



NEW ZEALAND PRINCIPALS' FEDERATION

National President, Peter Simpson

On National Standards

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Many countries have travelled the path of introducing National Standards. Such education reforms do not occur in a vacuum. They are first politically motivated and are the initial step in developing a new education culture, at the centre of which is a new form of accountability. The driving force of this new culture is competition. To the politically naïve it may seem like a winner. It appears to make schools accountable and give parents information about their child's achievement and their school's performance relative to others nation-wide.

Unfortunately, this new education culture is based on the premise that all children of the nation, within an age cohort, progress and achieve in a standardised way. This is where the term 'National Standards' comes from. It means 'Standardisation of the Nation'. There are no individuals in this new culture. It assumes that all children arrive at school with the same readiness to learn, with the same level of intelligence, fitness and health and pre-school learning experiences. Children who fail to meet the 'standardised' measure are deemed to need help. A central agency is appointed by government to decide what that help will be. Further, schools that have too many children in the 'failed' group may also be targeted for 'help' and if they continue to 'underperform' the consequences could be drastic as we have seen overseas. Logically if schools are consistently high performers, then in a competitive culture, one can assume they are worthy of reward and generally that is what happens once the new culture has been embedded.

It takes just a second to work out that such a system not only defies all the laws of nature, it is educationally deeply flawed because children arrive as individuals not as standardised clones. It takes one more second to understand why countries such as the USA, UK and China that had famously adopted such systems are now abandoning them. It's simple. The achievement levels of their nation's children plummeted.

The New Zealand version of standardisation had its genesis in the 2008 general election campaign in which the National Party showcased the policy as an election winner. It was promoted as the way to address underachievement. Once in government, they rushed the policy through without any critique from the Science and Education Select Committee's process and without the involvement of academic assessment experts or actual practitioners. Counter to any normal practice, the system that was introduced was untested. The resultant standards are vague and Ministry officials trying to make sense of them, as recently as last week, sent out more inconsistent and confusing statements about how to interpret them. Nor do they align with other nationally norm-referenced assessments. So they cannot tell the truth. In reality any data emanating from their application is flawed and unreliable and thus any reporting based on them is also untrue. These are some of the reasons responsible professionals in the education sector refuse to embrace them.

They are not, however, the only reasons that teaching professionals reject them. If underachievement is the problem to be addressed, we don't need another assessment tool. We already have very good, reliable assessment tools to identify underachievers. All professionals want to do better by these children and there are some excellent programmes in place to help address underachievement. More support for these programmes would always be welcome.

A further reason to reject National Standards is that a heavy assessment culture leads to a narrowing of the curriculum. There are countless studies to demonstrate this effect. NZ practitioners know that the reason we achieve such a high level of education performance is because we deliver such a rich, relevant and broad curriculum. Overseas education experts tell us that to prepare children for the 21st century world we need to expose them to opportunities to develop their creativity, critical thinking and entrepreneurial skills. Standardised testing cultures completely work against the development of creativity. Finally, narrow assessment cultures in a competitive environment lead to 'teaching to the test' rather than teaching to the individual student's needs. NZ teachers will not accept that.