachievement. But only effective teaching will address the long tail. Because so much achievement depends on prior knowledge and experience, and because that is unevenly distributed, student achievement on national standards is a crude and limited measure of teaching (and school) effectiveness. It is persistent, well-informed, goal-oriented, individualised inquiry combined with the knowledge and flexibility to adapt teaching to individual needs that marks effective teaching. National standards can help establish the goals but that is about all.

On the other side of the debate overseas evidence is cited as proof that national standards are damaging to the implementation of a broad curriculum and that they provoke narrow measures of achievement. The trouble with this line of argument is that the New Zealand national standards are so different from the overseas examples cited that such examples offer no proof of their harm or benefit. In most other jurisdictions national standards are accompanied by national tests. In England, all children sit standard achievement tests (SATs) at the end of Year 2, Year 6 and Year 9¹; and in New York City elementary and middle school students sit annual State exams². These are single point, high stakes measures of achievement.

But this is not what has been developed in New Zealand. The standards are presented as annotated examples of student work. They are embedded in content from a range of learning areas and are not greatly different from the exemplars that teachers are already using. Decisions about progress towards, and achievement of, the standards are to be made through a *process* of overall teacher judgment based on multiple sources of evidence, using existing assessment tools and arrived at in consultation with colleagues. This bears little resemblance to single point summative national testing.

There is no *proof* that it will work. The standards are complex, and reliable moderation of judgments between schools using multiple sources of evidence is challenging. But establishing national benchmarks of literacy and numeracy achievement embedded in a range of learning areas, increasing conversations between teachers within and beyond schools about levels of achievement, and using the feedback about achievement and progress to develop next steps for teaching and learning is not inconsistent with what we know about effective teaching.

In search for proof that the national standards will be either a panacea or a disaster, and consequently to either oversell them or to reject them, we lose an opportunity to use them in ways that improve goal-setting, evidence collection, judgment, and feedback. More importantly, the profession loses the opportunity to promote teacher insight and expertise, to take charge of the standards and influence their refinement, and to inform a richer and more equitable view of school reporting.

None of this is to deny that the standards pose significant risk, especially the impending, invidious, ill-informed comparative reporting that might arise from media-driven analysis of boards' annual reports. They are, however, already in regulation and as written offer the *potential* to be used in ways that improve teaching and learning. But realising this potential requires the profession to engage, shape and lead, not resist; and from this position of strength *inside the process* to work to mitigate the potentially damaging effects of league table reporting.

¹ See http://www.sotsguide.co.uk/what_are_sots.htm

² See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/YearlyTesting/default.htm>

It's not a silver bullet



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Does assessment have the potential to raise student achievement? Yes. Can assessment reduce disparities between high and low achievers? Yes. Should schools and teachers be accountable to their communities? Yes. Do teachers, students and their parents need to understand what learning is expected and what constitutes successful attainment of that learning? Yes. Should students and parents have a more significant role to play in student learning and the assessment of

that learning? Yes. Will national standards be able to deliver in regard to each of the aforementioned questions? No.

The government's flagship policy, national standards, has caused one of the biggest educational furores of the twenty-first century. Press coverage is testament to the fact that battle lines are drawn and the fight has begun in earnest. In one corner, we have a number of senior New Zealand academics past and present, each of whom have extensive knowledge of assessment systems and their effects on individual students and on schools and their communities. In the main, those at the chalk face subscribe to the academics' arguments that as a policy national standards is fatally flawed, and when implemented will cause more harm than good. In the opposing corner we have the government and its officials, keen to raise achievement and reduce the tail of underachievement by making the teaching profession more accountable. Essentially national standards are being promoted as the silver bullet that will rid the profession of incompetent teachers who themselves are the cause of low achievement.

Like many of my academic peers, my stance about national standards has been borne out through the interplay of personal experience and theoretical knowledge. Together these two resources have highlighted for me the complexities involved in raising achievement. The argument mounted by those favouring national standards is simplistic and naïve. Proponents of national standards ignore a body of research that exemplifies the best way in which we can support and enhance learning and achievement. They also underplay the experiences of schools, teachers and students in countries such as the USA and England, where the unintended consequences of policies implemented to raise achievement and reduce disparities have led to a narrowing of the curriculum, the marginalisation of specific groups of students and the unfair labeling of some schools and teachers as ineffectual and incompetent.

If raising achievement were as simple as clearly specifying and reporting achievement then the USA and England would be at the top of the game. Significantly and sadly they are not! In New Zealand, national standards will only serve to draw attention away from what really matters. If we want to raise achievement, we have to concentrate on what happens in classrooms as teachers and students interact during teaching and learning. School leaders' and teachers' attention needs to be focused on the specification of quality learning goals and the use of feedback and dialogue to close the gap between where students are at and where they need to be. To enhance self-regulatory behaviour in students, a vital component in successful achievement and the improvement of learning, then greater attention needs to be paid to the development of authentic self and peer assessment activities, which are an embedded part of the daily classroom programme. As the research has shown, it is the improvement of these strategies, along with the development of teacher expertise in the use of assessment information to inform teaching and learning that raises student achievement and reduces the disparities between high and low achieving students.

