



PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY

Te Pātaka Rangahau a Te Whare Pāremata

NATIONAL STANDARDS

June 2010

Parliamentary Library Research Paper

SUMMARY

- ▶ In 2010 National Standards for reading, writing and mathematics are being implemented in all schools with Year 1-8 students. Standards aim to set clear expectations of what knowledge, understanding and skills students should be achieving at each year level to be on track to achieve NCEA Level 2.
- ▶ Teachers are required to assess students' in relation to the Standards twice a year and provide plain language reports to parents. Requirements for assessment and reporting under National Standards are more prescriptive than previous assessment and reporting requirements.
- ▶ Schools may not have time and sufficient professional development support to become familiar with the National Standards and develop effective moderation processes before they are required to implement the National Standards in mid 2010.
- ▶ The Standards have been designed and implemented in a short time frame that has not allowed a trial to determine whether they have been set at the correct level.
- ▶ Students assessed as not achieving the Standards could lose motivation for learning, affecting their achievement. Enhanced student achievement is an aim of the Standards, yet National Standards themselves do not raise achievement levels; it is the teaching and learning that is invested in students that improves achievement levels. This may not be adequately provided for under the Standards.
- ▶ Schools are concerned that their results may unfairly categorise some schools as failing.

Introduction

This paper examines the education National Standards initiative being implemented in New Zealand primary and intermediate schools from 2010. The paper begins by providing an overview of the Standards and outlines the rationale for the initiative. The second part of the paper looks at previous assessment and reporting practices in schools compared to the framework required under National Standards. Finally, potential issues with the Standards are analysed.

What are National Standards?

Overview of National Standards

National Standards have been formulated as nationally consistent benchmarks of achievement for students in reading, writing and mathematics in Years 1-8 (primary and intermediate) for all state and state integrated schools. They aim to set clear expectations about what knowledge, understanding and skills a student should be achieving at each year level, based on levels for students to be on target to achieve National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 2. Schools are required to report in plain language twice a year to parents on how their children are performing in relation to the National Standards.

National Standards were part of the National Party's election campaign in 2008. When the National Party came into government in November 2008, the Education Act 1989 was amended, giving the Minister of Education the power to set National Standards. In 2009 academics and education experts started designing the Standards. Consultation with the education sector was undertaken throughout 2009, and the Standards were published in late 2009, ready for implementation in schools at the start of the 2010 school year. In 2012 Trustees will be required to report on the progress and achievement of their school in relation to National Standards, for the 2011 school year.

The speed with which National Standards have been designed and is being implemented has been criticised. According to some critics, implementation at the beginning of 2010 did not leave an opportunity for the Standards to be trialled to ensure they are robust¹ In response to concerns, the Minister of Education established an Independent Advisory Group in February 2010². The group's role is to: "provide technical and educational advice on assessment approaches to support implementation" and "provide advice on the changes to be made to the design of the standards on the basis of assessment information and their knowledge and expertise."³

Why National Standards?

One in five children without basic literacy or numeracy

A strong driver of the National Standards initiative is the one in five New Zealand students the Government identifies as leaving school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. New Zealand has a wide spread of achievement compared to other highly performing countries. A large proportion of students gain very high achievement levels and a large proportion gain very low achievement levels.⁴ The Standards aim to identify low achieving students, enabling teachers and parents to give them support to help lift educational achievement in New Zealand schools.⁵ It is important to note that National Standards by themselves will not raise achievement; it is the teaching and learning that is invested in students that will raise achievement levels. To be able to provide effective teaching and learning, schools and teachers will need professional development assistance and support that may not be adequately provided for under the Standards.

¹ New Zealand Educational Institute. 'Hands up for learning. Trial National Standards and not our kids'. Available from <http://www.handsupforlearning.org.nz/campaign-resources> accessed 30 April 2010.

² Members are Professor Emeritus Guy Hawke, Professors Tom Nicholson, Professor John Hattie, Tony Trinick and Dr Avis Glaze.

