

Southbridge School and the National Standards

A Cautionary Tale

In December 2009 the board of trustees of Southbridge School in Canterbury decided not to implement the new National Standards “at this time.” “This time” has extended to August 2010 and looks likely to continue for a while yet.

In late July I was invited to tell our story at a Canterbury Primary Principals’ Association hui on the National Standards. I attempted to describe what we have done and what consequences have flowed from our decision not to implement the Standards.

This document is a summary of that talk and is intended mainly for principals and other school leaders who are considering how to develop their school’s position on the Standards. Alongside the story you will find suggestions for how you can respond to National Standards with your board, staff and community.

I am happy for any part of this document to be used and shared, and to be contacted if you want more information: peter@southbridge.school.nz

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Our story	What this might mean for you
At Southbridge School we began discussing the National Standards (NS) early in 2009, after the legislation had been passed but before the draft Standards were published. I initiated the conversations, first with individual staff and board members and also with parents. These conversations were not planned, they happened within the context of other developments in the school. However, I was anxious to engage the board, staff and parents with the NS debate. I already had misgivings about high-stakes assessment models from having taken an interest in the previous National government’s proposals to introduce national testing in the late 1990s, and from my experience of teaching in England.	In what context have you framed your conversations about NS? Can you, or others in your school, share experiences of working in countries that have high-stakes assessment systems ?
We considered the draft NS when they appeared in May, and attended an information (consultation?) session in June. We could see there was some good stuff in the NS; particularly the encouragement to improve how schools report to parents. To some degree we felt the NS was the world catching up with Southbridge School, as we had worked for several years to produce our own standards, which we call learning markers, using the range of normed assessments available to us. But I was uneasy, as most others were, about how the NS were being prepared and presented to us, and about the high-stakes elements of the policy, especially	To what extent do the NS reflect existing practice in your school? What does your school have to gain from the NS?

<p>the prospect of league tables.</p>	
<p>Our board of trustees was less concerned about the educational implications of the NS than they were about the impact it would have on our implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum. Through a strategic planning process we call 2020VISION we had invested enormously in the NZC as a catalyst to confront how we educated our children and how we could transform ourselves into a 21st century school. The board had ownership of this process and worried that the NS would divert our energy from carrying through the NZC.</p>	<p>How has the NS influenced your work on the NZC or other major initiatives?</p> <p>What does your BOT 'own' and how important is it for them that this continues to be a priority?</p>
<p>A crucial moment for us came when our board chairperson was invited to attend the NZEI forum on NS held in Wellington in November 2009. The invitation came through my involvement on the NZEI Principals' Council. Our chairperson was nervous about attending a union meeting but she was strongly influenced by the things she heard that day, especially from John Hattie, Lester Flockton and Terry Crooks. She could see that opposition to the NS was not just teachers serving their own interests.</p>	<p>What sources of information are available to your BOT?</p> <p>Could you share some of the work of Hattie and others with your board chair?</p>
<p>In December 2009 I wrote a series of short pieces about NS in our school newsletter. I tried to consider all sides of the debate (you can see for yourself if I was successful as the articles are posted on the NZEI National Standards website). At that stage there was no discussion about our board choosing not to implement the NS so I was not writing with that in mind. I tried to point out the longer term problems of high-stakes testing, as experienced in countries like England and USA, because I felt these were not well enough understood.</p> <p>My articles prompted a very strong response from our community, almost all of it concerned about the NS. The most outspoken critics were a number of families recently migrated from England who were adamant that we should do all we could to avoid high-stakes assessments. They believed NS was the thin end of the wedge.</p>	<p>How have you communicated with your community about NS?</p> <p>How aware are you of the longer term consequences of NS? 2010 has been a relatively soft landing for schools but the real pitfalls lie 3-5 years out. Take a look at the 2009 Alexander report on the affects of high-stakes assessment on England's children and education system.</p> <p>Do you have families at your school who</p>

	<p>have experienced high-stakes assessment systems? Are they willing to talk in public about these experiences?</p>
<p>At the board meeting in December we had a lengthy discussion about NS. The chairperson shared her experiences from the NZEI meeting and we considered the implications of implementing the NS as well as 2020VISION. I was surprised (and a little nervous) when the board decided that we would not implement the NS at Southbridge School when they were mandated in February 2010. The decision was justified on the positive grounds that we wanted to continue prioritising the NZC. This was important: the board did not want to be too critical of the NS, nor appear to be simply negative. They were also concerned about how the decision would expose me and the staff – a concern that continues.</p> <p>The announcement of the decision at the school prize-giving was greeted with applause.</p>	<p>If your board is willing to express concern or opposition to NS consider how this can be framed in a positive way: for example, by recognising that NS is diverting time and energy from other important initiatives, or that NS does not add a lot of value to what is currently happening in your school.</p> <p>Consider your professional safety if you or your board are at odds with NS. How far do you want to expose yourself? Where do you find support?</p>
<p>The board’s decision was influenced by additional factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The knowledge that they had parent support • Their confidence in our existing assessment and reporting procedures and the quality of information they were getting about student achievement • A very positive ERO report in November 2009, in which ERO recommended we be placed on the 4-5 year review cycle. 	<p>To what extent do these factors fit with your school?</p>
<p>In February 2010 our position became public (again through my links with NZEI). Some board members were uncomfortable with us becoming a ‘crusading’ school against NS. They worried that their decision would bring a heap of trouble upon us, would threaten my career and would disrupt learning in the school. Others thought that if we believed the NS policy was flawed we needed to contribute to a public debate about it.</p>	<p>How would you and your board respond if you were asked to publicly describe and defend a position on NS?</p>

