

National Standards: A Trustee's Perspective

The Triumph of Politics over Reason

As a trustee, I am responsible for the governance of our school and ultimately for the quality of the education delivered to the children who attend.

It was therefore with real interest that I read the Dominion Post article (Monday 30 November) written by the Minister of Education, Mrs. Anne Tolley. It carried the statement that "it was time to sort out the facts from the fiction about National Standards." The article was written in response to a letter sent to Mrs. Tolley by four leading academics, stating quite clearly that National Standards, in their view, would not achieve the government's objective of raising student achievement and was likely to lead to "dangerous side effects." As a parent and trustee, I am concerned by those comments, as I suspect they were not made lightly and represented the views of highly regarded experts in their field.

Surprisingly, I thought, Mrs. Tolley dismissed the academics' letter and stated: "National standards are very different and the rest of the world is looking to New Zealand and our unique approach to increasing pupil achievement." But as a school trustee, I was most intrigued to read later in the article that the NZ School Trustees Association is "a strong supporter of national standards and can see the benefits they will bring to pupils."

On this matter of "fact:" I beg to differ. As a member board of NZSTA we have never been asked for our views on this policy, so I am astounded that our "representative" body is in a position to take such a strongly supportive stance. Our Board of Trustees has written to the National Board of NZSTA to lodge a formal complaint that the views of member boards have never been sought and the stance of the Association has not been subject to consultation with member boards in any form. It is therefore of real concern if Mrs. Tolley has used NZSTA support to inform her judgment of what trustees think about National Standards.

I was also surprised by the "fact" that "parents want National Standards and they are going to get them." When were we asked whether we want National Standards? Of course parents want to easily understand how their children are progressing at school but were the possible risks ever publicised? And at no stage in the consultation process were parents ever asked the direct question of whether they actually support National Standards.

Essentially, the parent consultation that took place in June and July, focused on choices such as: do you want the Plunket graph or the other one? The on-line consultation took the same approach. There were only two open-ended questions, where parents had the opportunity to express their thoughts or make suggestions.

The NZ Council for Educational Research (NZCER) carried out the independent analysis of the consultation submissions. An extract of their analysis of the 3,011 parent/whanau submissions makes interesting reading:

“Around 14% made a positive comment on National Standards, either the general idea of comparing their child’s performance with national benchmarks, or the specific examples given. Around 38% voiced some concerns about the introduction of the national standards. These included valuing their school’s current way of reporting and discussing student progress with them and not wanting to lose it, concerns that the National Standards ignored differences in individual patterns of growth, would narrow teaching, ignore the development of the whole child, demotivate low-achieving students who never made the standard or lead to unfair comparisons of schools.”

The responses from trustees (including our school) were even less supportive, with only 3% making positive comments as part of the consultation.

Many parents have also voiced their concerns about National Standards through other channels. A parent group called “Parents Against Labelling”, led by Dellis Hunt, has been formed in the South Island. Their main concerns are around the damaging effects that labelling can have on young children and how this can become self-fulfilling.

The Great Depression Revisited?

Statements from academics warning of “dangerous side effects” are of concern to me, as a parent, because my children are at school and their education is vitally important to me. The academics’ letter to Mrs. Tolley may have a parallel in a well-known case in the United States, known as the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, enacted in 1930.

Messrs Smoot and Hawley were the two senators who sponsored the bill calling for the imposition of a wide range of tariffs on goods imported into the USA. An open petition opposing the bill was signed by 1,028 prominent economists who warned of the disastrous consequences of such action. Apparently, Henry Ford also made a trip to Washington DC to plead personally with President Hoover to veto the bill calling it “an economic stupidity”. The president declined and the bill was passed into law. The ensuing retaliatory tariffs by U.S. trading partners reduced American exports and imports by more than half and according to some views may have contributed to the severity of the Great Depression.

Politics v Reason

My overwhelming feeling is that National Standards is essentially the triumph of politics over reason. At the heart of the problem lies the failure to correctly identify and assess the real benefits and risks, and to discuss these openly and honestly before we started down this pathway. Colin James, the most astute political commentator we still have, has written an excellent piece, “Hide and Hattie: the peril of fast law”, that discussed both National Standards and the Emissions Trading Scheme legislation.

Both are major policies with significant effects but were rushed through under urgency. I fully agree with his concluding comment:

“Hide’s and Hattie’s subtext? Fast law is bad law”.

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