



Heeding Parents in Educational Reform

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One of the most important groups in any education reform process is the parents/ whānau of the students directly affected. Theirs is frequently the forgotten voice in such reforms, drowned out by politicians, interest groups, academics, principals, teachers, and others with the prestige or influence to get their voices heard.

The current debate on National Standards is no different in this regard. Who talks on behalf of the parents? Is it their Members of Parliament, the principals and the Principals' Associations, lobby groups comprising interested parents, individual board of trustees or the School Trustees Association, teachers and teacher unions, or researchers? And, who is then actually listened to by those making the decisions?

These are critical issues if we believe that community and national democratic processes should be followed in decision-making that involves major educational reform. It is simply not good enough for any government to argue that just because an initiative was signalled at some point during their election campaign (we rarely see comprehensive policy manifestos anymore from political parties) that this gives the winning government an *automatic* mandate to proceed to implement their intentions without further trialling and consultation.

With regard to the current National Standards debate, there seems to be an unseemly haste by the current government to put this major reform into nation-wide practice. In the articles in this issue and other academic forums, including a considerable amount of media coverage, many problems have been raised with the conceptual basis, the pragmatic implementation and the impact of these standards. Moreover, as an NZCER survey (Wylie, Hodgen & Darr, 2009) reported, parental support for the standards is at best equivocal: 38 percent of parents who responded were concerned about the standards, and only 14 percent positive.

One parent presented the Hands Up For Learning petition to the House of Representatives on June 28, 2010, in response to the Government's National Standards policy, with a call to slow down the implementation process:

In the immortal words of former Prime Minister (and former Minister of Education) David Lange, *It's time for a cup of tea.* (p. 1)¹

This petition, submitted by William (Bill) Michael Courtney (who writes an opinion piece in this issue), contained 37,617 signatures from concerned parents (as well as board of trustee members, principals and teachers) specifically requesting that National Standards be trialled first before being introduced on a national basis.

¹ A copy of the petition is available from: www.graphicmail.co.nz/nz_members/39/ftp/Bill_Courtney_NS_Petition_Submission_23_07_10.pdf

Specifically, the petition argued that: 'The Government needs to understand that the dissatisfaction with this controversial policy is growing and its support at ground level is waning' (p. 1).



Figure One: Bill Courtney (parent), NZEI President Frances Nelson and supporters who presented the submission to Labour MP Trevor Mallard and the Greens MP Catherine Delahunty.

[Source: www.nationalstandards.org.nz/profiles/blogs/nzei-president-frances-nelson; used with permission]

What is intriguing about this petition is that one, well-informed, parent has demonstrated how democratic processes can be used to challenge government educational policy directions and to seek to have a genuine and meaningful input into the debate, alongside those organisations and groups that traditionally have had the power, influence and the voice to contribute to those debates. What is particularly ironic here is that the government, having claimed that the policy is 'what most parents want', appears to be intent on ignoring vocal evidence that says just the opposite.

This petition is only one among several instances in this debate of parents wanting to be listened to and finding ways to put their views into the public domain. Yet, it is a powerful example that we hope might serve as a model for other parents to stand up and be heard when unproven education reform processes are about to be visited on their children. Participatory democratic processes exist if parents are prepared to use and negotiate them together. Like other public rights of way, however, they may become overgrown, fall into disrepair or even disappear if parents do not.

REFERENCE

Wylie, C., Hodgen, E., & Darr, C. (2009). *National standards consultation*. Wellington: NZCER.