

Considering the assessment landscape in 2024

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With the new National-led government now in office, we can expect changes to assessment policy for schools. Given the critical role assessment plays in schooling, it is important that any proposed policy shifts are carefully scrutinised. In this Assessment News column, we identify some possible proposals the new government may be considering and make some brief comments on each one. We conclude with some recommendations.

Possible directions for assessment

The formal agreements that underpin the new National-led coalition government include several commitments to various aspects of education policy. Apart from a commitment to regular assessment and reporting to parents, however, the agreements provide no further commentary about assessment in schools. In contrast, the 2023 National Party manifesto entitled “Teaching the Basics Brilliantly” contains some very clear statements regarding how assessment policy will be carried out. According to the document: National will:

- Require schools to assess student progress in reading, writing and maths at least twice a year every year from Year 3 to Year 8, using the e-asTTle assessment tool.
- Introduce a common reporting template, so every parent receives a detailed report on their child’s progress in reading, writing, and maths at least twice a year.

- Introduce an age-appropriate skills check-in towards the end of Year 2 to assess basic skills such as counting, phonics, and letter formation.
- Expand the NMSSA study to sample all year groups for reading, writing, maths and science annually, to monitor progress towards the target of 80% of Year 8 students being at curriculum by 2030 (National Party, 2023, p. 8).

As of early March 2024, no announcements have been made about whether any of these actions will be taken. While we wait for an announcement, it is important to look at each one and consider the opportunities and risks they present.

Before we comment on the proposals, we should mention that we both work for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER). NZCER develops and maintains a range of assessment tools that are widely used across the country. These include the suite of Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs) that have been a mainstay of assessment in schools since the early 1970s. NZCER also partners with the University

of Otago to run the national monitoring programme mentioned in the proposals above.

All this work is important to us. We are committed to ensuring that schools can continue to access NZCER's assessments and that the national monitoring programme can flourish.

We acknowledge that our employment by NZCER has the potential to present a conflict of interest when commenting on possible assessment policy. However, we also think it provides a valuable vantage point from which to make some observations. So, let's start with the first proposal.

Require schools to assess student progress in reading, writing and maths at least twice a year every year from Year 3 to Year 8, using the e-asTTle assessment tool.

It is essential that teachers, schools, and whānau can obtain information from robust assessment tools, including standardised tests, to gain a better understanding of students' learning. This data, combined with teachers' observations, and the commentary and insights of whānau, should inform teaching and learning and be used to respond to students' needs.

While we support the regular and systematic use of a variety of assessment tools, we are concerned that mandatory use of a single tool could increase the pressure associated with testing and potentially detract from the educational purposes of assessments. An over-reliance on testing can lead to a narrowed curriculum that is focused on test preparation, which may result in heightened security concerns, and possibly even cheating.

Ensuring that all students have fair access to any required assessment and are evaluated equitably is also a significant concern. This fairness includes creating appropriate content and providing necessary accommodations or alternatives, which hasn't always been done well in the past.

We would argue that the primary goal of any compulsory testing should be to enhance our understanding of teaching and learning in a way that respects everyone involved and leads to improved student learning outcomes. This goal suggests that schools and teachers need the flexibility to choose and use assessment tools that best fit their and their students' needs.

If part of the rationale behind mandatory classroom testing is to also monitor the education system, the objective of monitoring should be secondary. While national monitoring is important (see our discussion later in the article), any use of classroom assessments for monitoring should not overshadow the main purpose behind the assessments, which is to support teaching and

learning. We also believe that effective system monitoring does not require all schools to use the same assessment tool. The system should be flexible enough to interpret data from a variety of sources.

The e-asTTle tool, developed in the early 2000s as a world-leading assessment method, is used to provide valuable insights into students' progress aligned with the curriculum. Designed for flexible use in classrooms, e-asTTle remains widely used. However, despite its critical role we do not think that e-asTTle is currently fit for the proposed expanded purposes. Its content has not been updated in over 15 years, and we understand its online delivery platform has struggled at times to support large numbers of simultaneous users. Addressing these issues will require significant time and investment.

Introduce a common reporting template, so every parent receives a detailed report on their child's progress in reading, writing, and maths at least twice a year.

Parents and whānau are entitled to accurate and comprehensive information about the achievement and progress of their children. It is important, however, that this information can be properly interpreted, and that it highlights both strengths and opportunities for growth.

While we support the idea of creating better and clearer reporting templates for parents and whānau, we urge that this is done carefully. Any template that is developed should be underpinned by research. A common reporting template needs to be able to communicate clearly to a diverse audience, lead to appropriate responses, and support all students to thrive.

We do worry that a template might overemphasise test results. Educational trajectories take time to become established. Test results, however, are snapshots of achievement that have limited precision and often overlook important aspects of learning. When students struggle on a test the results can negatively affect their motivation or be used to label or pigeonhole them according to assumed ability. Achievements and progress should be presented with care. As previously mentioned, it is important to provide context and highlight both strengths and opportunities for growth. We believe that the teacher's perspective has an important role here.

