



Submission on national standards

From the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER)

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) is an independent research organisation. We produce research-based knowledge, advice, products and services for the education sector and anyone with an interest in education.

NZCER has been involved in the development of the national standards in a number of ways. Researchers have acted as advisers to both the literacy and numeracy working groups developing the standards within the Ministry of Education (MOE). NZCER has also been contracted by the ministry to analyse the submissions on the national standards. We have a staff member who is a member of the assessment academy that is providing advice to MOE on assessment against the national standards.

Alongside that work, we believe that, as a national, independent education research organisation, our role is also to step back and consider the national standards at each point in their development. In November 2008, NZCER published a position paper on national standards. We set down the underlying principles we felt were important, and we outlined the international experience and the potential pitfalls of national standards. This submission is intended to follow on from that paper. It draws on a number of our research projects, including the longitudinal Competent Learners study; our extensive expertise in assessment over many years, which includes the development of the Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs), the Supplementary Tests of Achievement in Reading (STAR) test, and the Assessment Resource Banks (ARBs); and our close connections with schools, including our work supporting the analysis of their student achievement data and implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

This submission focuses on three main areas. They are the use of national standards; timing of the introduction of national standards; and the research that will be needed to support national standards. We look at the potential impact on the curriculum and on overall student progress, and at the need for infrastructure development to help schools manage this fundamental change. A key recommendation is that the national standards be “road tested” for a year as part of a phased implementation plan.

Use and purposes of national standards

Many schools do a good job of reporting student achievement and progress to parents and involving students in self-assessment. We believe national standards have the potential to improve reporting to parents, provided their introduction is well supported and done for the purpose of continual learning, rather than to label and blame schools. Done well, there is potential for national standards to act as a catalyst for improved teaching and learning.

We are pleased to see that the standards provide a broad description of competency, rather than presenting a finely detailed list of skills and knowledge students must master. If the standards were too detailed or prescriptive, the temptation is to “teach to the test”. National standards could become the dominant driver of what happens in the classroom, squeezing out the broader curriculum that students need to perform well at NCEA and to become lifelong learners.

It is also pleasing that the professional judgement of teachers is recognised, and that judgements about whether a student meets a standard are to be based on several sources of evidence, not a single assessment. This is in line with international best practice. Such an approach offers the potential for rich discussions among teachers about student achievement and progress. Those conversations are already taking place in some schools but, as with the introduction of the standards-based NCEA in secondary schools, we believe national standards could help sharpen the focus of those discussions.

In talking to parents, teachers will need to back up their judgement with reference to supporting material such as test results, portfolios and observations. It should spark conversations about what performance at a certain level means, and how that judgement was made, and it should reinforce the idea that students share the responsibility for their learning. This could lead to better focused, more purposeful assessment in schools, so that schools develop and use assessment practices that enhance teaching and learning. For example, we know from the Competent Learners longitudinal study that enjoyment of reading is one of the key indicators of student performance at NCEA level two. Teachers could provide evidence of student enjoyment of reading, or provide students’ own assessment on their reading enjoyment, as part of judgements against the literacy standard.

However, national standards should only be one aspect, or a starting point, in reporting to parents. Competency in literacy and numeracy is important, but we know from Competent Learners and other research that attitudinal competencies are also crucial. A student might be tracking well in literacy and numeracy but poor motivation could undermine their progress.

The consultation material suggests that as well as providing a mechanism for reporting to parents, the standards will be used to identify schools that need support to improve achievement levels. We believe that there are real validity issues with using the standards to achieve the latter purpose. The standard itself is a coarse measure—a student is below, at or above it. This lack of precision means that achievement levels at a school could improve or fall back over a period of time without this necessarily being reflected in significant changes to the percentage of students performing at, above or below the standard.

We would not recommend that decisions about intervention or additional support for individual schools be based solely on the proportion of students reaching the national standards for their year level. At the broadest level, it would be possible to identify the group of schools with the highest percentage of students performing below standard. After that first cut, however, much finer-grained measures will be needed to track school progress. These measures include standardised tests such as the PATs or asTTLe, which can show more subtle changes in achievement. National standards by themselves should never be treated as a precise measure.