<p>I felt a responsibility to join the public debate and found myself on National Radio and in the press. The board decided it would support me to the extent of recognising that I had a responsibility to my profession that existed apart from my responsibility to Southbridge School. This remains their view. I have tried to respect their dilemma by limiting my public comments.</p>	<p>Do you have a policy or protocols for managing media?</p> <p>Do you believe it is part of your role as a school leader to participate in educational issues beyond your school?</p>
<p>In March the entire board met with our local National MP at her request. The meeting was polite but the board was clear about its concerns and the reasons for its decision. The MP took notes, promised to report them to the minister and led us to know that our decision would have no influence on the rollout of the policy.</p>	<p>This meeting was a low-stakes way of making our position known. Government MPs are not interested in giving publicity to oppositional schools, but a meeting with a government MP gets the message back to the people driving the policy.</p>
<p>Realising that our decision would attract attention we conducted a review of assessment and reporting processes during term one. We sent staff to NS training, considered the NS booklets and made some small changes to our student portfolio. The review was good for staff: it reassured them that they were doing a good job and that our practices were as good as, if not better, than the NS. We decided that the board's decision did not mean we should not engage with the NS to the extent of being informed.</p>	<p>I suppose the lesson here is 'know thy enemy'. If you're going to oppose something you almost need to learn more about it than if you are supportive.</p>
<p>In early April our board chair received a call from the Ministry of Education's area manager, Ray Webb. The purpose of the call seemed to be to find out if the board had been bullied into their decision by me. She reassured Ray that this was not the case.</p> <p>A couple of weeks later I was also contacted by Ray who asked to set up a meeting at school. This was held in week two of term two and included Ray and Jill Forgie from the MOE, the board chair and deputy chair (who has since become chairperson) and myself. The meeting lasted a couple of hours. Again it was polite. They quizzed us in detail about how we assess and report student achievement, the quality of data to the board and how we use data to shape teacher professional development. They had read our ERO report and school website and were very affirming of our existing practices. We explained to them our desire to prioritise the NZC and our misgivings about the NS; mainly our concerns about league tables</p>	<p>The MOE has been careful not to make martyrs out of schools that have publicly opposed NS. Their approach has tended to be to bury the debate by not engaging.</p>

<p>and the lack of a trial. Ray told us he would report the meeting to the Ministry. He sent us a copy of his notes a couple of weeks later. This is the only formal contact we have had with the MOE. Ray said that he would prefer if we expressed our concerns directly to him rather than through the media.</p>	
<p>We have had one other informal contact from the MOE. In late May I received a call from Elizabeth Ellis who told me she had been engaged by Karen Sewell to talk with schools about how they were responding to the NS. We discussed our school's position, which I shared quite openly (we had been all over the news by this time so we had nothing to lose). I discovered a few days later that Elizabeth was only contacting schools that have been publicly opposed to the NS. I gather other schools approached believed this was an 'auditing' process by the MOE. We have had no further contact with Elizabeth or the MOE since that call.</p>	<p>How politically savvy are you and your board? When somebody from the MOE or the media calls do you have the presence of mind (unlike me) to check their credentials and purpose? How comfortable are you at saying no to requests for information?</p>
<p>Our board substantially changed at the May elections. Interestingly, the board's position on NS did not generate any public discussion during the election. The long-serving chairperson departed, her youngest child having left the school. At the second meeting of the new board we revisited our decision about the NS. Some of the things we debated were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our position with regard to NAG2A. We realised that at present we are not contravening 2A, which is not specific about what times of the year we must report to parents. • What the next six months or so might bring. If we continue our position beyond the end of 2010 we will clearly be in breach of NAG2A. • The pressures of being exposed as an oppositional school and the morale of staff. <p>The new board decided to continue the original position, reiterating their intention to focus on our 2020VISION goals. However, we agreed that we would engage with NS to the extent of running some internal information sessions with staff, and aligning our learning markers with NS. We agreed not to attend formal training – in line with the recommendation of the CPPA. We agreed to revisit the decision in October.</p>	<p>It is important to regularly review controversial positions. Where is the line in the sand? Has it shifted since last time we looked at it? What new information do we have? How comfortable do we feel about our decision at this time?</p> <p>It is important that a controversial position is not reduced to black and white. Give yourself room to move, have a fall-back position and prepare for it. Set clear review processes.</p>

August 2010