A plan to provide a template should include the supports that will be needed to help users draw appropriate inferences from the information included in the template, including how to find out about next steps. We also need to be careful not to undercut the considerable investment schools and kāhui ako have made to develop localised reporting systems and templates. A "one-size fits all" approach might not serve all contexts well.

Introduce an age-appropriate skills check-in towards the end of Year 2 to assess basic skills such as counting, phonics, and letter formation.

Early detection of literacy and numeracy issues is important. Again, however, we would suggest taking a cautious approach when considering how a skills checklist should be developed and used in schools. Mandated checkpoints in other jurisdictions have not always worked as expected. For instance, experiences in England with a compulsory phonics screening check (PSC) for Year 1 students have raised concerns. According to Carter (2020),

The PSC was seen as an end in itself, rather than a way of securing progress in one of the skills of reading. It found that, the assessment had become the curriculum, to the detriment of specific groups of learners (higher-attaining readers and children with English as an Additional Language). Teachers were found to use the assessment processes of the PSC as objectives for teaching rather than using them as the tools of assessment. (p.593)

In recent years, NZCER has cooperated with a range of other organisations to develop a kete of assessment tools that schools could use to monitor students at school entry and throughout the first 2 years of learning. The work was completed under contract to the Ministry of Education. It was based on progression models that enabled teachers to identify student learning trajectories across a range of important capabilities. We believe this work could provide similar advantages as the checklist, but with a much earlier and proactive line-of-sight.

A national monitoring programme based on the approach taken by NMSSA is an appropriate way to monitor system performance

We strongly support the use of the National Monitoring programme to assess and understand student/ākonga progress and achievement nationally. The first iteration of national monitoring, the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP) was established in the early 1990s under a National Government to assess achievement in Years 4 and 8. To avoid the pitfalls and perils of national testing it purposefully used a school sampling approach. The National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) took over from NEMP in 2012 and has regularly brought attention to inequities and anomalies related to achievement and progress, as well as areas of strength and excellence.

More recently, NMSSA has evolved into an expanded Curriculum, Insights and Progress study that involves assessment at three year-levels (Years 3, 6, and 8). These timepoints have been chosen to match the end of the first three phases of the refreshed New Zealand Curriculum (Te Mātaiaho). Like NEMP and NMSSA, the new study uses

a school sampling approach and assesses across the whole curriculum. Yearly assessments of numeracy and literacy are also included to provide regular information about these vital areas.

Since its inception in the 1990s, national monitoring has enjoyed strong support and acceptance by schools and teachers. A concerted effort to use rich assessment tasks, involve teachers and school leaders, and harness insights to inform classroom practice have engendered much goodwill and trust.

We believe that the current national monitoring programme can be expanded further. At least one more year level could be involved, for instance Year 10 (end of Phase 4 in Te Mātaiaho). In addition, more regular assessment could be considered in some areas, for example in te reo Māori and science. However, expanding the programme to all year levels might not be an effective use of assessment dollars. The programme is intensive for the schools involved and scaling the programme to all year levels could increase the burden on the schools beyond a reasonable level. Such broadening across all year levels might also reduce the programme to using simple, easily administered tasks that limit the scope and richness of the assessment programme.

We also believe that more could be done to publicise the insights and resources that have been and continue to be generated through national monitoring. There are some excellent existing resources available, for instance, that could be used to support professional learning development programmes and the development of local curriculum.¹

Final thoughts

We are enthusiastic about the potential benefits that thoughtful assessment practices can offer to our national education system. Crafting a national assessment policy should be approached with diligence, relying on solid research and a thorough consideration of both risks and opportunities. We think it is important too, that assessment policies recognise both Māori medium and English medium contexts and take into account Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments. This includes, but is not limited to, considering how concepts relevant to aromatawai as well as assessment might impact policy. Finally, a national assessment policy must capture the hearts and minds of school leaders, teachers, students, and whānau if it is to lead to committed action and change. We suggest working together to co-construct the national assessment policy.

¹ For example, see the NMSSA website for a range of insights reports for teachers.

We conclude with five recommendations.

1. Establish a plan for regularly using and maintaining robust low-stakes assessment tools that can supplement teacher-based judgements, inform parents and whānau, and provide a triangulation point for system-wide analysis.
2. Launch a research-driven initiative to identify best practices for reporting to parents. This initiative should explore ways to design report templates that deliver clear, comprehensive information, acknowledge student diversity, and support progress for all learners.
3. Continue to invest in the new Curriculum Progress and Insights study (previously NMSSA) so that schools, curriculum developers and professional learning facilitators can use its outputs. This includes considering whether expanding the existing study would benefit the sector.
4. Ensure that any new policies are co-constructed and backed by thorough analysis including how they can serve the aspirations of kura and meet Tiriti o Waitangi obligations. Any roll out of new policy should include mechanisms for ongoing evaluation and refinement.
5. Consider the development and implementation of school entry assessments that enable teachers and whānau to generate a rich understanding of how students are progressing in their first 2 years of school.

References

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