³ Ministry of Education. 'Terms of reference – Independent Advisory Group for National Standards'. Available from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EducationInitiatives/NationalStandards/TOR.aspx> accessed 30 April 2010.

⁴ Ministry of Education. *Formative Assessment : a key component in improving achievement in mathematics in New Zealand*, p.2.

⁵ New Zealand National Party. *National Standards : Lifting education standards*. Available from http://www.national.org.nz/files/NationalStandards/National_Standards.pdf accessed 30 April 2010, p.1.

One standard for students to be measured in relation to

National Standards aim to provide consistent benchmarks that students can be measured in relation to. While most schools currently use nationally standardised tests as a means of measuring students' achievement, the tests are not all aligned to the curriculum and schools do not use the same tests. The Education Review Office (ERO) has also observed that teachers in some schools set inappropriately low expectations for learning.⁶ National Standards aim to address these issues of consistency by providing a system where achievement can be compared across schools using the same measure, regardless of what assessment methods a school uses or the particular school a student attends.⁷

Information for parents

The Government has identified parents wanting more information on their child's progress at school as a reason for the initiative.⁸ While most schools were already reporting regularly to parents, National Standards requires schools to report on a student's progress in plain language twice a year. The reports are to include the student's next learning steps, how parents can help at home and any details of extra support that may be needed. In 2006 research found that approximately two thirds of primary school parents thought the reports they received about their child's progress and learning were good or very good. However, 42 percent of parents wanted more information about their child's progress.⁹

Assessment in schools can be variable

Issues have been identified with the quality of assessment taking place in schools. Twelve percent of primary schools in March 2007 were found by the Education Review Office (ERO) to have inadequate assessment practices in place for literacy, and 18 percent for numeracy.¹⁰ In 2009, 40 percent of teachers in Year 1 and 2 were found to be making little use of assessment in writing to improve their teaching and 33 percent in reading.¹¹ National Standards propose to address this inequity in assessment practices by requiring all schools to collect quality assessment information on students and to report on the information collected. One of the assessment approaches that National Standards encourages teachers to use is "assessment for learning", a teaching method that has been shown internationally to improve student learning.¹²

Assessment Prior to National Standards

This section looks at assessment prior to National Standards. It begins by discussing the National Administrative Guidelines (NAGs) and how they have become more prescriptive under National Standards. The New Zealand Curriculum, The Numeracy Development Project and Literacy Learning Progressions are then discussed. All of these initiatives, like National Standards, contain assessment frameworks with defined learning progressions. The New Zealand Curriculum implemented in 1993 contained the first national benchmarks of

⁶ Education Review Office. *Reading and Writing in Years 1 and 2*. Wellington : Education Review Office, 2009. p.2.

⁷ New Zealand National Party, p.1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sandie Schagen and Rosemary Hipkins. *Curriculum changes : priorities and issues. Findings from the NZCER secondary 2006 and primary 2007 national surveys*. Wellington : New Zealand Council of Education Research, 2008, p.104.

¹⁰ Education Review Office, *The collection and use of assessment information : Good practice in primary schools*. Wellington : Education Review Office, 2007, p.21.

¹¹ Education Review Office, *The collection and use of assessment information*, p.1.

¹² Marshall S. Smith and Gayle S. Christensen. 'Beyond rhetoric? Three books and the educational standards debate'. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 2004, v. 13(2):225-235.

achievement that students could be measured against. They contain broader achievement areas than National Standards, while the Numeracy Development Project and Literacy Learning Progressions provide more detailed 'signposts' of achievement than National Standards.

National Administrative Guidelines

The National Standards regulatory framework gives schools more specific assessment and reporting requirements. Previous assessment and reporting practice gave schools some latitude in how they chose to manage their assessment and reporting.¹³ The reporting requirements for National Standards are contained in the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs), under s60A of the Education Act 1989 (the Act). Since 1999 the guidelines have been organised into six sections. NAG 1 relates to curriculum and assessment. NAG2 relates to planning and reporting.

