National Standards - a cautionary tale

This report begins with a commentary on the issues and concerns around the government’s National Standards policy and implementation processes. The government’s agenda is identified, design flaws in the policy are discussed, and NZEI’s position is set out. The second part of this report looks at what makes a “system shift” such as this successful and discusses key elements that are missing in the current context of the government’s National Standards policy. The report concludes by considering “ways forward” that have become more apparent as the implementation process has progressed.

Overview

The government’s National Standards policy has been one of the most divisive education policies legislated for New Zealand’s primary schools in the past 150 years. A groundswell of concern has been evident among principals, teachers, boards, parents, academic experts, and the wider community.

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.¹

The political agenda

The Government’s stated reasons for introducing its National Standards - to improve student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics - has shifted from when it was first announced in the National Party’s manifesto prior to the general election.²

Various other reasons for the policy have become apparent during the implementation processes which have added to the current confusion.

Among these reasons the Minister of Education has said that National Standards will ensure children’s achievement can be compared from one school to another.³

The Prime Minister adds:⁴

- New Zealand parents should not have to put up with declining education standards or be kept in the dark of their children’s progress.
- The Government’s National Standards policy will fix those who fear accountability and who put their own vested interests ahead of New Zealand’s young people; those teachers who needed to change their ways and step up.

There is also a lack of clarity about the concept of the National Standards. For example, they have been, and continue to be described in a variety of ways by the Minister and Ministry of Education as: benchmarks, reference points, signposts, standards, aspirational standards, and more recently as the New Zealand Curriculum National Standards.

**Design flaws**

The Government’s National Standards policy was released on 23 October 2009, with the expectation that implementation in schools would begin in February 2010. Issues and concerns about features of the policy quickly became evident in the school context.

**Conflicts with the New Zealand Curriculum**

While the Minister of Education says the National Standards and *The New Zealand Curriculum* reinforce each other, it is difficult to see how they line up. *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 by treating learning as linear and age–related, rather than recognising the variations in students’ learning.

> Of course focussing on a narrow slice of curriculum in a repetitive way means teachers are likely to see a boost in performance in that narrow area, students can be put on a treadmill of rote learning, backed up by worksheets, and there is likely to be a result.⁵

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³ Tolley, A. (2010) in Government pamphlet ‘New National Standards for New Zealand Schools’ to householders, 4 Feb
⁴ Key, J. (2010) . Comments in a number of forums including Parliament during February 2010 .for example, at the launch of the Govern-ment’s public information campaign to gain support for the new notational standards in schools, Radio NZ Morning Report 3 Feb 2010
Lack of evidence
The National Standards do not have an evidence base to underpin their development. They are backward mapped from NCEA Level 2 in linear and “lock-step” fashion. Warwick Elley points out:

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.6

NZEI, principals’ associations, boards, parents and the wider community have all expressed concern that with no trial of the Standards there has been no opportunity to establish whether they have been set at the appropriate level, or to see how they relate to actual patterns of student progression over time. Not all students follow the same developmental trajectory to get to the same level of performance at the same time.

Lack of alignment
The backward mapping process means the Standards have no rational alignment to current norm-referenced assessment tools which show how students are achieving in relation to their age cohort. The National Standards have been described by the Minister and the Ministry of Education as aspirational rather than actual.

The work currently being done on mapping the norms from existing assessment tools with both the levels of the curriculum and the National Standards is throwing up a number of difficulties. The alignment is not clear and straightforward. The current assessment tools are based on student performance and are norm-referenced. By contrast the National Standards are criterion-referenced. The two systems do not match.

For the Government’s National Standards policy and implementation process to be supported by NZEI as leaders within the profession, it must be:

- fair to students and communities (i.e. meets student learning needs and parent needs for shared information)
- respectful of educators (i.e. principals, teachers) and the school community including boards of trustees, parents
- evidence-based on best available knowledge.

Currently this policy doesn’t meet “best practice” models for either successful change strategies or professional development.

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What makes a system shift successful?

This section starts with a brief comment on the Government’s National Standards as a “system shift”. Elements evident in successful change strategies which lead to sustainable change, are considered. This includes ensuring decisions are grounded in research leading to professional and public engagement and commitment; investing in the infrastructure and resourcing to support the change; and maintaining coherence and alignment. The main elements of Strong Respectful Relationships and the Infrastructure are discussed below in the context of the Government’s National Standards policy and implementation process.

