

NATIONAL STANDARDS SCANDAL

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State teachers crusade dogmatically to obscure public accountability while the state demonstrates incompetence in articulating standards. It ought to be an incontestable expectation that teachers demonstrate they are meeting clearly defined standards ~ instead teachers are doing everything they can to avoid public accountability. At the same time the state's published standards, shaped by the teachers themselves, are meaningless and deceptive.

Actually, teachers as a body are not opposing public accountability, as is evident from the teachers the government is able to get to front their implementation: most good teachers not only want to demonstrate they are teaching well, but want poor teachers held to account. It is the Principals Association and the Teacher Unions that are so vocal in opposing standards. What are they hiding?

Fatuous Opposition

Opponents to national standards raise a number of fatuous arguments:

They claim they are already making these assessments. But, demonstrably, they are not. Not only is there is no standardisation between schools, there is no standard! With logic that defies their suitability to teach, they claim to assess standards that don't exist.

Their call for standards to be trialled has some superficial credibility until one examines what they want to trial. There is some validity in a trail that finds out of the assessment design actually tests the standards that are set. But that is not what the unions want. *They* want to trial the standards themselves, to see if they match what is happening in schools. That's like defining road-worthiness of cars by finding out what the cars people want to drive on the roads are like instead of setting standards and testing cars to make sure they are safe. Educational standards are only standards if those who set the standards tell teachers what is expected. They are not standards otherwise.

Publishing results of assessment will, we are told, lead to league tables. So? What is wrong with league tables anyway? Such tables can expose bad teachers and failing schools, just as they can "expose" good teachers and successful schools. Who can be harmed by that? True, league tables can be a rather over-simplified tool of comparison. Better to have some measure of improvement from a baseline than crude comparisons of raw levels of achievement. But parents know that. All the research indicates that parents who look up league tables know that and compensate for it. Parents know how to read league tables discerningly and do so. It seems it's only the teachers who can't!

Parents, we are told, don't want results published. Too right they do! Try spinning that lie to the 9 million parents who looked up school scores on the first day they were made public in Australia: so many in fact that the *MySchool* site crashed. They certainly wanted to find out how their children's schools were performing.

Parents might move their children from schools that do not show up well on lists of results and league tables. Great! Their children might then get an education.

Children might be labelled. Apart from the fact that children know only too well where they rank, what sort of perverted thinking justifies hiding children from information about their own learning and achievement in the pretence that the unlearned and incompetent are no different from those who have mastered knowledge and skill? (Of course, that is exactly the philosophy behind NCEA in senior secondary school, so it is hardly surprising primary

teachers should aim for dumb egalitarianism since they can clearly never achieve educated egalitarianism.) Good teachers, and for that matter good parents, do not hide from children who they are. Nor do they encourage children to pretend to be what they are not. They help children see themselves as they are and to work to grow and develop with the particular gifts they have been given in the face of the particular challenges they confront.

Meaningless Standardsⁱ

The intentions of introducing National Standards were to specify levels of achievement, relate those to individual children, and report achievement to parents. Each of those three intentions has been subverted by the way the Standards have been written even before they are put into practice:

- “levels of achievement” are not objective standards but examples from which teachers select bits or do something similar
- assessment of individual children may take place in groups, or with previously studied text, teacher prompts, or reference to other resources
- reports to parents will purport to describe a child’s knowledge or skill, but may relate to nothing more than taking part in a group activity

There are no specifications of what must be known or achieved to meet any standard, only “examples that illustrate” how students can “engage” with the tasks of the national Curriculum. The Curriculum states:

Examples of problems and students’ responses are not a definitive collection for use in assessing achievement in relation to the standards. They are illustrative, and they represent only a small sample of possible problems and responses that teachers might draw on.

Teachers are required to choose whatever data fits. Whatever the government intended, National Standards look good, do nothing, and will report less.

Assessment of reading and writing standards, for example, is to be based on what students do “largely by themselves.” What nonsense! A student who cannot read or write on his own *cannot* read or write. Although the reading standard describes a 90% accuracy in reading *previously studied* text, even that is never once referred to in the examples of assessment: no particular level of accuracy is required in reading. In fact, the standards stipulate that children can “gain meaning from the text” they are supposed to be reading by using illustrations or the classroom’s wall charts!

Similar deceit is found in the Mathematics standards. They relate to “solving problems or modelling situations”. Although this may include calculations, it is in the context of the Ministry’s statement that right answers are ... “no longer the prime goal of mathematics.” “Multiplicative and additive thinking,” are among things to be assessed. What will be assessed as a mathematics standard is the *process* of thinking to solve problems, not necessarily the accurate computation of mathematical solutions.

Nonsense a State Necessityⁱⁱ

This is consistent with the concept of state education in two ways. Firstly, state education by definition is achieving the standards of state education, so its perception of its task is not to change what is done to meet new standards, but to change the standards to conform to what it is doing; and secondly, because state education must increasingly focus on social outcomes

to validate its existence, any standards it uses must be referenced to group activity and not the individual components of the group, the children.

Once the state has determined that it knows what is best for children's education, not only must it monopolise both the determination of what is good and the delivery of that good, anything it does by way of educating children must by definition be good. It follows that it must and will find a way to demonstrate that what it is doing is good. Thus the introduction of National Standards is a challenge to the state education system only so far as it has to work out how to manage the idea without changing what it already knows is good for children, that is, what it is already doing.

The National Standards have been introduced with remarkable speed: the efficiency of the Ministry of Education is more than evident in the way it has managed to transform the concept of objective individual standards into subjective group outcomes in such a short time. Knowing that subjective group standards are good because that is what it is presently committed to, and that individual objective standards are bad because that is what it has already rejected, the state system had to change the standards to fit its present practice. The result of the valiant but vain attempt to impose National Standards is that teachers will continue to do what they are already doing, and the state will continue to validate the standards it is achieving whatever they might be.

Social outcomes are similarly a necessary result of a state monopoly on education. A content-rich education in which knowledge and skill are imparted is an open-ended education: the more knowledge and skill that is gained, the more individualised subsequent learning becomes and thereby the more free it is from the control of others. But a state system demands universal participation: since participation in state education is regarded as the greater good for the whole community, the state must constrain any tendency that allows for individual activity outside of the system and enhance anything that engenders increased dependency. Since knowledge and skill by their very nature tend to free individuals' further learning from the control of or undue dependency upon others, they have no lasting place in a state education system. Knowledge and skill must either be abandoned by a state education system or, as in ours, be redefined to mean a process of group engagement, dependency, and control.

ⁱ From Michael Drake *State Children* Wycliffe Christian Schools, Auckland, 2009, p29f

ⁱⁱ From Michael Drake *The Child Moulders* Wycliffe Christian Schools, Auckland, 2009, p74f