NAG 2A was inserted in October 2009 to cover requirements under National Standards. It includes requirements to:

- report to parents in plain language at least twice a year;
- include school level data in the Board of Trustees' annual report; and
- include in the annual report the numbers and proportions of students achieving at, above, below and well below the standards.

NAG 2A outlines exactly how and what schools are required to report under the National Standards. This is in contrast to previous NAGs that consisted of broad, simple policy statements which gave schools the ability to interpret how they practically implemented them.¹⁴

The National Curriculum

Achievement levels

National Standards are not the first national benchmarks of achievement to be implemented in New Zealand schools. Since 1993, schools have used an assessment framework under the New Zealand Curriculum that includes 'achievement levels' and 'achievement objectives' that student can be measured against. The Curriculum levels encompass more years of schooling and are broader benchmarks of achievement than National Standards. Two National Standards levels fit into one Curriculum level. Like National Standards, the achievement objectives describe what a student is expected to know or be able to do at each particular level, providing teachers with a basis to assess students against.

Reporting to parents

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework made little mention of reporting to parents. As schools were not required to report achievement levels to parents this did not become a widespread practice.¹⁵ Some schools collected a wide range of quality assessment data and reported this back to parents whereas other schools did not.¹⁶

¹³ Michael Absolum, Lester Flockton, John Hattie, Rosemary Hipkins and Ian Reid. 'Directions for assessment in New Zealand : Developing students assessment capabilities' available from <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-in-the-classroom/Directions-for-assessment-in-New-Zealand-DANZ-report> , p.11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁶ Education Review Office. *The collection and use of assessment information*, p.2.

Assessment

Teachers experienced difficulties in assessing students against the achievement objectives. Issues with national consistency of teacher judgements arose, as did issues with assessment methods used.¹⁷ Subsequent analysis showed that overall the objectives do not provide a sufficiently clear basis for assessing levels of achievement or judging learning progress.¹⁸ Initiatives to address the difficulties in assessing students included the development of major curriculum assessment tools, for example: resource banks, exemplars, Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle), Progressive Achievement Tests, and, more recently, literacy and numeracy progressions.¹⁹ The majority of these assessment tools focus on English and Mathematics leaving issues for assessing other curriculum areas.

The new curriculum document 'The New Zealand Curriculum 2007', currently being implemented in schools has not changed the assessment framework under the curriculum. 'Achievement levels' with specific 'achievement objectives' remain in place, and therefore many issues relevant to reporting and assessing students remain.²⁰

Assessment within the Numeracy Development Project

The Numeracy Development Project is a major national strategy that was implemented in schools from 2000. It aims to improve student achievement by improving the professional capability of teachers.²¹ The project has been successful in improving overall student achievement and reducing disparities between ethnic groups.²² Assessment within the project includes the Number Framework, which was designed to help teachers, parents and students understand the requirements of 'Number', one of the Mathematics areas in the New Zealand Curriculum. The Number Framework like National Standards provides benchmarks of achievement, there are eight different stages in the Number Framework.

To assist teachers in identifying what level of achievement it was reasonable to expect from students, 'expectations' were designed to align to the Number Framework and New Zealand Curriculum Levels. This gave teachers a tool that guided them as to whether students were; at risk, a cause for concern, achieving at or above expectations, or high achievers.²³ With the introduction of National Standards, the expectations have been superseded.

The National Standards in Mathematics have been designed to build on the Numeracy Development Project. They cover all the mathematics areas under the New Zealand Curriculum: number and algebra, geometry and measurement and statistics, compared to The Numeracy Development Project predominantly focused on number in the early years. The Number Framework provides more detailed benchmarks of achievement in the number area and can be used by teachers to assist them in assessing in relation to the standards.

¹⁷ Absolum et al., p.13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ministry of Education. *Formative Assessment*, p.2.