This is one reason why it is important to avoid the creation of league tables from national standards: they are not valid indicators of school quality on their own. We would not want to see judgements made about schools on the basis on standards alone, or the information used to “name and shame” schools and, by association, their students. Specific policy or legislation will be needed at the national level if league tables are to be prevented.

Timing concerns

We think there is a strong case for a nationally co-ordinated “road test” of the national standards for at least a year, rather than attempting to finalise them for 2010. There are a number of related reasons why we think a phased approach is necessary.

Impact on curriculum implementation

The introduction of national standards must not come at the expense of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. *The New Zealand Curriculum* is built on 21st century principles of teaching and learning, and enjoys widespread school and community support. Much work is still needed to implement the curriculum in schools, and the considerable investment and gains made so far should not be jeopardised. Literacy and numeracy are important, and occupy a fundamental place in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, but it would be a mistake to narrow professional development and support for schools to literacy and numeracy, or to make literacy and numeracy the sole focus of school accountability. Given the tight financial situation, and depending on the uses to which the national standards will be put in judging schools, there is a danger of that occurring and of schools consequently feeling unsupported in the task of implementing the wider curriculum. National standards must not become a straitjacket that prevents schools from providing students with engaging and enriching curricula that also develop the attitudes that will allow success at NCEA level 2.

Infrastructure demands

Systems and processes that schools will need to support their use of the standards take time to develop and “bed in”. We would recommend that 2010 be spent gearing up the infrastructure that schools can use to support a standards-based assessment system. This would include developing a range of benchmarked assessment tools, including exemplar materials (particularly in writing, statistical investigations, and at the younger year levels) as well as providing advice to schools on how to moderate results to make reliable and valid judgements against the standards. This is a good opportunity to build capacity in schools around moderation.

Schools have been given an opportunity in the consultation phase to comment on the level at which the standards have been set. However, we suspect it is difficult for most teachers to make those judgements until they are actually doing assessments themselves, with students’ writing or maths samples in front of them. Phasing the standards in would allow time for any issues with the level of standards to be sorted out, and for teachers to get a better feel for what the standards look like. As we have learnt from the experience of NCEA, the process of developing a collective view of evidence for standards takes professional support and time.

It would be important for the MOE to work with a sector group and a set of schools in different contexts and at different stages of implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum* to test the reality of making professional judgements against the standards, and the use of national standards and other information in reporting to parents. Research will also be needed about the ways parents respond to the reports, to the categorisation of their child, and the “what next” suggestions, and how that can impact on student learning. From this work would come some useful strategies and tools that could then be rolled out for all primary and intermediate schools for the start of 2011. Prominent US researcher Richard Elmore says that for every ounce of pressure or accountability that is put on schools, they need an equal ounce of support. The infrastructure needs to be in place, including sufficient advice to schools. Bringing in national standards too

quickly risks creating confusion in the way they are applied and disruption to other initiatives in schools. The negativity that would create in schools would leave a legacy for the MOE to overcome. We think a phased-in approach reduces those risks.

We also see a need for improved student management systems that allow longitudinal analysis of student performance as well as management of different pieces of assessment used in the judgement of national standard levels. We know from our work with schools that few of them have such systems. Linked to this is the issue of safe storage of student records, in ways that will enable schools to have quick analyses of student assessments, while also allowing ongoing national analyses of patterns of progress and the roles of different school contexts.

We understand schools' apprehension about central accumulation of school data. One possible solution would be for NZCER to provide independent storage of school data, drawing on our experience with the PAT data. This would maintain the confidentiality of the data, but enable schools to access and analyse their own data at any time. This national "storehouse" (pātaka) model would also enable analysis of national patterns and trends, which is helpful to schools as well as policymakers.

Research needs

The introduction of national standards must be accompanied by a robust programme of research that brings the MOE and the sector together to discuss the results and work on deciding priorities for joint action. We have already mentioned the need for initial research during a proposed trial year, and there needs to be ongoing work as well.

Research will be needed to provide some baseline data so that we are able to see any patterns that emerge, and thus the implications for policy and schools. For example, we need data on how schools with different student results are currently forming their judgements about student performance, how teachers work together in those schools, what moderation processes they use, what professional development and external support they have and what tools and systems they use. We will need to know the impact on teacher workload. It will also be important to research performance in national standards over time, which means decisions need to be made about the collecting and warehousing of national standards data and the standardised test data used to inform the standards.

Sources

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