

### **So why are principals opposed to National Standards?**

*The implementation of any educational policy requires robust public debate. Since late 2009, as an attendee of a wide range of Principal forums, I have listened to much debate concerning the implementation of the National Standards policy. My role as the intermediate and middle schooling sector representative on NSSAG carries with it, I believe, the responsibility to clearly articulate the views of these Principals as they have been shared with me. While any or all of these arguments may not be the opinion of the author, I believe that it is important that they be discussed by the members of NSSAG.*

*The purpose of this paper then, is to articulate the variety of arguments I have heard from Principals concerning the implementation of this policy. I believe that if NSSAG is to fulfil its role as an effective advisor to the Minister, it must engage in this level of robust debate with the sector.*

### **Introduction**

At some time during each National Standards Sector Advisory Group (NSSAG) meeting the question, “Why are Principals opposed to National Standards?” is raised. Rather than accepting this as a rhetorical question, this report sets out to research Principal concerns as they have been articulated to the author from within the intermediate and middle schooling sector. Currently, it appears as if there are two different conversations being held around the implementation of the National Standards policy. One conversation articulates the positive “good news stories” of schools implementing National Standards, while the other conversation the continuing rumbling of discontent from the profession. It is my belief that for the sector to move forwards will require the coming together of these two differing discourses.

We must remember that, in the main, Principals are not a collective voice, but individual professionals leading diverse learning organisations. This paper attempts to move beyond the rhetoric of the NZEI and NZPF, and to ascertain what individual Principals are thinking within their workplace, and saying when they are engaged in professional learning conversations. Individual Principals are as a diverse group of well educated professionals as would be found in any other profession. Some are “big picture” whole of story thinkers, others tend towards the pragmatic issues of implementation. Along this continuum lay pockets of disquiet or frustrated confusion at almost every stage. As someone outside the profession commented to the author, “at any gathering of five principals it is more than likely [an observer] will hear five different reasons for opposing National Standards.”

This paper does not concern itself with those Principals who are not complying with the requirement to implement National Standards. Rather it seeks to outline the unresolved issues which are growing in number and/or intensity within the sector among those Principals who are complying with implementation of this policy. NSSAG is charged with providing advice to the Minister, therefore I believe that the advisory group has a responsibility to hear and respond to these issues and areas of concern.

The aim of this paper then, is to attempt to articulate these many diverse issues within some form of schematic structure. In an attempt to analyse the issues raised by Principals, they have been categorised into one of four strands. These I have labelled as the “4P’s;” Politics, Publications, Professionalism, and Pedagogy. Most, if not all, issues raised by individual Principals fit within one of these four categories.

Underpinning all four of these strands however, is a much wider apprehension concerning the direction of this policy and what that may mean for preparing our citizens for 21<sup>st</sup> century lifelong learning and employment. This wider apprehension will be addressed in the concluding comments of this paper.

## **Methodology**

Since the release of the National Standards policy the New Zealand Intermediate and Middle Schooling Association (NZAIMS) has generally been supportive of the intention of this initiative. The adoption of a consistent, relatively uniform, assessment process tracking student achievement from contributing primary school through to intermediate or middle school and then onto secondary school has been a key aspect of our manifesto. Much of what is contained within the National Standards policy has the potential to achieve this outcome.

As president of NZAIMS, during 2009 and 2010, I was first a member of the Minister's Sector Advisory Group on National Standards and latterly a member of the National Standards Sector Advisory Group (NSSAG). Therefore, I have been aware of many of the issues that have surrounded the implementation of this policy. During this time I have also been listening to my constituency as they have outlined their concerns with regard to this policy. The following schema outlines the arguments that I have heard from a wide range of individual Principal sources. These include; at NZAIMS Annual Meetings, at regional cluster meetings of Principals, in conversation with Principals individually, from emails and blogs that have been shared with me, and during social occasions.

Therefore, this paper attempts to bring together within a coherent approach the arguments shared with me that concern the implementation of this policy. This paper does not set out to suggest the discontinuation of this policy and only rarely attempts to offer solutions to the issues raised. Its purpose however, is to set out as clearly as possible the need for NSSAG to establish a platform from which robust, informed debate can further support and influence the implementation of this educational policy.

## **Politics**

The issues concerning the politics of the implementation of National Standards were the first raised by the profession. These issues remain prevalent and are readily articulated by a small, vocal group of Principals. When the National Standards policy was first released much was made of the intention that this policy would raise student achievement and address the long tail of underachievement in New Zealand schooling. Early press releases, in late 2009, commented on the long tail identified in PISA assessments of approximately 20% underachievement; one of the longest tails in the OECD. However, when the 2009 PISA results released in 2010 identified that New Zealand's tail of underachievement had been reduced to 14%, smaller than that of Australia by comparison, the public political debate appeared to Principals to shift ground.