²² Ibid., p.10.

²³ Ministry of Education. 'Numeracy Project information : Using expectations'. Available from <http://www.nzmaths.co.nz/using-expectations> accessed on April 30 2010.

Literacy Learning Progressions

Literacy Learning Progressions were developed by the Ministry of Education in 2007 to support the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum and the National Literacy Strategy.²⁴ They were designed to help teachers identify whether students were meeting the reading and writing requirements of the New Zealand Curriculum.²⁵ In 2008, the draft Literacy Learning Progressions were used as a framework to help design the National Standards. The Learning Progressions provide more detailed benchmarks of achievement than National Standards, and under the National Standards framework can provide teachers with indicators of whether a student is meeting the Standards.

Potential issues with National Standards

This section looks at potential issues with the National Standards initiative. These include the speed in which the standards have been designed and are being implemented. This has left no time to trial the standards to establish if they have been set at the correct level. Teachers also may not have had sufficient time and professional development to develop effective moderation processes before implementing the standards. Also discussed is the issue that National Standards alone do not improve educational achievement; student achievement is assisted by support in the classroom, and this may not be adequately provided for under the Standards. The next issues analysed are the effect that being labelled 'below standard' may have on a student's achievement, and the potential for bias in the main means of assessment, that of overall teacher judgement. Moderation processes are then investigated. Though they are needed to ensure standards are nationally consistent, there is a potential for between-school moderation to be insufficient. Finally, this section discusses the potential for media-created league tables to unfairly label schools, and the possibility that teachers will narrow the curriculum to teach to the Standards.

Speed of design and implementation

The lack of a trial period or testing of the Standards has caused concern. Education sector groups and academics sought a phased introduction of the Standards, as opposed to full implementation in schools during 2010. Full implementation means that schools are required to develop their capability to assess in relation to the Standards whilst simultaneously applying them. Group moderation processes, systems to relate current assessment tools to the Standards, and the development of exemplars may not be reliably developed in time for teachers to assess students against the Standards in mid 2010.²⁶

Concern has also been expressed that with no trial of the Standards, there has been no opportunity to establish whether they have been set at the correct 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.²⁷ Schools were given the opportunity in the consultation phase to comment on the level of the Standards however that was when they were only broadly outlined. What happens when students actual reading and writing is compared to the Standards may be different.²⁸ Whilst the Independent

²⁴ Ministry of Education. 'Rationale for key decisions : draft Literacy Learning Progressions', p.6.

²⁵ Ibid., p.7.

²⁶ Ibid., p.3.

²⁷ John Hattie. 'Horizons and whirlpools: the well travelled pathway of national standards'. Auckland : Visible Learning Lab, University of Auckland, 2009. Available at <http://www.cognitioninstitute.org/fullpage.php?type=news&slug=horizons-whirlpools-the-well-travelled-pathway-of-national-standards> accessed April 2010, p.8.

²⁸ National Council of Educational Research. Submission on national standards. July 2009, p.2.

Advisory Group has been assembled to monitor any issues that occur, this is a retrospective function and students will already have been assessed against standards that may be incorrectly aligned to student progression.

Professional Development for Teachers

Professional development support under the initiative may not be adequate for teachers, principals and trustees to implement National Standards effectively. Teachers need professional development support to help them effectively assess against the Standards to create reliable Overall Teacher Judgements.²⁹ In 2010, an estimated 7000 trustees, principals and lead teachers will attend Ministry of Education professional development workshops on the Standards. Those teachers who receive the professional development training are required to facilitate the training of their colleagues in assessing and developing moderation processes.³⁰ This responsibility is likely to create quite a burden on some teachers. Professional Development is also being provided in the form of materials online and schools can contact their regional Ministry of Education office if they need help. Because the Standards are being implemented simultaneously with professional development training, teachers and schools may have to start implementation before opportunities to access professional development arise. This minimal professional development could lead to inadequate assessment and moderation practices in schools.