So much now depends on the implementation!



JOHN HATTIE

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Since writing this article John Hattie has become a member of the National Standards Independent Advisory Group.

This was formed to provide independent advice to the Minister of Education on the standards in the first year of implementation.

The development and implementation of national standards is a key plank in the National Party policies for Education. The success of national standards is less a function of the quality of the standards but more related to the successful understanding of these standards and the quality and validity of their implementation across all schools in NZ. To successfully implement in a system where local school management governs implementation, there needs to be widespread quality of and resources for implementation, a confidence to succeed, and a spread of ownership. So far this does not seem to have been realised.

Successful implementation will probably require a clear appreciation of the criteria for success; independent evaluation to ascertain intended and any unintended consequences; monitoring that national standards do not lead to perverse actions (such as over testing, creating debates about *between* instead of *within* school variability, increasing retention); and orientation more to standards of progression as much if not more than to the levels of performance of students. The measurement of progress is not straightforward and any pleas to "keep it simple" are doomed from the outset; the within and between school moderation of progress and the levels (eg, year based standards) is critical and seems barely debated; and the time to implement is almost certain to be measured more in years than months. Many schools already have excellent systems for reporting to parents about levels and progress and we need to be careful to avoid a tendency for each school to discover "the answer" (while down the road another school has just abandoned that answer). We need to get better systems for sharing of excellent ideas based on evidence.

I have outlined elsewhere some criteria of success (Hattie, 2009), and there is much to learn from other systems that have started with similar lofty motives, claims that "we will be different", and we need to resist blaming those who do not implement optimally when the implementation is too experimental and not given full support to accomplish. We cannot afford to expend our energies and goodwill solving the wrong problems, fixing any perverse problems that may arise from poorly conceived policy and implementation, and not knowing whether policies we are implementing are truly making the difference to the quality of teaching and learning *across* the curriculum for *all* students.

There are opportunities in this policy to get some schools up to the quality of many of our current successful schools who are tuned into formative assessment, use assessment to inform

teaching and learning, and are developing students with high capabilities in assessing their own learning. But proclamation is much easier than implementation, and the latter depends on generating the goodwill and commitment from the many thousands of school leaders and teachers in our system.

One issue is clear – the NZ national standards policy is not good or bad and pleas from those who ask that I take a stance either way miss the claims I have made above. We just do not know at this stage as the implementation seems too unknown, too experimental, too rushed, and missing some critical components. These issues may be remedied soon, although the verdict is out! The only truism is that the policy is unlikely to successfully implemented in all schools in one year; by necessity there is a trial in the air.

Hattie, J.A.C. (2009). *Horizons and whirlpools: The well travelled pathway of National Standards*. Working Paper from Visible Learning Lab, The University of Auckland. Located at www.cognitioninstitute.org

Professional development that is worthy of investment



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Designing effective professional development and learning projects that will make a difference to student outcomes, is an ongoing challenge. We are fortunate that the series of Best Evidence Synthesis

reports has contributed to our understanding of how public investment in professional learning and development (PLD) for teachers can become increasingly effective and strongly aligned to 'valued' student outcomes. The most important elements of improvement involve strengthening teaching and learning practices and adult-student relationships across all classrooms and teachers in a school system¹.

The current challenge we face as an education sector, is to ensure that we implement national standards in a way that places 'students at the centre of teaching and learning'². By effectively using the standards and the school self review tools that have been published, leaders and teachers have an opportunity to reflect on their current practice.

The ERO reports on the effectiveness of teacher professional learning and development in primary³ and secondary schools published in 2009 are a timely reminder of the importance of a strongly coordinated planned approach, where there is a school culture of learning and development. Thirty eight percent of primary schools in the ERO study demonstrated the characteristics of high quality PLD management. These schools aligned their PLD with well-informed school priorities and had a school culture in which professional learning was fostered and supported by school leaders. The self-review systems in the school were used to monitor and evaluate the impact of their PLD investment on improving the quality of teaching and student outcomes.

Many of the school leaders Team Solutions staff are working with in the Auckland and Northland region are taking the opportunity to reflect on the current assessment and reporting practices in their schools. When teachers take the opportunity to read the standards, they are also finding them a useful tool for reflecting on their teaching, for identifying the standard and achievement levels of their students and as a 'marker' for setting their expectations of student achievement. Timperley (2008) comments that when teachers are given the professional support they need, take responsibility, are engaged and do not dismiss learning difficulties as an inevitable consequence of the home or community environment, they discover that their new professional knowledge and practice have a positive impact on their students, and they begin to feel more effective as teachers⁴.

There is potential for the standards to be a transformational initiative. Teachers will be required to discuss the progress of students in their class with each other, sharing and analysing student data and evidence in order to establish their next steps for teaching. If evidence based, reflective conversations are a consistent feature of our school staffrooms, where teachers engage in dialogue about how to support children who particularly need their help, then that would be a professional development outcome worth investing in.

¹ Levin, Ben (2008). *How to Change 5000 Schools: A Practical and Positive Approach for Leading Change at Every Level*. Harvard Education Press. p91.