By mid-2010 the debate appeared to shift to the statistic that 20% of students were leaving secondary schooling not achieving NCEA Level 2. The argument was articulated that National Standards aligned with NCEA Level 2 and would prepare students for entry into Secondary School. As one principal commented, "Where then are the National Standards for years 9 and 10 to show us the clear alignment with NCEA Level

1?” Another principal suggested that, “if we have such a small tail in PISA results (14%), why then is secondary schooling not able to prepare students for NCEA Level 2?”

A further question that has been posed by an Auckland principal is why; “considering that New Zealand has the largest number of high stakes assessments of any OECD country with NCEA Level 1, 2 and 3, do we require more high stakes assessments in years 1 through 8?”

As members of NSSAG, we have frequently heard the argument that there should have been a trial of the standards and that the time frame for implementation has been too short. The confusion that arose with the very late release of the Literacy Progressions at the same time as the reading and writing standards is an issue that cannot be remedied now in 2011. However, those who argue against National Standards on a political platform look at the collaboration and consultations carried out with the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and have compared the this later policy unfavourably. A growing number of Principals have further commented that they now feel “professionally bullied” into adopting this policy. I would suggest, not a strong platform from which to move forward.

Given that the development of moderation for NCEA has taken ten years and required a number of “whole school” release days and the addition of significant release time within the secondary teachers’ collective contracts, this issue of time is one commonly raised by Principals. The continuing press releases concerning the urgency of this change, and the desire to refer to a three year time frame, are not well received by a significant number of principals. Those Principals, who are engaged in the implementation process in their schools, have commented that such a three year timeframe is unachievable.

Others comment on the reality that these standards are not national in coverage. The lack of professional teacher and leadership development on moderation, both intra-school and inter-school, makes the standards (at best) open to only class-based moderation. Some Principals articulate that the issues concerning inter-school moderation have been down played in the material they have read. If the standards are to be national in implementation then this is an area which will require significant new development.

Of course the issues of league tables and performance pay for teachers and the ideology behind the implementation of the standards cannot be addressed by NSSAG and remain firmly in the political arena. However, it would be fair to comment that these issues add to a climate of distrust of this policy among a number of Principals.

More recently, there has been among a group of Principals from low decile intermediate schools a discussion on the perceived political shift in emphasis from a highly performing education system focussed on excellence to one focussed on the lowest achieving 14% of students. A perceived shift as there does not appear to have been a similar shift in emphasis from the other social ministries (housing, social welfare etc.) in their support of schools in this work. As Hattie articulated, while schools can have a significant impact on student achievement, this impact is still in the order of some 20%. His research suggests that the greatest impact on student achievement is the home and community environment making up some 50% of the effect size. Schools need to have the 50% engaged to support their work on the 20%. These Principals suggest that if the National Standards policy is to raise equity across the system then, there needs to be whole of system engagement to address the third highest rate of child poverty among the OECD countries.

The political issues outlined above were often the first issues articulated in late 2009 and early 2010. Over that Christmas period, as Principals had the opportunity to read the National Standards booklets and the self review tools posted on line, a wider range of issues began to emerge. The haste with which the National Standards booklets had been written has led now to a number of issues arising from the publications themselves.

## **Publications**

Unfortunately, when the National Standards booklets were issued to schools the surrounding press comments often reported that National Standards would lift student achievement. As Principals are aware the booklets themselves will not raise student achievement; that can only occur with the ongoing development of quality teaching and effective school leadership. Putting aside for the moment the Principals who returned the National Standards booklets to the Ministry unopened, and those who have put them into storage unopened in their own schools, this ill-informed public assertion in the media significantly undermined Principals' confidence in this policy.

It appears that this confidence has been further confused with the proliferation of material that has been issued by the Ministry of Education in the last eighteen months. Principals have commented that they have received or had access to; frequent letters from the Ministry, letters from local ministry officers and from the Secretary of Education, emails and directives to boards of trustees, self- review tools for all aspects of school operations, gazette notices, a wide largely unstructured and frequently changing website, mailouts on reporting to parents, and numerous research reports. All of these in addition to a wide range of supporting material; final literacy progressions, new ESOL progressions, articles, posters, charts, new moderation modules, and a wide plethora of information from professional development providers. This material has also been matched by similar National Standards publication overloads from NZEI, NZPF and the academic community. The issue of time merely to read, analyse, and interpret this quantity of material has been a significant issue for Principals wishing to implement this policy well in their schools.

