

NATIONAL STANDARDS

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NEW ZEALANDERS WOULD like our education system to provide great learning opportunities for all of our children and young people, and to help them to take full advantage of those opportunities. We may disagree about the details, but this general goal has very broad support. As a consequence, we are unhappy when some children or groups of children do not progress as far or as quickly as we believe is possible and appropriate. There is always scope for improvement, and educators at all levels are constantly working towards such improvement, through such approaches as revisions to curricula, changes in teacher education, refinements in how teacher performance is monitored and enhanced, development of new teaching resources and approaches, and more effective identification of and response to the particular needs of individual students.

The justifications in 2007, 2008 and 2009 for the introduction of National Standards fell within this pattern of promoting high goals and striving for improvement. If we truly could substantially improve educational achievement for the bottom 20 per cent of students in our schools and have almost all students attain at least

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a completed level 2 NCEA by the time they left school, that would be an outstanding outcome. Likewise, if better measurement and communication of the progress of all children could ensure more coherent and appropriate support for their learning from teachers and parents, we would expect to see improved progress towards our desired educational goals.

Over the past two years I have expressed many concerns about details of the National Standards, the proposals for how they are to be used, and the way in which they have been introduced and are being implemented. I have sincere and grave doubts that they will make any significant progress towards the stated goals for which they have been introduced and I am worried about bad side effects from their introduction. Here I will focus my comments on three core concerns.

In 2006 I was invited to appear before the Education and Science Select Committee of Parliament, which was considering the idea of setting standards for the achievement of children in each year of schooling. I told the Committee members that setting appropriate standards for their students' learning was a huge professional challenge for teachers, requiring deep insight

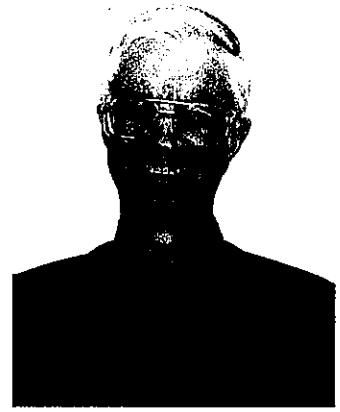
into the capabilities, interests and needs of each of those students. The goal must be to set targets as high as possible for each student: targets able to be achieved, but only with real effort. Such goals foster optimal learning and motivation, provided the students can be persuaded that the goals are worth their effort. Easier goals tend to lead to boredom, harder goals to giving up.

I then drew on student results from our National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP). I showed that there were huge ranges of achievement among students at the two year-levels whose achievement we monitored, Year 4 and Year 8. On almost every assessment task that we administered, the best Year 4 student performances were better than average Year 8 student performances, and the worst Year 8 student performances were lower than average Year 4 student performances. In other words, the performance range at each year level was huge, implying that typical school classes often would include students performing from levels several years below the class level to several years above the class level. Such diversity of achievement is reported also in the education systems of many other countries.

I used these observations to tell the Select Committee that I believed that these achievement patterns made a nonsense of setting any particular standard as an appropriate level for all students in a particular year of schooling. The more teachers focused on trying to get all students in their class to a prescribed standard in a subject, the less appropriate their efforts were likely to be for the most capable and least capable students in that class. Because New Zealand's National Standards place a huge focus on whether each student is above, at, or below the target standard for their year of schooling, they tend to lead teachers, students and parents away from the best current learning targets for many of the students. This is a fundamental flaw in our National Standards system.

My second core concern is closely related. Because students have widely varied levels of performance, it is much more appropriate to focus prime attention on student *progress* rather than student *achievement level*. When judging progress, we need to pay close attention to how a student is performing currently and how that differs from how they were performing at an earlier point, such as the beginning of the current year or end of last year. Progress is achievable and motivating for all students, whereas attaining the target for their year of schooling clearly is not. Although some of the rhetoric surrounding *National Standards* mentions both current achievement level *and* progress, the former unfortunately has received much greater emphasis than the latter. We would have been much better placed if the

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reverse were true: progress given priority over performance level. Both deserve to be assessed and reported, but progress is far more educationally useful. What is more, focussing on progress is much fairer: students of differing ability levels and schools from differing socio-economic communities can much more fairly be compared on measures of progress than on measures of achievement level. It is a worthy goal to seek to achieve more progress, on average, for our lower performing students or schools, thus gradually reducing educational disparities, but along the way it will be very beneficial to keep our focus firmly on where each student is and what his or her current learning needs are.

If the main metric for reporting student achievement is whether they are *above*, *at*, *below*, or *well below* the target standard for their year of schooling, we are particularly poorly placed to use the results to clearly describe student progress. If a student drops one category from one year of schooling to the next, a reasonable interpretation will be that they have made little or no progress over that year. If they are judged to be *at* the target level in both years, we can assume that they have made about one year of progress. In most other circumstances, their amount of progress will be unclear. For instance, they may be classified as *above* the target standard in both years, but really have made little progress over the intervening year, while others who have made more than a year of progress over the past year can remain classified as *well below* the target standard. It would be far more appropriate to record what performance level (year level) each student had reached, which could then be used to measure progress by comparing it with the same student's assessed level a year earlier.

My final core concern is procedural rather than conceptual, but still very important. The introduction of National Standards has been carried out in a way that ensures that this initiative will be less effective than it might have been. Educational changes are far more effective if they are embraced by teachers and principals, rather than imposed on them. Imposed changes are given lip-service rather than dedicated effort, usually because the educators have not been convinced of their value. The use of National Standards was legislated before the actual Standards even existed, the Standards themselves were developed with minimal involvement of teachers, and implementation was required long before appropriate professional development and other resources allowed the Standards to be applied at all consistently among different schools. All of this suggests that the purpose was more to impose a new form of accountability on schools and teachers than to address the real needs of students.

In my view, very substantial changes in the National Standards system will be required if it is to have a realistic chance of usefully improving educational outcomes for New Zealand children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Crooks is an emeritus professor of education at the University of Otago, where for 16 years he was co-director of the Educational Assessment Research Unit and the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP). His research interests include understanding the impact of educational assessments on learners and exploring ways to improve the assessment of student learning. He has served as president of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education and on many national committees or working parties relating to assessment in education.



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