Standards by themselves do not lift achievement

National Standards aim to identify students who are struggling to meet the standards, enabling schools and teachers to provide them with extra support. Notably, it is not the identification of students that leads to improved educational achievement; it is effective teaching and learning support that is provided to students that improves achievement. For schools to provide effective teaching and learning, teachers need professional development training and support. However, a lot of the professional development provided to schools and teachers focuses on assessing against the Standards to identify struggling students as opposed to improving classroom learning. For education achievement to improve, it will be important that teachers are provided with adequate opportunities to participate in programmes that improve their teaching capacity. This may not be adequately provided for under the Standards.

Student motivation

Students who are not meeting the Standards may be assessed by schools as achieving 'below standard' and 'well below standard'. This is the wording that the Ministry of Education requires schools to use in their annual reports in regard to the standards. If this wording is adopted by schools in their reports to parents and students this could lead to students who fail to meet the Standards becoming demoralised and unmotivated toward their learning. Internationally, low achiever's self esteem has been compromised where metric measures of student achievement have been adopted³¹. All students progress at different rates and emphasizing a student's progress against the Standards could be less damaging than using the label 'below standard' or 'well below standard'.³² In the United States the more neutral indicators of 'basic', 'proficient' and 'advanced' are used to show a student's achievement.

²⁹ Hattie, p.10.

³⁰ Ministry of Education. 'Professional development for the National Standards'. Available at <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Professional-development> accessed April 2010.

³¹ Assessment Reform Group. 'Testing, motivation and learning' 2002, Available at <http://www.assessment-reform-group.org/TML%20BOOKLET%20complete.pdf> accessed on 30 April 2010, p.5.

³² Open letter from Prof. Martin Thrupp, Prof John Hattie, Prof Terry Crooks and Lester Flockton to the Minister of Education, Hon Anne Tolley regarding National Standards, 23 November 2009.

The Overall Teacher Judgement

National Standards require teachers to use assessment information gathered from various sources to form an Overall Teacher Judgement on whether students are meeting the Standards. The Ministry of Education bases this approach on the understanding that no single source of assessment information can provide an accurate summary of a student's achievement or progress, and the best systems internationally are those that value and utilise teachers' professional judgement.³³ Overall Teacher Judgements has been found to offer more reliability than tests because tests do not take into account variations in:

- student's performance depending on the particular day the test is taken;
- pupil's performance according to the particular items chosen; and
- marks awarded depending on the marker.³⁴

Overall Teacher Judgements draw from a range of evidence to make an assessment. This means that teachers are not under the same pressure to narrow the curriculum and teach to tests. Importantly Overall Teacher Judgements enable 'assessment for learning' to be more readily facilitated than assessment systems relying on testing.

The Cambridge Primary Review however noted that Overall Teacher Judgements can be biased or inaccurate as a result of teachers focussing on aspects of the students and their work that are irrelevant to the assessment. This is less likely to be found where good moderation processes are ensuring reliability and consistency of judgements.³⁵

Moderation

Effective moderation of National Standards across schools is critical to ensure National Standards are reliable national benchmarks of achievement. It is important that the Overall Teacher Judgements of students' work, against the Standards, can be compared nationally with confidence. The implementation of NCEA and the issues experienced with establishing a reliable moderation system, illustrate the importance of this.

'Group Moderation' is the predominant moderation process relied upon for National Standards. In regard to the Standards, group moderation consists of professional discussions between teachers that clarify expectations and assessment methods. The Cambridge Primary Review, an independent inquiry into English Primary Education, endorsed this method of moderation, citing it as "the most powerful means of developing professional competence in assessment".³⁶ Under National Standards, schools are encouraged to facilitate group moderation processes. For these group moderation sessions to be successful, schools need time, resources and professional support. Whether this has been adequately provided for is yet to be seen.

