

HANDS UP FOR LEARNING!

KIA MAU KI TE WHAKAAKO

Trial National Standards, Not Our Kids

NZEI TE RIU ROA



Is New Zealand's education system in crisis? True or False?

1. Isn't our system in crisis? The Government says 1 in 5 kids can't read/write/do maths. It claims ERO says 30% of teachers are incompetent and school leaders aren't monitoring children's learning properly. Aren't we sliding down the international scale to rack and ruin?

This is a manufactured crisis, created by the Government to help make the case for National Standards.

In fact our primary schools are some of the best in the world:

- Our students consistently score in the top 5-10 places in international studies. We have a larger gap between our top achievers and our so-called "tail" of under-achievers than many other OECD countries, which also reflects the level of socio-economic disparities in New Zealand. The reasons some children — disproportionately Māori and Pasifika — are failing are complex. However, the "tail" of under-achievement has reduced from 20% to 16% in past years if measured by success in NCEA Level 2.
- New Zealand teachers are highly regarded in other countries. Our Reading Recovery programme has been adopted in many countries, and companies like Cognition are now exporting our learning and assessment processes overseas.
- The Government has seriously misrepresented the 2009 ERO report it has been quoting, claiming it is a "damning verdict" on our teachers. In fact, ERO found that 93% of primary schools were able to demonstrate effectively their students' achievements in the curriculum areas of English, and 91% could show this in Mathematics (p20).
- The ERO 2009 reports on the teaching of reading to year 1 and 2 students found that "the majority of teachers were good at using assessment to reflect on and improve their teaching of reading and writing." The Government has added the 10% of teachers found to be "limited" in their effectiveness with another 20% who were described simply as "adequate" — and come up with the 30% figure. It is likely that the 10% includes beginning teachers, who too often end up in hard-to-staff schools in rural areas, or South Auckland, or on several short-term fixed contracts. This can lead to insufficient mentoring and support because there are not enough experienced teachers in these schools to undertake this role.
- "The ERO report found in 2007 that more than half of schools were not using assessment data well." It did. BUT the 2009 report found that two-thirds are now using it well and mentions this as an enormous improvement (without any National Standards!).

2. How exactly are the National Standards flawed?

“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 (2009) Horizons and Whirlpools p8*)

The National Standards were developed and determined by a group of experts rather than developed from research data showing what students can actually do. The Education Minister’s argument that the National Standards are part of the curriculum and that teachers have been using them still does not mean that there is any valid evidence to support them – or that the Standards have been indexed to students’ age and developed correctly. NZEI believes that the Government’s policy is too critical to allow such a high stakes initiative to be implemented without confidence that the National Standards are in fact accurate. Schools should not be held accountable for National Standards that are not valid.

This is part of the reason why NZEI is asking schools and their communities to support the call for a trial. The trial would look at the impact of the National Standards on schools, including any unintended consequences.

The Standards are being imposed in schools over the top of the New Zealand Curriculum without any community consultation. While the Minister says the Standards and Curriculum reinforce each other, it is difficult to see how they line up at this stage. The New Zealand Curriculum provides a breadth and richness of learning and seeks local answers and innovative responses. It nurtures individual talents, cultivates creativity, celebrates diversity, inspires curiosity, and acknowledges the importance of a student’s personal learning journey. All these are basic building blocks for life-long learning. In contrast the National Standards policy encourages more standardisation, treats learning as linear and age-related, and is the first step down a slippery slope towards high stakes testing and test-based accountability.

3. Isn’t NZEI opposing the Standards because it is defending failing teachers?

NZEI wants to see every teacher teach as effectively as possible. Research internationally (for example Hattie et al) shows that after “out of school” factors (the socio-economic status of children’s families and so on), the quality of teaching is the single biggest variable in boosting student learning.

NZEI and other professional organisations have been working with the Ministry, STA and academics on a variety of programmes to support quality teaching. We want to see the resources going into the unnecessary and untested Standards re-directed into proven programmes for increasing teacher effectiveness.

4. But isn’t the Government right to say National Standards are the solution, especially for Māori students?

The Government claims National Standards will lift under-achievement, especially among Māori children who are disproportionately represented in the “tail” of under-achievers. However, the standards will only IDENTIFY failing kids, and without significant resources those children will continue to under-achieve.

Māori academics, Māori principals and Māori Party co-leader Pita Sharples have all raised concerns about the danger that the Standards may label children as failures and increase the perception of low-decile schools and communities as “failing”.

There has been no consultation with Māori principals in mainstream schools, where 80% of Māori children are. National Standards are not being trialled, unlike the ones being developed for kura. Why will standards essentially monocultural in design and development – that fail to acknowledge a Māori world view – suddenly work to help Māori children succeed?

