

## Leadership Positioning Government National Standards

April 2009

This paper sets out important considerations for leadership positioning on national standards and reporting. To exercise leadership influence within the school community, every principal needs to know and consider the issues, and develop and communicate positions that have the weight of professional integrity.

### 1. The Government's Intentions

The National Party, prior to its election to Government, made clear its intentions to introduce national standards and plain language reporting in literacy and numeracy. It enacted legislation to this effect soon after taking office in November 2008. The legislation is broadly stated, and does not prescribe or detail the content, design or implementation of standards and reporting procedures. These matters are being managed by the Government's Ministry of Education. Public consultation will allow opportunities for comment on how the Ministry is fashioning the requirements of schools with the aid of its consultants. Consultation is unlikely to divert the Government and its Ministry from its overriding intentions.

The Government has repeatedly made it clear that it does not intend National Testing. National Testing in this sense is typically thought of as one test for all students, with the results being used to compare student against student, teacher against teacher, school against school, community against community, along with extensive industries of deeper data analysis.

The demanding time-frame imposed on the Ministry by the Government, and minimal opportunities for open participation, are significant threats to achieving an educationally healthy formulation of policy and procedure that draws on the best of New Zealand thought and practice.

#### ***Leadership Positioning***

***National standards are soon to be open for consultation. What criteria will you use to make decisions on the validity of what is proposed? How will you check the strength of your criteria? What steps will you take as a leader to help others evaluate and respond to the proposed standards and associated requirements?***

### 2. The Government's Justification

The Government's justification for national standards with associated testing for all of New Zealand's students, and plain language reporting, is regularly reported as necessary for meeting five major concerns: **(1) reducing underachievement; (2) identification of students who are struggling, (3) more effective teaching of underachieving students; (4) having and using evidence-based data to improve student outcomes; (5) giving parents clear information on their children's achievement relative to other children of a similar age.**

Underachievement is typically referenced to New Zealand students' results on international tests. In 2005/6, a sample of just over 6300 Year 5 students from approximately 240 schools took part in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) along with children in 39 other countries. The mean reading score for New Zealand Year 5 students (532) was significantly higher than the international mean. However, relative to other higher performing countries, a notable sized group did not reach the PIRLS lower international benchmarks: Maori boys, Pasifika boys, Pasifika girls, and Year 5 students in lower decile schools. NEMP, which uses considerably richer approaches, also shows that students in these subgroups are substantially overrepresented in lower achievement.

Hattie and other researchers internationally have variously found that 20% to 30% of student achievement can be attributed directly to schools and their teachers, with the remaining 70% to 80% attributable to home circumstances, personal traits and capacities, etc. As countless studies have repeatedly shown, schools alone should never be held totally responsible for a child's achievement or progress.

**Leadership Positioning**

***Do you agree with the validity of the major concerns of Government, and the need for national standards to address such concerns? Are you confident that national standards will be effective in addressing those concerns, and that they are the best way to address such concerns?***

### **3. Quality Education and Quality Curriculum**

National standards for numeracy and written aspects of literacy need to be considered within a framework of overarching beliefs about what constitutes rich, meaningful and engaging school-based learning for New Zealand's diverse students. This is not a technical matter. It is a moral, ethical and professional matter. It is a matter that challenges and reflects the integrity of school leadership, the teaching profession, and the community at large.

The revised New Zealand Curriculum presupposes a balanced programme of learning experiences at school that will help students to grow as confident, connected, active life-long learners. It includes values and key competencies that are necessary for a good society, and for a successful and satisfying life within and beyond school. It includes learning areas of English, The Arts, Science, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Health, Physical Education, Technology and Languages – all of which are fundamental to a rounded education. Yet evidence suggests that in many schools, more than half of the available time for teaching and learning is devoted to literacy and numeracy, reflecting the current NAGs 1 i. b) and ii. a). International evidence shows that those aspects of curriculum that are prescribed for mandatory testing and reporting get the lion's share of school time, and seriously narrow the learning experience.

