

National Standards Petition

Submission by Bill Courtney



“The National-led Government is determined to improve education standards and as Minister of Education I am working with our schools and teachers to ensure this happens.”

**National Party Statement
February 2010**

Submission

Petition number: 2008/90
Presented by: Hon Trevor Mallard
Date presented: 28 June 2010
Referred to: Education and Science Committee

The petition of William Michael Courtney, requesting that the House of Representatives note that 37,617 people have signed a petition requesting that National Standards be trialled in our schools before being introduced nationally, and that it support this request.

The basis of this submission is to argue for a slowing down of the implementation of the National Standards system. The Government needs to understand that the dissatisfaction with this controversial policy is growing and its support at ground level is waning. I call on this Committee to recommend that:

- 1. The development and implementation of the National Standards policy be reviewed;**
- 2. The issues highlighted in the petition be addressed;**
- 3. No school be compelled to implement the National Standards until that school community is satisfied these issues have been addressed.**

In the immortal words of former Prime Minister (and former Minister of Education) David Lange, "It's time for a cup of tea."

Section 1: New Zealand's National Standards System

Poor policy development

1. The fundamental problem with National Standards has been the failure to develop sound policy at the outset. National Standards falls short of the Government's own guidelines on how to develop good policy, including clear definition of "what is the problem?"
2. From the outset, there has been a failure to identify "what is the cause of the problem?" or to evaluate multiple options and to seek the optimum solution. We have not been told "how might this option make a difference?" or "what does success look like?"
3. It is a basic premise of a democratic society that sound policy is developed in an open, inclusive manner, based on accepted processes. With National Standards there was no White Paper or draft policy to review and comment upon and no select committee review process. This is in stark contrast to the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools in 1989, when over 20,000 submissions were received in response to the policy White Paper issued by the government.

4. It is simply wrong to claim that any government has a mandate to drive through policy creation merely because they won the election. I voted Party Vote “National” at the 2008 election and I do not support this policy.

“Those who make policy are most successful when they must advance their ideas through a gauntlet of checks and balances, explaining their plans, submitting them to a process of public review, and attempting to persuade others to support them. If the policymaker cannot persuade others, then his plans will not be implemented. That’s democracy”. (Diane Ravitch p. 10)

5. The failure to develop sound policy has led to a hastily conceived scheme, with little time to genuinely consider the full range of both potential benefits and possible risks, or to fully identify the requirements for complete, system-wide implementation.

6. There seems to have been a lot of reliance placed on the successful implementation of similar approaches in a small number of schools. However, as leading US education expert, Diane Ravitch points out, this can often cause real problems:

“If there is one consistent lesson that one gleans by studying school reform over the past century, it is the danger of taking a good idea and expanding it rapidly, spreading it thin. What is stunningly successful in a small setting, nurtured by its founders and brought to life by a cadre of passionate teachers, seldom survives the transition when it is turned into a large-scale reform.” (Diane Ravitch p. 146)

“Standards” v “standards”

7. With Standards-based reform, there is a clear need to understand the difference between standards with a "small s" and standards with a "big S". Most people would think that improving education standards implies raising the overall quality of education in our schools, so as to improve students' knowledge - that is, they can achieve more.

8. Well known US commentator, Alfie Kohn, is an outspoken critic of the call for “tougher standards”. He argues that the movement is fatally flawed in five separate ways:

“It gets motivation wrong; it gets pedagogy wrong; it gets evaluation wrong; it gets school reform wrong; and it gets improvement wrong. Proponents of tougher standards have a proclivity for trying to coerce improvement by specifying exactly what must be taught and learned – that is, by mandating a particular kind of education. There is good reason to doubt that the way one changes schooling is simply by demanding that teachers and students do things differently. Accountability usually turns out to be a code for tighter control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms – and it has approximately the same effect on learning that a noose has on breathing.” (Alfie Kohn, p.3)

9. Standards-based reform in the education system involves developing a system of explicit statements of learning objectives at various levels. Standards-setting methods have been well documented overseas, where Standards are more commonplace.