If the quantity of material as an issue was not sufficient, then there has been the compounding factor of the varying quality of the material. Principals have been quick to comment that many of the early workshops were poorly structured and conflicting information led to early confusion. This confusion continues as Principals seek advice from colleagues where often that advice is dependent on who has received the most current version of accepted practice. A number of Principals have suggested it may be timely to run these workshops again, now that the providers themselves have a greater understanding of this policy.

This issue of publication accuracy has been compounded by the haste with which the standards themselves were written and the numerous corrections that have had to occur as time elapsed. In a collaborative model these natural editing and alignment issues are accepted as part of a trial. In the context of this policy, with the lack of a trial, such amendments, inaccuracies and corrections are frustrating for Principals who have already attempted to report against these standards to parents. Furthermore, a significant number of schools have begun developing targets based on these standards as they are articulated in the initial booklets.

In contrast, of concern to a few Principals, is that the standards pedagogy articulated in this policy is undermined by the actual documents themselves. Many of the documents, for example year eight mathematics, are perceived to be based not on standards but on criterion based assessment. There are eight mathematical criteria listed for achievement at the year eight level. The National Standards policy has been articulated as being one of three that could have been adopted; National Testing, National Curriculum Criteria or National Standards. The argument has been articulated by the Ministry of Education that a standards based assessment model has been selected as the preferred model.

This apparent confusion is compounded by a wide variance in principal understanding of standards based assessment. This variation in understanding then influences the effectiveness of the implementation of this policy in their schools. Many Principals believe that there is a requirement and responsibility for significant professional development, both of primary school leadership and teachers, on what is a standards based pedagogy. Unfortunately, such professional development in this area, as with most other aspects of this policy, has not been forthcoming, a significant concern articulated by a number of Principals.

For Principals attempting to comply with the implementation of this policy the constant refinement and apparent contradictions between various national standard publications has been reported as being frustrating. As these publications have been used to form the basis of reporting to parents and setting of charter targets for 2011, when they have been found to be inconsistent, has called into question the professionalism of those Principals attempting to implement this policy.

### **Professionalism**

Of increasing concern to those Principals who have contacted me, has been the perception that the implementation of this policy appears to undermine their professionalism. In the early phase of this policy those with a passion for curriculum development, and who had been actively involved in the development of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC), felt excluded from the process of developing the standards. This perception of decreasing professionalism has accelerated with the deepening divide between Principals and the Ministry of Education, and an increasing divide between some boards of trustees and their principals.

A number of Principals have written to me to suggest that there appears to be, in the work around charter reporting to the Ministry and the development of the Student Achievement Function (SAF), the creation of an additional layer of accountability and bureaucracy developing within the education sector. When this development is compared to internationally successful educational jurisdictions (in raising student achievement) such as Finland and China, the opposite appears to be the case. In contrast these countries are reducing levels of bureaucracies and developing internal school accountabilities. Increasing external bureaucracies and accountabilities appear to be the hall marks of countries with poorly performing school systems. There appears to be for these Principals, an inherent contradiction between the espoused ideology of National Standards, to raise levels of student achievement, and the reality of its implementation, to mirror low performing educational jurisdictions.

The requirement to set school charter targets using National Standards data before it is reliable or valid has also created a conflict of interest for Principals implementing this policy. The lack of professional development in data analysis, the poor coverage of ATOL professional development across New Zealand

schools, and the poor advice and guidance on effective intra-school moderation, has meant that much of the early data based on National Standards within a school may be flawed, at best. Even in schools with highly effective data gathering and analysis methodologies in place, such as those involved in a literacy or numeracy contracts, concern remains about the reliability of then transferring their norm-referenced assessment data to an Overall Teacher Judgement (OTJ). To then base the development of charter targets on these OTJ's is, in the opinion of some Principals, especially those involved in literacy and numeracy contracts, a step too far at this early stage.

Increasingly, comments have been made of the incongruence between the haste of National Standards and the important work from the NZC which was already included in school's strategic plans. In particular schools, which were in the process of developing closer links to their school community and working to engage minority communities, have felt a conflict of interest. Those Principals that have attempted to do both, maintaining their strategic direction from the NZC and implementing National Standards, have faced an unrealistic workload. Those that have abandoned one for the other have either disappointed their school stakeholders, or risked falling out of favour with local Ministry offices. More than one Principal has commented on the feeling of "being bullied," by either a ministry official or a professional development provider, when they have had to make a professional decision between NZC and National Standards implementation in the best interests of their learning organisation.

