



## National Standards: A Parent's Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*Do parents strongly support National Standards? Or, more to the point, how many parents really understand it? 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, or they have been set at the wrong level, then parents will lack the confidence to use the information contained in the reports. 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.*

### INTRODUCTION

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 (February, 2010)

I am a parent of two school-age children, who are both doing just fine at school. How do I know? I ask their teachers. The purpose of this article is to share a few of my thoughts, as both a parent and a former Chairperson of a school Board of Trustees, on how I see National Standards (NS).

The government's marketing of National Standards has been based heavily around two planks: the alarming 1 in 5 children 'failing' story and that 'parents strongly support National Standards'. From my perspective, I think that Terry Crooks and Lester Flockton of the National Education Monitoring Project, have provided credible evidence that, over time, our education standards are not falling, as the government claims. Indeed, in a recent radio interview, the Minister of Education failed to provide a clear, straightforward description of how the famous '1 in 5' statistic is even derived.

But arguments over literacy and numeracy are nothing new. Roger Openshaw and Margaret Walshaw (2010) have looked at the history of debates over literacy and numeracy standards in New Zealand since 1945. They observe that, whilst criticism has been relatively continuous, there have been distinct periods of time when criticism peaks. The authors identify three of these: the mid-late 1950s; the late 1970s; and the most recent period. They

state that '... we do seek to emphasise in this book that the Education (National Standards) Amendment Act 2008 is not the first, but merely the most recent, of a long line of creative schemes initiated with a view to improving the nation's literacy and numeracy proficiency' (p. 7). So, this leaves me with a sense of déjà vu, to say the least.

Many of the concerns that I have about the NS policy and system have been set out clearly in the writings of leading academics. Professor John Hattie's 2009 paper, *Horizons and Whirlpools: The Well Travelled Pathway of National Standards and the open letter to the Minister of Education from four leading academics* (Thrupp, Hattie, Crooks, & Flockton, 2009), both highlighted that there were serious flaws in the system developed. But, as a parent, I was alarmed to hear their clear statements that the system could lead to 'dangerous side effects', which made me concerned and puzzled when the Minister of Education dismissed them so readily. Is this just politics at play? But, if the academics are right, then it is children's learning that is at risk – my children's!

## **DO PARENTS STRONGLY SUPPORT NATIONAL STANDARDS?**

I believe there is not widespread agreement among parents as to whether National Standards is 'good' or 'bad'. Let's look at some of the evidence. In the parent/whanau consultation exercise carried out last year, parents made 3,011 submissions which were analysed by the NZ Council for Educational Research (NZCER). Here's what they said:

In response to a broad open-ended question asking for any further comments, around 14% 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% 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 (2009, p. 8)

So this sounds quite mixed, to say the least. But this is how the government saw it:

Consultation feedback shows strong support from parents for National Standards, Education Minister Anne Tolley has announced.

Tolley (2009)

I believe the voices of parents have hardly been heard on this controversial policy. A significant source of parent opposition to National Standards has arisen from those who are concerned about labelling and the demotivating effect of continually being told that achievement is 'below standard'. 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' (<http://parentsagainstlabelling.weebly.com/>). Wellington based mother, Monique Watson, is organising her own petition, under the title 'One Size Does Not Fit All' ([onesizepetition@gmail.com](mailto:onesizepetition@gmail.com)).

Many parents value the quality of education that their children receive in New Zealand's public education system, regardless of the government's inclination to knock it. The degree of public concern about this rushed and untried NS system was captured during the nationwide bus tour earlier this year. The Hands Up For Learning petition, organised by the New Zealand Educational Institute, was signed by 37,618 people of all backgrounds, including parents, grandparents, board of trustee members and members of the public.

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 sweeping generality that 'parents strongly support National Standards'.

## **WHAT DO PARENTS REALLY WANT?**

Parents do want to know how their children are progressing and achieving at school. Clear, easy-to-understand school reports are valuable and, in some ways, the National Standards discussion has served as a 'wake up' call for schools to really focus on the quality of their reporting to parents. This has been beneficial and timely, but you do not need to implement National Standards to achieve this.

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.

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.

The recent paper issued by the NZ Council for Educational Research (NZCER), titled, National Standards for Mathematics: Where to Set the Bar? (NZCER, 2010) is a fascinating read. The discussion paper was written after a script scrutiny exercise that mapped actual PAT results to judgements made by a panel of experts against the National Standards. It showed that many students whom the PAT would show as making 'normal' progress for their year level – not brilliant but not behind either – would be judged to be 'failing' when assessed against their Year level National Standard for Mathematics.

For example, at Year 8, results from the script scrutiny exercise would indicate that only about 35% of students perform at levels at or above those required by the National Standards.

Given that 71% of school leavers left school in 2008 with NCEA Level 2 or better, this seems a nonsense result. NZCER has indicated that the exercise will be revisited but the initial outcome is still significant. 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'.

Apparently, says Mrs Tolley, we parents just need to take this into account:

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.

Tolley (2010)

There will obviously be considerable uncertainty for some time as to the reliability of the achievement information that the National Standards system will produce.

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, or they have been set at the wrong level, then parents will lack the confidence to use the information contained in the reports.

In the meantime, confusion reigns, as this mid-year article from the *NZ Herald* reveals:

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* (2010)

## **MY QUESTIONS FOR MY CHILD'S TEACHER**

The implementation of National Standards may well change the relationship between parents and their children's teachers. I have been quite concerned about the way that the government's actions seem clearly to be attempting to drive a wedge between teachers and principals and their school communities. As a parent, I will need to understand more about the Standards and, more importantly, what my children's teachers know about them.

Here are the initial questions I would use to frame this discussion:

1. How well do you feel you understand the National Standards?
2. Are you comfortable that you could explain, in plain English, what the terms 'Early', 'Within', 'Working Towards' and 'At' mean, and that you can clearly differentiate between them?
3. How many Standards do you need to be fully familiar with, in order to assess every child in your class?
4. Will assessment of my child against the National Standards tell you anything you do not already know?
5. How much time and effort will it take to carry out this assessment, both for my child and the whole class?
6. Will this additional workload impact, in any way, on teaching and learning?

## **WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

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.

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.

Ravitch (2010, p. 146)

The experience to date, of hastily developed policy, rushed implementation, polarised views, limited media analysis and personalised attacks on anyone seen opposing the government's view, shows the government in a poor light. 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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Bill Courtney is a parent of two school-aged children and the former Chairperson of the Khandallah School Board of Trustees. He is the named petitioner on the petition signed by 37,618 people calling for National Standards to be trialled in our schools before full implementation takes place. He has also written an opinion piece, published in *The Dominion Post*, calling for a David Lange, 'Cup of Tea', on this controversial policy.

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