10. Joan Herman, a Director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, (CRESST), based at the UCLA, California, wrote an overview last year of the proposal to move to the “next generation” of standards for Science in the USA. In the paper she examined the call for standards to be “Fewer, Clearer and Higher”:

“Finally, the watchwords of “Fewer, Clearer, Higher” may be seen as both guiding principles for the development of new standards for science and as the bases for

claims that need to be substantiated to validate any standards produced. My bias says that as difficult as it may be to negotiate, “Clearer” is the key pre-requisite. To repeat: Without “Clearer” there is no way to know whether standards are “Fewer” or “Higher”. (Joan Herman, p. 24)

11. *“The glossy, recently published New Zealand literacy and numeracy standards have no data, no evidence and no evaluation – they are pronouncements without evidence. If there is evidence outside committee contemplations where is it? Until there is evidence the Standards remain untested and experimental...we seem complacent in our ignorance of the evidence and ignorance of standards-setting methods.” (John Hattie, p.8)*

Leading Academics: National Standards System is Seriously Flawed

12. Criticism of the Standards themselves is only one part of the concerns expressed by leading academics, Terry Crooks, Lester Flockton, John Hattie and Martin Thrupp, in their open letter to the Minister of Education, written in November 2009:
“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.” (Open letter)
13. Major concerns revolve around the impact that introducing Standards-based reform has on education. These include the incorrect notion that a child is “struggling” or “failing” if they are deemed to be below standard, as Standards set the same course for everyone. This is not true, as all children learn at different rates.
14. Narrowing the curriculum, due to too great an influence on those subjects that are assessed and reported, is also a key concern.

Erroneous claim that parents strongly support National Standards

15. A significant source of parent opposition to National Standards has also arisen from those who are concerned about labelling and the de-motivating effect of continually being told that achievement is “below standard”.
16. Dellis Hunt felt strongly enough about the negative effects she had, herself, experienced in her schooling, to set up a group known as “Parents Against Labelling.” Her website is: <http://parentsagainstlabelling.weebly.com/>
17. Wellington based mother, Monique Watson, is organising her own petition, under the title “One Size Does Not Fit All”.
18. Numerous other pieces of parent feedback have been gathered, including the MoE organised “consultation” carried out in May / June 2009. My concern with this exercise was that it did not allow parents or other interested parties to genuinely state their concerns about the policy and its development.
19. I attended the meeting for parents held at Raroa Intermediate School and asked the question: why are we doing this? After giving a polite answer, the MoE meeting organiser then stated that this meeting was really for parents, so could I, as a trustee, please not ask any more questions, and besides, the government had already decided to do this, so questions of that nature were pointless!
20. The written and on-line consultation exercise then focused almost exclusively on choices: “do you want the Plunket graph or the other one?” Of the 11 questions

asked, 9 were choices. In only two places, was it possible for respondents to make general comments.

21. Notwithstanding this difficulty, parents made 3,011 submissions which were analysed by the NZ Council for Education Research (NZCER) and its report has been made public.

“In response to a broad open-ended question asking for any further comments, around 14 percent made a positive comment on National Standards, either the general idea of comparing their child’s performance with national benchmarks, or the specific examples given. Around 38 percent voiced some concerns about the introduction of the National Standards. These included valuing their school’s current way of reporting and discussing student progress with them and not wanting to lose it, concerns that the National Standards ignored differences in individual patterns of growth, would narrow teaching, ignore the development of the whole child, demotivate low-achieving students who never made the standard or lead to unfair comparisons of schools.” (NZCER National Standards Consultation Analysis, p. 8)

22. The government has consistently stated that parents strongly support National Standards:

“Consultation feedback shows strong support from parents for National Standards, Education Minister Anne Tolley has announced. (Press release, 20 September 2009)

23. But a recent article published in the NZ Herald made the following observation:

“Many parents are still confused about National Standards with a large number saying they haven’t got a clue about what they are all about or how it will affect their children’s learning.” NZ Herald, 5 July 2010.

