

TWENTY FUNDAMENTAL FLAWS IN THE NATIONAL STANDARDS POLICY

W. B. Elley, May 2010

1. The National Standards policy assumes "One Size Fits All". But our children vary enormously in backgrounds, interests, needs and abilities. They learn best if their teaching is pitched just above their present level. Each child should work to his/her own standard.
2. The Standards have been hastily prepared by committees, and untested for difficulty or intelligibility. They may well prove to be too hard, or too easy for the majority of children.
3. The wording of the Literacy Standards is vague and capable of many interpretations. They do not specify clearly how difficult the pupils' tasks are to be, or how well pupils need to be able to perform, to pass the standard. Many are very similar from one year level to the next.
4. There is no research which shows that passing NCEA Level 2 requires the levels of progress indicated by the published National Standards. This is sheer guesswork.
5. Teachers will be expected to make their "Overall Teacher Judgements" of their students' achievement levels, based on various sources of evidence, which teachers and their students are to select. These sources will vary widely, from teacher to teacher, making comparisons between schools and between classes quite unfair and impossible to interpret.
6. The Ministry advice provided to teachers, in the Ministry web-site, on how to moderate teacher judgements is naive. It ignores the many problems which have dogged such policies.
7. When results are made public, league tables comparing schools will follow, and all assessments will be "High Stakes". Lawyers tell us that they will have to be accessible under the Official Information Act. The league tables which the media love to publicise, represent THE MAJOR FLAW which has caused the abandonment of similar policies in other countries.
8. High Stakes testing for accountability in this way interferes with the formative value of assessment. It interferes with a teacher's efforts to use tests for better learning. One test cannot serve many purposes adequately. If the standardised tests in current use are given early in the year for identifying children who need help, and for allocating pupils to groups, they cannot then be used for accountability purposes at the end of term or the school year.
9. Teachers will feel pressured to coach their children for the commonly used standardised tests such as the PAT tests, the Clay Tests, the STAR tests and the AsTTle tests (many of which are already stored in the schools) or the other forms of assessment that their overall judgements will be based on. There is much evidence from overseas on this. Teachers are found to drill children on the style of questions to expect, the specific contents that the tests cover, and in many cases the actual test questions themselves.
10. Overseas experience also shows that other key subjects in the curriculum will be downgraded, as more time is devoted to literacy and numeracy. There will be less time for science experiments or social studies projects, or oral language, or drama, or art, or music, or developing a lifelong interest in reading, and all the other desirable things that teachers do. Yet this is the time when teachers are expected to introduce an exciting new curriculum.

11. Teaching will lose much of its spark and spontaneity, and children become bored. There will be less time for the teachable moment, when a child brings a pet to school, or class excursions to the zoo or the fire station. There will be less time for class visitors, or reading and discussing a great story, or discussions about moral issues - bullying or racial prejudice.
12. Bright children and slow learners will not be challenged so much, as any gains in their achievement levels will rarely be reflected in assessment results reported publically. Overseas experience shows teachers focus on students just above and below the standard.
13. Schools will be judged unfairly, by parents and media, as the results of the assessments largely reflect the socio-economic level of their students, rather than the amount of learning that teachers generate. Surveys show that decile 9 and 10 schools, whose children enjoy the best of home and school resources, consistently outperform decile 1 and 2 schools, where many children are disadvantaged in terms of home language, access to books and computers, family support and other factors. These persistent trends tell us nothing about how well some individual teachers are lifting the performance of disadvantaged children.
14. Overseas experience shows that these kinds of compulsory assessment/reporting plans do not reduce the size of the tail of underachievement. Some say they go backwards.
15. Many children, who do not reach the national standards will be labelled as failures, by their parents and peers. This will be inevitable in Years 1 and 2, as the gap between high and low decile children at age 5 is already huge, and hard to eradicate in the short term. This factor will be tragic for young children, as negative labels are always hard to shake off.
16. Dedicated teachers who currently work hard to help students in low-decile schools will soon seek to move, rather than remain in a failing situation. In USA, many good teachers resign because they disapprove so strongly about high stakes testing with young children.
17. The National Standards policy will require much more teacher time spent assessing, reporting, moderating, and defending their judgements before and after they are made public. This is valuable time taken away from teaching and mentoring.
18. An analysis of the students in the lowest 20% would show the Minister that many are ESOL children, or have learning disabilities. Many come from dysfunctional families or communities that do not value schooling. National Standards will do little to change this.
19. This policy will require the full cooperation of teachers. Surveys of teacher opinion show that most believe that the policy is counter-productive, so full cooperation is unlikely.
20. "Big Shake-Ups" as the Minister describes this policy, surely require a period of trial before implementation, as there are so many ways it can be screwed up or sabotaged. Our children's education is too precious to allow a wholesale change of culture in a system that is working well for most children. The introduction of the National Standards-Based assessment system in Years 11 to 13, for NCEA, took over 10 years, yet the State Services Panel that investigated its failings judged that it had been implemented too hastily.