**Leadership Positioning**

***What is the scope and what are the features of a quality curriculum that your school and its community is committed to? Literacy and numeracy are fundamental – but to what extent should they dictate or limit the scope of teaching and learning programmes and experiences in all other areas of curriculum?***

### **4. Reporting Achievement on National Standards**

Reporting to parents on each student's status in relation to national standards needs to be conducted within framework that clearly benefits students by their own and others' responses – parents and teachers. If reporting has potential for negative effects (e.g. labelling of children, teachers, or schools), then its usefulness for improving learning is in jeopardy. Reporting is not simply a technical matter; it is a matter that requires high levels of professional knowledge, judgment and communication.

Numerous surveys have shown that parents *do* want to know where their children stand in their achievement and in the progress they are making, and that this is a professional obligation. To merely give one-off standardised test scores (percentiles, stanines, or other poorly understood statistical descriptors) is to attribute undue and overriding authority to a test and a single score. Moreover, written and timed tests cannot satisfactorily measure all of the important dimensions of learning and progress. It is now widely accepted that the most important features of good reporting (whether written or oral) are clear and accurate descriptions of what the student *can* do, and the priorities for further progress in relation to important learning goals. Data (numbers, etc.) are an insufficient "outer crust" that belie the detail of the "soft underbelly". Moreover, data by definition are but *estimates* of a *sample* of what is being learned and what the student can do!

**Leadership Positioning**

***The community at large has a limited knowledge of scope and frailties of testing, so it can be all too easily lulled into measurement paradise. What steps can be taken within your community to deepen their understanding. Are you happy to reinforce "single test" scores as the basis for determining and reporting student learning, or do you insist upon multiple sources of information as the basis of judgments and reporting? Will such "insistence" apply to reporting against proposed national standards? How will you ensure that your reporting methods elude attempts to allow comparisons from your school to another school? Or do you think that such comparisons are helpful for students and teachers?***

## 5. The Self-Managing Context

New Zealand has a widely supported system of self-managing schools, where the State sets broad national expectations for every school in ways that allow individual schools to interpret and design their practice in ways that are most suited to meeting the learning needs of their students and extending their achievements. The large majority of New Zealand's schools operate very effectively and responsibly within the parameters of a self-managing system. To be consistent with the fundamental principles of self-management, mandatory national standards and reporting systems must be designed and implemented in ways that allow sufficient scope for local decision making.

The Ministry of Education has for some time been working away on changing the **National Education and Administration Guidelines**. It is expected that they will be revealed sometime in 2009. Careful scrutiny of the Guidelines will also be necessary to ensure that the scope provided in the New Zealand Curriculum obligations (see page 44, The New Zealand Curriculum) are not undermined, and that school governance and management continue to have the scope to exercise local interpretation and decision making. Any curtailment would require serious interrogation and challenge.

### **Leadership Positioning**

***To what extent should National Standards and reporting requirements be consistent with self-management, and what scope should self-management allow in the school's processes?***

## 6. Criteria for Judging the Acceptability of National Standards

The profession's contribution to ensuring that National Standards and reporting requirements are healthy and acceptable needs to be based on a set of clear and widely communicated criteria. Such criteria might include:

- .1 National standards are broadly rather than narrowly stated, and include a balanced and interrelated set of abilities and dispositions, including those that are not amenable to measurement by formal tests.
- .2 National Standards are relative to the individual student's learning, and can be used to show the progress they are making.
- .3 Achievement of standards is decided from multiple sources of evidence including teachers' day to day observations and professional judgments.
- .4 National standards do not undermine a well rounded schooling as prescribed by The New Zealand Curriculum.
- .5 National standards are sensitive to cultural and lingual differences among students.
- .6 National standards are understood, accepted as sensible, and supported by teachers.
- .7 National standards cause no harm to individual students.
- .8 Reporting against national standards avoids regimes that allow for simplistic comparison of schools, promulgation of league tables and the like.
- .9 The analyses and reporting of student achievement against national standards will have safeguards against simplistic blaming of teachers or schools for those students or groups of students who fail to attain because of powerful influences that are outside of the school's reach.
- .10 National standards and reporting procedures are aligned with the New Zealand system of school self-management.

### **Leadership Positioning**

***What criteria need to be satisfied before the adoption of proposed national standards and reporting are acceptable to the school? How will these criteria be communicated, justified and used?***



The NZPF is keen to hear from you about the consultation process. Please forward your comments and insights to [standards@nzpf.ac.nz](mailto:standards@nzpf.ac.nz)