24. Finally, of course, there is this petition, organised by the New Zealand Educational Institute, and signed by 37,618 people of all backgrounds, including parents, grandparents, board of trustee members and members of the public.

25. It is my view that although many parents are clearly in favour of National Standards, or at least agree with the policy’s overall intentions, there is no conclusive evidence to support the view that “parents strongly support National Standards.”

What do parents really want?

26. Parents do want to know how their children are progressing and achieving at school. Clear, easy-to-understand school reports are valuable but you do not need National Standards to achieve this.

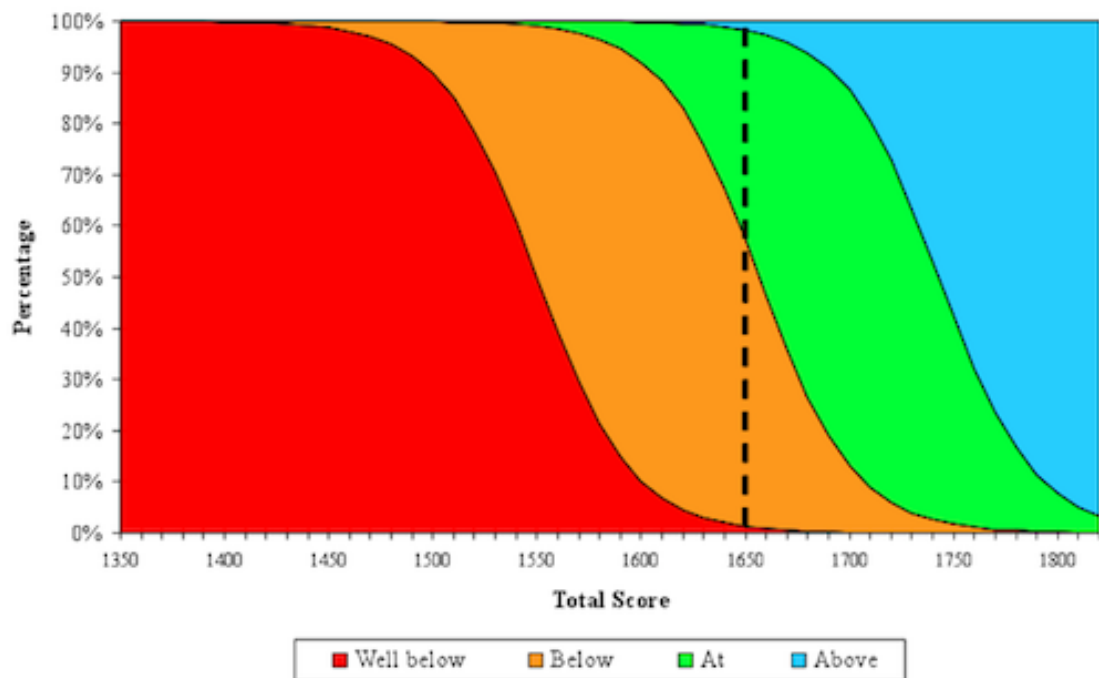
27. Parents also want to understand that achievement targets set by schools are reasonable and that achievement outcomes reported against these targets are accurate and reliable. But the basis on which the Standards have been set is questionable and many people are just now beginning to understand how subjective the overall teacher judgements against them are likely to be. Therefore there will be considerable uncertainty for some time as to the reliability of the achievement information the National Standards system will produce.

28. Many parents also value targets and achievement outcomes showing relative performance against other children, using norm-referenced assessment tools. It will be confusing for many parents to hear that students performing well against their peers are perhaps deemed to be only At Standard, or worse, simply as a by-product of how the Standards have been set.

