

Open Letter to the Minister of Education, Hon Anne Tolley

Warning about the new National Standards system

Minister, we are education academics from the Universities of Otago, Waikato and Auckland who attended the National Standards forum organised by the NZEI last week. We are writing to tell you that we share the main concerns expressed at the forum about the intended new system of National Standards.

We are deeply committed to helping primary teachers to promote high quality learning for all of their students. Assessment plays a key role in teachers' work – it gives them vital information about the results of their work with the whole class and with individual children, helps them to give appropriate help and guidance to all children, and forms the basis for effective reporting to parents and school leaders.

The Government has developed National Standards with similar goals in mind, and we can see considerable merit in the idea of clearly identifying stages in the development of children's knowledge and skills, assessing each child's progress and level of achievement, and reporting that progress and achievement in accurate and understandable ways to parents. There is also merit in paying close attention to the development of children's skills in reading, writing and mathematics, as is normally the case in schools already.

Much of the work in developing the intended National Standards reflects positively on those who have been involved in that process. However, the very brief time frame allowed for the development of the standards and associated guidelines and requirements has resulted in fundamental flaws.

Minister, in our view the flaws in the new system are so serious that full implementation of the intended National Standards system over the next three years is unlikely to be successful. It will not achieve intended goals and is likely to lead to dangerous side effects.

We are very concerned that the intended National Standards system wrongly assumes that children are failing if they do not meet the standard for their age. This will lead to the repeated labelling of many young children as failures and will be self-fulfilling because it will damage children's self-esteem and turn them off learning and achieving in literacy and numeracy and other curricula areas. There are many successful New Zealanders with unexceptional school records who would not have succeeded had they been constantly labelled as failures during their childhood. A better form of assessment and reporting would focus on the progress that children are making and we believe this is the approach that should be being used.

Minister, you are aware the international record on the effects of national testing is damning. We recognise the intended National Standards are not national tests, but our understanding of why national testing has such adverse effects convinces us that the intended National Standards system will suffer most of the same problems. We are concerned about the damage that will occur if the performance of children against the Standards is reported publicly, as has happened internationally. We stress that such reporting of results at each year level will distort and impoverish the culture of teaching and learning and assessment within schools. It will undermine the new curriculum and lead

to a narrower, less interesting form of primary education for New Zealand children. It will also result in inappropriate judgements about the quality of schools and teachers.

We advise that the descriptions and examples of the Standards are not sufficient, at this stage, to allow them to be applied consistently. Teachers will be forced to report to parents and principals to their Boards in ways that could not be trusted to be sufficiently consistent from teacher to teacher or school to school. There is likely to be far too much unnecessary testing of children as teachers attempt to justify their judgements against uncertain standards. In this respect the outcomes of the intended National Standards could be even worse than national testing.

Minister, for all of these reasons, we advise further development work is necessary before all schools are asked to implement National Standards. Such work should involve: shifting the focus to measuring and reporting children's progress against standards; developing ways to moderate the judgements of teachers to achieve high consistency in the interpretation and application of standards; developing agreed protocols with teacher organisations for the use of data so as to prevent the adverse effects of reporting such data on teaching and learning, and trying out standards in a sample of, say, 150 to 200 schools. In our view this additional work would allow the development of the most effective implementation strategy to ensure standards are successfully introduced, without the negative consequences.

In our view the intended National Standards system has little chance of engaging the hearts and minds of New Zealand primary teachers. Our primary teachers have a strong ethic of care for children. We believe they are opposing National Standards not because they are reluctant to be accountable but because of genuine concerns about the effects of the national standards system on children and their learning. However there is still the potential to work with teachers and other educators to develop a system of National Standards that could work. We note that it is because the new curriculum was developed through extensive consultation with all parties that it has become a development that schools are excited about.

Minister, we are all senior academics with international reputations and extensive New Zealand and international experience in relation to education policy and assessment issues. We urge you to take our advice seriously.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Thrupp'.

Prof. Martin Thrupp, University of Waikato



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Hattie'.

Prof. John Hattie, University of Auckland



Terry Crooks

Prof. Terry Crooks, University of Otago



Lester Flockton

Lester Flockton, University of Otago

23 November 2009