Group moderation within schools addresses consistency of judgments in particular schools. However for consistency in judgements nationally, inter-school moderation is needed.³⁷ Under National Standards, interschool moderation includes schools using group moderation in school clusters; however this is not a requirement. Without a system of national moderation in place inconsistencies are more likely to occur.

³³ Ministry of Education. 'National Standards fact sheet 4 : The role of formal assessment tools'. Available from <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Key-information/Fact-sheets/Assessment-tools> accessed on 30 April 2010.

³⁴ Alexander, Robin, ed. *Children, their world, their education : final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon : Routledge, 2010. p.320

³⁵ Ibid., p.322.

³⁶ Ibid., p.323.

³⁷ New Zealand Parliament. Question for Oral Answer, 30 March 2010.

League Tables

Schools are required to report their results from National Standards in their Annual Reports, starting with their 2011 annual report. The Government has stated it is not using this information to create league tables, as has occurred in other countries with detrimental results. The results will be available to the Ministry of Education and where schools are identified as struggling, extra support will be provided.³⁸ Whilst there are no plans for government mandated league tables, this does not preclude the media from creating league tables comparing school results.

Internationally, league tables have created an incorrect perception of schools' performance, as they do not take into account variants in intake (schools with large numbers of struggling students are compared directly to schools with large numbers of high achievers) and they generally provide only a 'snap shot' of achievement.³⁹ For instance, a low decile school could be having a good impact on its student's progression in regard to the National Standards, but, the league table would only recognise the student's low achievement relative to the Standards. This information does not help parents make an informed choice on what is a good school to send their child and ends up unfairly labelling some schools. League table accountability has not been found to improve student learning, making them unlikely to improve student achievement, one of the aims of National Standards.⁴⁰

Teaching Methods, such as Teaching to the Test

Internationally, where schools have been under pressure to achieve from league tables and other measures of accountability, this has led to teaching methods that are detrimental to student learning such as 'teaching to the test'. 'Teaching to the test' involves teachers teaching to the subject matter of the 'test' or assessment at the expense of the wider curriculum. As the measure of school achievement consist only of literacy and mathematics, teachers in New Zealand may face the same pressure to narrow the curriculum. Also if teachers have difficulties measuring students in relation to the standards they may create tests to measure students in relation to the standards. However New Zealand is at an advantage in not having a single test and having an Overall Teacher Judgement that is measured against broad descriptions of competencies as opposed to prescriptive list of skills and knowledge that enable teachers to teach to them.⁴¹

Concluding Remarks

National Standards provide an opportunity for all schools to identify struggling students earlier to enable them to be given the support they need to successfully engage with learning. It is effective teaching and learning support that will lift the educational achievement of low achieving students. For this to happen, however, schools will need to be provided with adequate support and professional development assistance.

The Standards aim to provide all parents across New Zealand with quality assessment information on the progress of their child against nationally consistent benchmarks of achievement in literacy and mathematics. The Standards provide a more robust reporting framework than before, both to parents and the Ministry, on student's achievement against the Standards.

³⁸ National Council of Educational Research, Submission, p.2.

³⁹ Hattie, p.5.

⁴⁰ Absolum et al., p.32.

⁴¹ NZCER. Submission, p.2.

The Standards have been designed and developed in a short time frame, placing pressure on schools as they are required to develop the infrastructure to implement the standards while simultaneously applying them. Because of the speed with which the standards have been developed and are being implemented, it will be critical that any issues found in implementing the standards are acted on quickly and effectively.

Charlotte Oakley

Research Analyst

Parliamentary Library

Copyright: © NZ Parliamentary Library, 2010

Except for educational purposes permitted under the Copyright Act 1994, no part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including information storage and retrieval systems, other than by Members of Parliament in the course of their official duties, without the consent of the Parliamentary Librarian, Parliament Buildings, Wellington, New Zealand.

This document may also be available through commercial online services and may be viewed and reproduced in accordance with the conditions applicable to those services.