Poorly planned and rushed implementation

29. The implementation of National Standards has been poor. Harvey McQueen, a former education aide to David Lange, wrote last year, in a review of the 20th anniversary of Tomorrow's Schools, that:
"Each education minister has to relearn a lesson which their predecessors have already learnt the hard way. You can make education policy in offices in the capital, but you cannot implement it without the co-operation of the teachers." (Harvey McQueen, p. 19)
30. A major concern for schools is that implementation seems to be running well ahead of preparedness. The recent announcements from regional principals' groups on the poor quality and inconsistency of the professional training causes real concern for parents and other users of the information that the system will produce.
"Principals who have attended National Standards training so far have expressed very serious concerns about the inability of the trainers to answer crucial questions around the government's National Standards." (Auckland Primary Principals' Association letter, 25 June 2010)
31. The government has not been consistent in stating what the objectives of the system were and has changed tack recently. The original rhetoric was focused on fixing the "tail of underachievement", as it is commonly called:
"So if we keep on doing what we're doing at the moment, it's likely things will stay the same, and almost 20 per cent of young New Zealanders will be robbed of a bright future. I don't intend to let that happen. We need to make changes now, and that's why National Standards will be introduced in primary and intermediate schools next year". Anne Tolley opinion piece, *Dom Post*, 30 November 2009.
32. Government announcements recently indicate a change of policy stance that the Standards are now deemed to be "aspirational":
"This Government is lifting the bar for student achievement, which is why the Standards have been set higher than national averages, and parents should take this into account." Anne Tolley press release, 28 June 2010
33. This change is significant, as it clearly impacts on parents' understanding of what it means for their child to be "At Standard", or for that matter, to be "Below Standard".
34. The suspicion is that the change in stance has come about because of the widely differing outcomes of the mapping exercises now being undertaken that map the actual student achievement results gained through the commonly used assessment tools to the Standards. The initial output from that exercise has been published on the NZ Curriculum website.
35. An example, shown below, is the output of mapping a sample of Yr 8 writing scripts against the Yr 8 Writing Standard. This is documented at:
<http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-tool-resources/Alignment-of-assessment-tools-with-National-Standards/Writing/e-asTTle-writing/Y8-Summary>

36.



37. In the mapping exercise, a team of 14 experienced teachers and literacy professional development facilitators worked through sets of anonymised e-asTTle records of student performance from tests taken in Yr 8. The teachers and other judges made their decisions independently, so that a range of judgements for a given level of performance was captured. This means that for any one piece of evidence describing student performance (such as the e-asTTle assessment), only the likelihood of that piece of evidence being judged as “well below”, “below”, “at”, or “above” the relevant Standards can be provided.

38. The example shown above shows the range of possible judgements from a set of scripts across the range of e-asTTle test scores. The dotted line at 1650 points shows that the judgements made by the experts, for a set of scripts that all scored 1650 points, ranged from Above Standard right down to Well Below Standard.

39. Mrs Tolley often refers to a parent's call for reporting which shows “The Good, The Bad and The Ugly”. What she didn't tell parents is that you can get all of these judgements against the Standards off the SAME test score!

40. This example indicates the need for considerably more work on developing greater clarity around how the Standards are written and how they are interpreted by teachers.

41. Teachers must provide the judgments of students' progress and achievement against the Standards and parents want to know how their children are doing at school, so they can support their learning. But if the Standards are not clear enough for teachers to be confident about them, then parents will lack the confidence to use the information contained in the reports.

Section 2: Key International Research

UK Policy Development experience

Modern education policy is often developed and prosecuted with the media in mind. A recent British study by the CfBT Education Trust, titled “Instinct or Reason: How Education Policy is made and how we might make it better”, revealed these key findings:

- There is evidence of a gap between evidence and policy making;
- The media is very influential, and its attention to the short term and particular creates severe difficulties for policy making;
- Improved information flows in the education service are to be welcomed, but they have a side effect – namely to increase the sense of urgency when something appears to be going awry. Information can tell politicians what is wrong, but is less useful in suggesting remedial action;
- There are costs to a system in which decisions become more political and are taken higher up. They can warp reaction to evidence and create a presumption against policy adjustment;
- Evaluations after implementation seem more common and better funded than research before reforms;
- Though there have been benefits from the new systems of public management, some practices, in particular the unthinking use of business language, have been counterproductive.