The confusion regarding the aspirational nature of the standards, while a debate that needed to be held, has created further comment. A few Principals of low decile schools have commented on numbers of distraught parents they have spoken with after parent interviews. These parents, as with all parents, want the very best for their children. When faced with the gap between their child's actual performance and their National Standards level, and the parents' inability to be able to address this gap, many parents have become disillusioned and disheartened. By contrast Principals of high decile schools comment that the standards provide little, if any, challenge for their students. These standards appear to be irrelevant at best to high decile communities with high cultural capital, and certainly are not aspirational for developing a challenging education system for all students.

Principals attempting to work with contradictory information from a wide variety of publications and sources have had to act as mediators with increasingly frustrated teachers and questioning parents. With little time to assimilate this new knowledge for themselves, Principals have commented that they find that many of their own pedagogical beliefs have been called into question by this policy.

## **Pedagogy**

As Principals have had time to engage with the National Standards over the last eighteen months there appears to be increasing concern about the pedagogies that underpin these standards. New Zealand primary pedagogy is firmly based on theorists such as Bruner, Gardner and Vygotsky. These theorists describe learning in terms of the individual child, each making progress at their individual rate, at a time and in a context that interests and challenges them. The National Standards policy however, appears to be based on a theoretical construct that describes learning as increasingly linear and similar for all learners. Without delving too deeply into a theoretical dialogue, these two constructs appear to many Principals to be in direct contradiction to one another.

Ones' beliefs about learning, and how students engage in learning, are at the very core of the implementation of this policy. When the comment is made that the hearts and minds of the profession must be won over to National Standards what is being asked is that primary practitioners change the fundamental theoretical constructs of learning that they have developed over their career.

For a number of intermediate and middle school Principals the National Standards policy appears to undermine two fundamental aspects of primary years pedagogy. The first is the "emotional intelligence" foundation of primary pedagogy and schooling. Much of primary education is concerned with engaging our young citizens in the joy and challenge of learning, academically and socially. Schools as social constructs differ from the homes the children come from. Much of primary schooling therefore, is involved with making this new learning environment a positive, rewarding and challenging experience with the outcome of creating citizens who become engaged, life long learners. This is an oversimplification of a very complex process that involves teachers and principals engaging with learners and their families at a highly emotional level. National Standards, with its emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics; and its perceived labelling of learners well below, below, at, and above the standard at every year of schooling, significantly alters this complex human relationship. A number of Principals have commented that an unintended consequence of this policy may well be an increasing level of student disengagement from learning much earlier in their schooling career than is currently the situation.

Secondly, the intermediate and middle schooling system in New Zealand is firmly centred on the theoretical work of Clarence Beeby. He espoused these, "in the middle years" as a time of personal growth and development. Young people between the ages of 10 and 14 undergo extreme hormonal and physiological change and development. An appropriately engaging educational programme for this age group is holistic in nature, and experiential in practice. A wide range of psychological and physiological theorists have posited the theory that during these years little can be achieved with working with learners on an academic programme if due attention is not also paid to their developmental needs. To maintain their engagement and enthusiasm for learning an age-appropriate programme needs to be developmentally responsive and very much student-centred. Some Principals feel that the National Standards policy appears to significantly alter this complex human relationship, at the very crucial time of transition from childhood to adolescence. Significant Ministry of Education New Zealand based research has identified that where secondary schooling focuses mainly on the academic at the expense of the social, this leads to significant student disengagement by the end of year nine. As a number of Principals have commented, "why would we wish to replicate this emphasis on the academic at the expense of social development during years 7 and 8?"

The two points articulated above have been expressed by Principals as a concern for "narrowing the curriculum." International research has been clear that in those educational jurisdictions that have narrowed curriculum due to a focus on reading, writing and mathematics, based on high stakes assessment, have in turn driven down student achievement rates. This is the very opposite to the espoused intention of this policy. The breadth of the NZC and its practice in New Zealand primary pedagogy has not occurred by accident, and it is no accident that New Zealand education is reported to be among the top four performing countries in the OECD. A significant number of Principals view with apprehension those states and countries who have adopted standards based education and the narrowing of the school day to just these three basic subjects. International experience is clear that a narrow curriculum leads to student disengagement, truancy and early dropout rates.

Of further pedagogical concern for Principals, is the requirement to set school targets based on National Standards at a time when they are still poorly understood. There has not been one principal who has spoken with me who has felt confident or willing to set charter targets based on the National Standards at this time. In this statement I am excluding those principals who were opposed for political reasons and base this conclusion on those who spoke to me from a purely pedagogical view point.