A system shift

A system is composed of many individual parts that also interact or inter-relate as interdependent components. There is interdependence between groups of individuals, structures and processes that enable the system to function successfully. The government’s National Standards policy for primary education is a “system shift” as it demands a change to a number of inter-related aspects of the current system.

Strong respectful relationships

For new education policy to work the development and implementation processes must be respectful of professional knowledge and must secure public confidence. This can be achieved only if the policy is based on trustworthy evidence that it will lead to improved student outcomes; progress and motivation. This has not been the case with the government’s National Standards policy. The teaching profession and the community have largely been excluded from meaningful participation in the development process used.

The Education Minister has been inflexible in her response to concerns expressed by principals and academics that reflect negatively on the implementation of the National Standards. She has not wavered in her determination to forge ahead using the law to back the government’s right to impose what the education community clearly sees as flawed policy.

Teaching profession, boards and education communities

The Ministry of Education has worked largely in isolation from the sector to develop the government’s National Standards. As a result, the “consultation” was based on the production and dissemination of information about what had been done and what is

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7 NZEI. (2010) Crisis of Confidence in National Standards Deepens. Media release 25 June. Survey of principals found 94% had concerns about the National Standards, with a large majority lacking confidence in implementing them in spite of enormous pressure from the Government to do so.

expected of schools. On professional grounds, the process has been soundly rejected by many principals, teachers and boards.

*National Standards were developed behind closed doors by the Ministry with its hired consultants and with a round of farcical consultation meetings controlled by the Ministry. Fewer than 1% of parents participated in consultations and a substantial number of those who did take part expressed their serious concerns or opposition to the proposed system which is set up to label children in plain English twice a year, every year of their primary and intermediate schooling.*

Principals, teachers, school support staff and their representatives must be actively involved and feel a sense of ownership if positive change is to be effected. The sidelining of the profession and the academic community is one of the most destructive parts of the New Zealand National Standards process. It has resulted in significant alienation and dissatisfaction among principals and teachers.

More than 740 principals responded to a NZEI online survey which showed they felt under immense pressure to comply with the implementation requirements of the Government’s National Standards policy but had little confidence in doing so. An overwhelming 94% of principals said they had serious professional concerns about the Standards and their implementation for the following reasons:

- tight timeframe for implementation (91%)
- issues with moderation/consistency (90%)
- lack of evidence or trial (89%)
- design flaws i.e. don’t match current norms (87%)
- limited professional development (84%)
- potential for league tables (84%)
- potential to narrow the curriculum (83%)
- labelling children (74%)
- potential for performance pay (65%).

Ironically the Minister of Education’s Independent Advisory Group of experts (IAG) set up to monitor the implementation of National Standards has apparently set up a wider group of principals to consult with. The IAG Chair said it wanted to “make the development of National Standards owned within the sector and not imposed on teachers.”

**Māori medium community**

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

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Te Reo Areare discussed the potential impact of the Government’s National Standards on tamariki Māori, Kaiako Māori and iwi Māori in the English-medium schools. Te Reo Areare concluded National Standards:

- will discriminate against tamariki Māori
- have not been written from a Māori world view
- have not been trialled
- will label our tamariki, whakaiti forever
- do not celebrate our tamariki
- remove our mana
- will have no regard for the identity of the Māori child and National Standards will marginalise their potential.12

This position was endorsed by a hui of more than 200 Māori educators in July when a strong vote of no confidence in the Standards was passed.

**Early childhood community**

An Early Childhood Education Forum13 involving a range of practitioners, academics and representatives of national organisations both community-based and private, was hosted by NZEI. The aim of the forum was to discuss the possible impact, in particular any “downward pressure” of the Government’s National Standards policy on the philosophy and principles of Te Whāriki, on pedagogy and practice in ECE services. The forum participants reflected on what early childhood services do well and identified the opportunities and risks the National Standards policy presents to the sector.

The Forum:
- supported the primacy of Te Whāriki and its philosophy and implementation
- opposed the wholesale implementation of untried National Standards in schools
- supported the approach taken by Māori medium on the standards
- supported the implementation of the revised national curriculum in primary schools and expressed concern that it might be undermined by the Standards
- called for bilingualism to be celebrated, not marginalised by National Standards in English.