² Ministry of Education (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. p9.

³ Education Review Office (May 2009). *Managing Professional Learning and Development in Primary Schools*. p1.

⁴ Timperley, Helen (2008). *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*. EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES SERIES-18 The International Academy of Education. p9.

Whose standards? The politics of testing



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Let me state at the beginning that I am not opposed, in principle, to national standards. However, I do have grave reservations about the system currently being implemented in

New Zealand, for three reasons.

The first concern is the lack of any trialing. Assessment is an inexact science at best and to have no trial period is simply irresponsible. Imagine if a major health intervention was similarly implemented on the health sector and key medical professionals were either opposed to, or at least concerned about, its impact. Even if the intervention was couched as urgent or necessary, you can just imagine the public uproar that would result. Why then is this reckless disregard apparently acceptable in education? Why are professional educators ignored and the legitimate concerns they raise trivialised? And all this from a government who, when in opposition, criticised the implementation of NCEA on the basis that it was rushed.

The second concern relates to whether national standards will end up being used as league tables for school selection purposes. Whether this actually happens or not, it points to a wider problem

with standardised forms of assessment; they are inevitably used as sorting mechanisms in order to maintain existing social and educational hierarchies. We have already seen this with NCEA, where many high-decile and/or so-called elite schools have opted instead for the Cambridge system (ironically, given that Cambridge examinations are primarily used in developing countries). Though couched ostensibly on the basis of concerns with NCEA, this move is simply about these schools maintaining their current privileged status via a differentiated assessment process. I can see the same happening with national standards. High decile schools that are already socio-economically advantaged will inevitably start (and stay) ahead when measured against these benchmark standards. Low decile schools, which include a wider range of student backgrounds and abilities, will be further disadvantaged by comparison. Meanwhile, a key question that national standards could usefully answer in relation to individual schools is ignored: where were your students when they started and where are they now? This cohort analysis approach to assessment would give a far more accurate and informed picture of *how far* individual schools take their students.

And this brings me to my final concern. There has been a long history of standardised assessments specifically disadvantaging students from minority social, cultural and linguistic groups. We only have to go back to the spurious history of intelligence testing to see this. Intelligence tests, a supposed objective measure, were always culturally located (answering particular questions required appropriate cultural knowledge, not just abstract intellectual knowledge) and language specific. If you were a second language speaker of English, for example, you would be dealing not only with new (cultural) content, but the language demands of the test as well. And yet, these tests were regularly used to deny people (usually those just mentioned) citizenship on the basis of their supposed intellectual inferiority. My point here is that national assessment standards face these issues as well. Given that the supposed reason for their implementation is to increase the educational achievement of poorly performing students, many of whom are from other ethnic, cultural or language groups, it is highly likely, given this history of assessment, that national standards are actually going to make their educational experiences worse, rather than better.

Standards and Self-Review



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The brief I have been given for this piece - 500 words on the standards - is a challenge for someone more used to writing many times more than that on a given topic. I

will, therefore, leave aside the political debates and focus on some potential uses of the standards. This focus is consistent with previous statements in the Education Review that standards as an idea are neither good nor bad, it is their quality and use that makes them so.

Late last year, I agreed to lead a team to develop a self-review tool to accompany the release of the standards. The reason I agreed to be part of this development was to add my contribution to keeping the focus on the formative use of the standards. In this 500 words I wish to bring to the foreground some beliefs I hold about the standards embedded in this review tool.

The tool was designed to be consistent with effective processes of self-review that already exist in many schools. Its intent is to highlight how the standards can fit into those processes in ways likely to enhance, rather than detract from, teaching and learning. I was grateful to our advisory group for insisting that the tool was constructed in a way that emphasised that the standards must not become the default curriculum. We have a world-class curriculum. Let's ensure it continues as the overarching document.

The tool has underpinning it a theory of professionalism based on the idea of adaptive expertise developed in the work of John Bransford and colleagues. Both adaptive and routine experts develop deep knowledge on which they draw in their area of expertise. Routine experts become more fluent in what they already know. Adaptive experts do more than this. They have sophisticated systems to monitor what is working well so it stays part of school and classroom routines and what is not working well so associated practices can be revisited and changed to ensure they become more effective. If we are to solve our persistent teaching and learning problems, we need to do something different.

The final idea in the tool I wish to highlight is the importance of involving students, parents and whānau as partners in our students' education. Schools alone cannot solve the teaching and learning problems many of our students face. To be effective, the tool emphasises that partnership must be based on accurate information about shared expectations of what students should be learning and their level of achievement, how they are achieving in relation to these expectations and the responsibilities and contributions of each partner in achieving what is expected. These ideas have been around for some time, and some schools have this kind of partnership with their communities. As our education mantra has extended to include all students, so must our concept of partnership extend to all communities.

To my mind, determining whether the introduction of standards can be considered "successful" or "unsuccessful" depends on the uses to which they are put by the government, Ministry of Education, school leaders and teachers. All have responsibility to keep the focus on what happens for students in classrooms everyday and ensure that the standards are enlisted to enhance this central purpose of New Zealand education.