Since the release of the National Standards policy in late 2009, there appears to have been an evolution in the variety and intensity of Principal concern with the implementation of this policy. Vocal opposition to this policy began at a political level. However, among those Principals attempting to implement this policy, their concerns have become increasingly pedagogical in nature. In the discussion among Principals there appears to be inherent conflict between the intention and direction of the NZC and the reality of implementing National Standards at the school level.

### **Positive Aspects to this Policy**

Almost as a fifth “P” are those Principal comments on the positive aspects of the National Standards policy. Principals have commented on the need for a sense of urgency. The debate on National Standards has created an environment where Principal Associations now regularly discuss the “tail” of student under-achievement as part of their regular meeting agenda.

Principals have been encouraged to adopt AToL assessment practices more quickly and engage in moderation activities at a class and school level. Some intra-school moderation has also started among clusters of schools. A renewed emphasis on data analysis, and a system wide debate on the reliability and validity of commonly used assessment instruments has been timely. The focus on the use of specific assessment instruments to set charter targets has continued to refine existing practice.

The work on reporting to parents as the other, interrelated, policy introduced with National Standards has been generally well received. The increase in frequency of reporting, the development of plain language reporting and the use of a variety of methods of engaging parents and whanau has made significant progress in many school communities. School based review of written reports to parents, the introduction of three way conferencing and student led conferencing, and a greater parent understanding of assessment data, have all been reported positively by Principals. Much of this work has been seen as a worthwhile development of the implementation of the NZC, and Principals have appreciated the leadership of the Ministry of Education in this area.

However, as one principal commented, with the development of the Mahara web portal and My Portfolio web-based tools, the opportunity now exists for schools to report to parents in real time all assessment data. Of concern to that principal is the possibility that National Standards, with its emphasis on twice a year reporting will in fact be a backward step from where intermediate and middle schooling in New Zealand was heading with real time reporting to parents of student achievement.

## **Conclusion**

Since the introduction of the National Standards policy in late 2009 there has been a good deal of debate and discussion concerning this new policy. Much of the early debate centred on the political environment and the publications themselves. While this early debate became “captured” by principal organisations, individual principals set about reading the documents, using the resource material and engaging with their staff. As time has moved on this has deepened the debate into a professional and pedagogical debate. Principals have reflected on their work in the primary service and that of their teachers. They have listened to the political imperative for urgency and the need to address the tail of under-achievement (however that may be defined). Most have begun implementing the standards in their schools and have accepted the limited professional development initially provided.

Has this made Principals therefore, increasingly accepting of National Standards? In my experience in the intermediate and middle schooling sector I would suggest not. In fact I feel that they have become even more apprehensive than they were initially.

Superficially, one could argue that their apprehension may be based on the potential poor achievement of students in their schools when using National Standards as a comparative assessment tool. This argument could then be extended to a fear of accountability for their own performance or that of their school. In an environment of falling school rolls, schools seen to be poorly performing could face a loss of students and possible closure. While not denying this reality, it is my understanding from speaking with my colleagues that their apprehension is much deeper than merely one of school-based accountability

Their first deeper apprehension is that National Standards, and a range of other government policies, is leading to the development of a two tier education system for our country. In one tier it has been suggested, will be found the high decile mainly Pakeha communities; those schools with four-five year ERO reviews, and high National Standard year to level correlations. The second tier will be made up of low decile, increasingly Maori and Pacific communities, with one or two year ERO reviews, supported by interventions from SAF officers and low levels of National Standards to year level correlations. The question this apprehension poses in the minds of some Principals is, “Is this what we desire for our nation?”

A second deep apprehension arises from Principals’ personal experiences of highly performing educational systems such as New Zealand, Finland, Korea, Shanghei and so forth. Almost all aspects of these high performing educational systems we appear to be removing from primary schooling in New Zealand. To Principals we appear to be replacing these highly effective pedagogies with strategies from the internationally poorest performing systems. For example, where in the National Standards policy is the debate on the topics of; the development of high quality teachers, globally focussed educational leadership, local management and control of local schools, and an investment in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning tools and pedagogy?

For the National Standards policy to be implemented effectively in the New Zealand primary school service, the hearts and minds of our Principals must be convinced of the validity of the policy. The purpose of this paper has been to bring to the attention of the NSSAG representatives what a large number of intermediate and middle schooling principals are commenting on during this early implementation phase. In turn this paper sets out some of the parameters of the challenge ahead of NSSAG as we attempt to engage with primary school Principals in the implementation of this initiative.