**Students, parents and whānau**

The National Standards consultation analysis prepared for the Ministry of Education by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research showed that around 38% of nearly 5000 participating parents expressed concerns about the Standards, while only 14% made positive comments. The report14 states that the concerns included:

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12 Parks, L. (2010). Minutes of the Paenga Whāwhā-Haratua Te Reo Areare Hui, pp8-9
hood Education. Notes for ECE Caucus May meeting. April.
…valuing their school’s current way of reporting and discussing student progress with them and not wanting to lose its 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.

In addition there is strong evidence that parents do not understand the Standards. A February survey conducted by Nielsen for the New Zealand Herald found only 11.9% of parents fully understood the Standards.15

A follow-up to this survey by the New Zealand Herald in July identified that since February, support for the National Standards has dropped 11% (from 73% to 62%) at the same time as understanding has grown 6% (from 12% to 18%).

**Infrastructure**

**Professional learning and development opportunities**

Group moderation processes, systems to align current assessment tools to the Standards, principal and teacher access to professional learning and development opportunities to help them effectively assess against the Standards and create reliable Overall Teacher Judgements (OTJs), cannot be developed in time for teachers to assess students against the Standards by mid-2011 as required. Schools have not been given time to develop their capability to assess the Standards before being required to apply them. Similarly the Minister is operating a “fix it as we go” approach.

Despite the concerns about the policy a large percentage of “schools”, (either or both teachers/principals and trustees) have attended the training workshops in Term One. This is not surprising given that the only way to become informed about the policy and implementation is to attend the workshops. The growing unease and general dissatisfaction with the National Standards as “irreconcilably flawed, confused and unworkable” continues.16 The lack of focused information to address issues raised by schools and the lack of consistent or coherent advice offered by facilitators has been called into question.

In the absence of a properly developed trial, the Government is telling parents and their schools that this is a “bedding-in” year. The Education Minister has said that parents should not be alarmed if their children’s reports are not 100% right because schools are still learning to work with the National Standards. Also parents should not be alarmed if their child did not meet a standard because some were set at “higher” than normal age-group achievement.

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**Resourcing**

The government’s National Standards policy is a significant system shift but it has not been articulated clearly or backed with new resources.

Much of the funding is intended to come from existing projects. Professional development across the curriculum for primary and intermediate schools has been cut for 2010. The School Support Service is required to focus entirely on the Standards in their work with primary teachers.

With the release of the National Standards, the government announced it would spend $36 million over four years to support its implementation in schools. There is no clarity, however on how this money is to be spent, how decisions on targeting the money will be made, or even what benefits will come from it.

There is neither resourcing nor a coherent plan for moderation between schools to ensure a nationally consistent result. Interpretation of data, inaccurate classification of students, failure to provide consistent moderation of the Standards between and across schools and reduced flexibility in the curriculum are all risks that have not been managed as part of this implementation process.

**The Ministry’s Data Working Group**

This working group has met on a number of occasions in 2010 and discussed a range of issues. The primary focus for NZEI, the NZPF and NZAIMS has been to minimise the risk of school’s National Standards assessment data being accessed by any organisation and developed into league tables for the “public domain”.

NZEI, NZPF and NZAIMS have tabled a range of solutions which argued that:

- legislation could be developed, modelled on legislation in NSW that allowed the data to be in the public domain but prevented the media from creating league tables
- school National Standards data could be sent to “safe warehousing” (e.g. a research organisation) with the data processed and reported nationally for systems-wide accountability and planning purposes. Individual schools would receive feedback on their own development trends and ways forward
- a change is required in the wording of NAG 2A with the intent to change the quantity and the way in which the data is “delivered” to the Ministry at various levels. This work was initially sanctioned in principle by the Minister, but significant obstacles have been put in place to prevent this from happening.

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18 Chaired by the Secretary for Education, comprises the NZEI National President, the NZPF President, the President of NZAIMs and several Ministry officials.
19 New Zealand Principals’ Federation (NZPF) and New Zealand Association of Intermediate and Middle Schools (NZAIMs)
The Minister has now publicly stated that the working group has failed to find an acceptable solution and she believes league tables are inevitable. The Minister has suggested that a league table is developed that puts context around the data that was “fairer” than the media would do. This has been strongly opposed by the three practitioner organisations represented in the data working group.

**What needs to be done?**

This section considers the way forward and priorities for NZEI action at local and national levels.

**At school level**

**The New Zealand Curriculum**

Schools are required to foster student achievement by providing teaching and learning programmes which incorporate The New Zealand Curriculum or Te Marautanga o Aotearoa. The spirit and intent of both curriculums includes consideration of the breadth and depth of learning related to the needs, abilities and interests of students and the nature of the school’s curriculum.