In my view, the New Zealand experience with National Standards has many parallels with the findings of the CfBT paper. The government has targeted the media which has played a key part in promoting the system. However, there has been very little debate in the media about the real merits or flaws in the NS system. This may reflect the limited extent of genuine education reporting experience in the mainstream media. In contrast, a very significant proportion of the feedback on the system arising from letters to the editor, website comments, etc. has focused on the drawbacks and concerns inherent in the system.

School Reform

The populist appeal of the National Standards policy to the media and many of its supporters, is that it may be timely to review aspects of the current state and state-integrated school regime. But the danger is that National Standards is now perceived to be a symbol of everything relating to school reform in New Zealand.

International focus on school reform in recent years has shed no real light on the emergence of any magical solution to many of the challenges that public education systems face in countries similar to New Zealand.

“School reformers sometimes resemble the characters in Dr Seuss’s Solla Sollew, who are always searching for that mythical land “where they never have troubles, at least very few.” I have consistently warned that, in education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets.” (Diane Ravitch p. 3)

“School reform will continue to fail, until we recognise that there are no quick fixes or perfect educational theories. School reform is a slow, steady labour-intensive process.” (Carl Cohn, Superintendent, San Diego schools, quoted in Diane Ravitch, p. 66)

Regardless of the government’s noble intentions, the point needs to be made that school reform is not a simple, straightforward process. The issue with National Standards is not about the lofty, well-intentioned goals, but rather that the method chosen needs careful consideration before full-scale implementation is seriously considered.

The discourse of dichotomy and the discourse of derision

Professor Robin Alexander led the Cambridge Primary Review, the largest independent review of primary school education in England. Many of the significant findings of the Review, based on 6 years of research and analysis conducted by 60 research consultants, were dismissed within hours by the UK government. Professor Alexander visited Australia early in 2010 and delivered two lectures in Melbourne, discussing the findings of the Cambridge Review and his experience of dealing with both the government and the media. He described what he called the discourse of dichotomy and the discourse of derision:

“The discourse of dichotomy reduces everything to mutual exclusives, to a choice between grossly over-simplified alternatives, to the politics of them and us. If you aren’t for us, you must be against us and there’s no middle ground.”
(Alexander, p.8)

“The discourse of derision defines the tone of government responses to anything that has been said and done which is off-message. If you don’t like it, first misrepresent then ridicule it, personalising the attack where possible and appealing to the lowest common denominator of popular prejudice.”
(Alexander p. 9)

Ravitch describes a similar experience in the United States, with this quote from Carl Cohn, superintendent of schools in San Diego:

“I inherited a district in which the driving philosophy over the previous six years had, similarly, been to attack the credibility of any educator who spoke out against a top-down education reform model. These attacks allowed those in charge to portray themselves as the defenders of children, to justify any means to promote their model of improving student achievement and to view their critics through the same apocalyptic lens of good and evil that has characterised many of our national debates.” (Carl Cohn, quoted in Diane Ravitch, p. 66)

The characteristics of both the discourse of dichotomy and the discourse of derision have been present in the National Standards debate in New Zealand. The debate has become polarised with the media stance effectively accepting the government's statements about student underachievement, which created the initial base case for the introduction of National Standards, with virtually no attempt to understand how the New Zealand experience compares to other similar developed countries internationally, nor to examine the real causes of underachievement.

In turn, some leading media publications have portrayed the teaching profession and school principals as resisting the introduction of the policy, so as to avoid accountability and to protect their members' interests.

"Teachers' hostility harming only kids"
Dominion Post Editorial, 7 July 2010

It is the view of this submission that the exact opposite, is, in fact, the real position. Many participants in the education sector, including teaching professionals, academics, researchers and parents have spoken out against this policy and its potential to cause real harm to New Zealand's public education system.

The New Zealand experience with National Standards resonates with all of this international experience: hastily developed policy, rushed implementation, polarised views, limited media analysis and personalised attacks on anyone seen opposing the government's view.

It is of real concern that the government's actions seem clearly to be attempting to drive a wedge between teachers and principals and their school communities.

It is time to call a halt to this nonsense and to reassess what needs to happen in an open, inclusive manner.

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