5. Don't National Standards mean the Government can put more resources into helping failing kids?

Education assessment expert and Otago University Professor Terry Crooks says the \$36 million the Government is proposing to spend over three years on the “failing” 20% (approximately 86,971 students) would work out at only \$138 a year per child – less than half a day of tuition. Reading Recovery typically costs around \$2000 per child.

If the Government is serious about supporting failing kids then it needs to properly resource the people and programmes that we know work: literacy support, specialist teacher aides, support for children with dyslexia or special needs and so on. However, ANY new funding the Government provides needs to be considered in the light of cuts that are being planned for education. In the May 2009 Budget, the National Government announced there would be \$95 million worth of savings made over four years from the staffing budget for teachers – presumably by reducing the number of teachers and/or increasing class sizes. At the same time, it has increased funding to private schools by \$36 million.

Moreover, the \$26 million funding for professional development for teachers is funding that has been redirected from other professional development uses. For example, major cuts are being made to the provision of advisory services in science, the arts, social studies, PE and health. This means there will be limited help available to schools wishing to run programmes in these curriculum areas.

6. Don't parents have the right to know how their children are doing? They want simple information in the form of a Plunket graph, not waffly liberal pleasantries.

There is always room to improve the communication of information. NZEI is on record as supporting clear English reporting to schools. However, most schools already report at least twice a year to parents through parent-teacher-student interviews, profile books, reports and so on, and provide far more information than the Plunket graph approach. Many schools already give parents information about their child's progress relative to norms for their age, using widely-used assessment tools such as aTTle, STAR and PAT.

The way and rate at which children learn is variable and more complex than a simple “height and weight” dot on a chart. This reductionist approach doesn't do full justice to rich integrated learning across the curriculum and doesn't acknowledge a Māori world view. It measures achievement, but not the progress of the child – which may have been dramatic even if the child is still below the national norm.

The Government claims that the 2009 ERO report says many principals aren't adequately sharing their school's achievement information with their communities. The report did not: it found that principals reported to the school community about their own school but did not always give comparative data from other schools. If the point is to inform parents as to how their children are performing, then other school data is of questionable relevance.

7. Isn't it clear that parents want the standards? They voted for National and their policies. The Government says the School Trustees Association (STA) represents parents and STA strongly supports the Standards.

There is no evidence to show that education policy was a significant driver of voting intentions in the 2008 election. Exhaustion with the previous Labour Government after 9 years in power is a much more plausible explanation of the election outcome.

In fact, the Ministry's own attempt to consult parents over the plain English reporting of the Standards last year resulted in 38% of those parents responding saying they had concerns about the standards. A Herald poll in February found 73% of Herald readers in Auckland liked the Standards but also found that 88% of respondents admitted knowing little or nothing about them. The poll did NOT ask respondents whether they thought the Standards should be trialled.

STA did not consult with its member boards before publicly supporting the Standards. It represents approximately 90% of boards in New Zealand. A large number of boards around the country have already voiced support for a trial of the Standards.

8. But aren't 30% of teachers incompetent? Won't the Standards help get rid of these under-performing teachers?

John Key and Education Minister Anne Tolley have used a 2009 ERO report to claim that:

- two thirds of school leaders are not properly monitoring how well young people are achieving
- around 30% of teachers are not doing a good job
- principals are not sharing achievement information.

In fact, the ERO report – which looked at the teaching of reading of year 1-2 students in 212 schools, found that 90% of teachers were adequate or better, with just 10% percent being described as “limited”. ERO rated teachers' effectiveness (using its own criteria, not a test) as high (26%), good (43%), adequate (21%), and limited (10%) (p8). The Minister's 30% appears to add the “adequate” percentage to those who are “limited” and extend it across the entire teaching workforce.

The ERO report showed the majority of the 212 schools in the review evaluated and taught to a high or good standard.

ERO's claim that principals are not sharing achievement information is unsubstantiated. A 2007 ERO report found that 93% of primary schools were able to demonstrate effectively their students' achievements in the curriculum areas of English and 91% could show this in mathematics (p20).

The 2009 ERO reports on years 1 and 2 students found that “the majority of teachers were good at using assessment to reflect on and improve their teaching of reading and writing” (p1).

9. Why is a trial preferable to just rolling the standards out now and “tweaking” them if they don't work?

School communities – both teachers and parents – should have the opportunity to be consulted, provide feedback on a pilot of a smaller number of schools and then be confident that they can make it work. We've seen the problems with rushed implementation of NCEA and the issues around its moderation and we don't want to see the same mistakes repeated. The Government is promising “further reforms” along with National Standards, but also wants to reduce teacher staffing costs and “re-focus” money in existing programmes that help struggling students. For the sake of children's learning, we need to get it right the first time, not experiment with children and schools in this way.