**Professional responsibility**

Schools should be able to freely express their professional concerns about the Government’s National Standards policy without penalty.

> It is hastily prepared, poorly promoted, illogical and simplistic. The proposed Standards are untried. They have not been tested for appropriate difficulty. They are so vague that teachers will interpret them differently. There is no mechanism to moderate differences of interpretation. A serious problem in NCEA. The Standards will be of no use to extend the bright and will be too hard for the slow.\(^{20}\)

**Action**

The NZEI Warrant of Fitness is designed to be used by school staff to determine both their individual understanding and the school’s readiness to implement the Standards. It has been shared with Boards of Trustees and principals to encourage school community discussion and decision-making.

Partnerships
Boards of trustees all over the country are grappling with concerns about the risk to student learning as there is no evidence to give confidence that the Standards are either accurate or educationally sound. Boards add an important voice to those of principals in explaining why schools should not be compelled to implement the Standards before their professional concerns are addressed.

School policy on the implementation of the National Standards must be fair to students, their parents and whānau. Opportunities for meaningful engagement must be offered.

Action
i Teachers and principals should use their strong partnerships with their Board of Trustees to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning in the school is not compromised while the National Standards issues are addressed.

ii School policy must meet teacher, student and parent needs for both teaching and learning and information sharing.

iii Caution should be taken on any immediate work by schools for setting targets for the Standards when there is little confidence that they are robust, are in alignment with current norm-based assessment tools and that their judgements are moderated across the country.

Reporting systems
The process of reporting to parents is being addressed by schools and their communities. It is important that teachers and principals are not only using their assessment data to inform teaching and learning, but that the information parents receive meets their needs too. It is important that each school develops a reporting process that meets the needs of their community rather than reacting to the “one size fits all” requirement described by this policy.

Boards are now required to report annually, identifying the number and proportions of students at, above, below, or well below the Standards including by Māori, Pasifika and by gender where this does not breach an individual’s privacy. It appears there is now a requirement to report special education students and second language learners within the broad school report. There is however no mandated requirement in NAG 2A for schools to report to parents on individual students on a four point scale – at, above, below, or well below.
**Action**

i Each school should consult with its community and make sure that their report is what the community wants before making a change of any kind.  
ii Working with the board and community will continue to cement the relationship of and maintain confidence in the work the school is doing.

**At national level**

NZEI will continue to advocate for:

- a robust evidence-base which show the National Standards are supportive of teaching and student learning, motivation and self esteem  
- clear alignment with the spirit and intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum* to guide teaching and learning programmes in schools  
- sufficient time to allow for confident implementation by the profession and to gain parent support  
- sufficient resourcing for professional learning and development opportunities that meet the varying needs of staff and trustees is essential prior to embarking on the full implementation of the National Standards  
- clear guidance about how to achieve consistent teacher judgement nationally  
- assessment data being used for the purpose it is collected and/or collated for, that it is focused on appropriate use at school level for teachers, students, parents and the school community  
- no harm to be done to students and their learning, to schools or their communities through the generation of league tables.

**Recommendations**

1. That the NZEI Te Riu Roa Special Report on National Standards be received.

2. That no school be compelled to implement the National Standards until that school's community is satisfied the Government’s National Standards policy and implementation process is:
   
   - **fair to students and communities (i.e. meet student learning needs and parent needs for shared information)**
Recommendations continued

• respectful of educators (i.e. principals, teachers, and the school community including boards of trustees, and parents)
• evidence-based on best-available knowledge.

3. That, prior to embarking on the implementation of the Standards, professional development and learning opportunities are essential to enable staff and trustees to confidently understand and work with a revised system and to ensure the process supports quality teaching in The New Zealand Curriculum.

4. That NZEI supports and confirms the position agreed by the NZPF National Conference 2010 regarding the Government’s National Standards policy and its implementation by stating:\(^{21}\)
   • that the National Standards will not deliver the outcomes as intended
   • that a complete revision of the National Standards system in partnership with the sector be actioned with urgency.

5. That NZEI confirms its policy that assessment data should be used only for the purpose it has been collected i.e. to support teaching and learning.

6. That NZEI does not support the reporting of school data in league tables.

7. That the NZEI Te Riu Roa Special Report on the Government’s policy on National Standards and its implementation is endorsed.

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\(^{21}\) Buutveld, E. (2010) NZPF President’s speech to the NZPF National conference in Queenstown, 2 July.