

## **National Party Education Policy and the Accountability Question:**

### **The School Trustees' Perspective**

*"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."*

*Albert Einstein*

The National Party's education policy for the 2011 general election sets down another marker in the on-going battle between those who focus on data and what is "counted" versus those who focus more on what really "counts" in delivering quality modern education.

The difference is becoming clearer as the roll-out of National's highly controversial National Standards policy passes the second anniversary this month of the publication of the open letter to the Minister of Education by four leading academics. The academics stated that the new system was so seriously flawed that its implementation would not be successful, it would not achieve intended goals and it could lead to "dangerous side effects".

The dangerous side effects are best described in the concluding paragraph of the paper written by Professor John Hattie, an adviser to John Key in the early days of the policy's development:

*"National standards offers the most wonderful opportunities for refreshing and reinvigorating an already top of the world system, but it could be the most disastrous policy formulated if it turns our attention to narrowing, testing, league tables and diverting attention to between-school rather than within-school differences."*

School trustees, the elected representatives of parents, have voiced concerns for the past two years about the National Standards system. The School Sample Monitoring & Evaluation Project, the official Ministry of Education commissioned report that monitors the implementation of National Standards, asked school trustees about their level of concern over the unintended consequences of National Standards.

The issues of most concern to trustees are league tables and the demotivation of students who are consistently below the standards, with 71% of school trustees being moderately to very concerned about league tables.

Narrowing the curriculum and the possibility of national testing are the other key concerns shared by trustees and educators alike.

An attempt to determine parent views on the system could not proceed, as the response rate to the parent survey was just over 1%, illustrating how little interest many parents now have in the new system.

The monitoring report was published on the Ministry's Education Counts website back in August but the Minister of Education has not released a press release discussing its contents.

The New Zealand media has generally played a poor role in covering the National Standards debate. All too often they have mistakenly asserted that teachers are opposing National Standards merely because they are afraid of accountability. In the view of many school trustees, this is incorrect.

The National Party policy statement says that schools and education agencies should be accountable to parents and taxpayers for student achievement. WWSTA agrees. All participants in the state and state-integrated schools sector play an important part in delivering both the desired social policy objectives of education and doing so at a cost that represents “value for money” for the taxpayer.

But the crunch question is how we all work to achieve the desirable objective of further enhancing an already world class system while avoiding the “dangerous side effects” that Professor Hattie warns us about.

Parents do want to know how their children are progressing and achieving at school and how they can support their learning. Effective assessment plays a vital role in both informing teaching and learning in the classroom and in providing valuable information back to parents.

But the real issue is not whether children should be assessed (they should), or whether schools should be accountable (they should) but how and in relation to what?

The fascination with performance data and the tendency to want to copy education policy from the USA and England has been a feature of the debate around standards-based education reform for some time. The late Roger Kerr wrote as such, as far back as February 1998, in the National Business Review:

“The UK is light years ahead of New Zealand on this...How refreshing and how sensible. What a contrast to New Zealand where education officials try to play down the importance of such performance data. Parents deserve such information so they can choose schools that are best for their children. Not only that. Knowing that their performance will be measured and published creates good incentives for schools.”

These sentiments have been repeated in the aftermath of the release of National’s education policy but there has been no reference to the poor level of student achievement performance in countries such as England and the USA that use high stakes assessment and reporting.

In contrast, why has Finland, which bans league tables under legislation, consistently scored so highly? And, why has the New Zealand media not learnt from their English counterparts that school league tables do not lead to genuine improvements in the quality of education?

The bigger issue overshadowing the sideshow of National Standards for many parents is that, while literacy and numeracy are important skills, they are not all that matters in a good primary education.

So, WWSTA would argue that the accountability issue must first address the more important question: what is it that schools must deliver to their customers – the parents – as their main purpose for existing? In essence, it is time to reconsider the most basic question: What is the purpose of education?

This much more important question, of what we expect from our schools and teachers, has descended into a game of political football with our children’s futures at stake. Can we really determine the effectiveness of the education system unless we have discussed and agreed on the real purpose of education?

This government's failure to develop sound policy is the cause of the problems behind the poor implementation of National Standards. We should take time out and refocus our efforts on developing meaningful solutions to our challenges in our circumstances.

It's time for a rethink about the role of education and what New Zealanders want our public education system to deliver. Only then can we hold our educators truly accountable.

Issued by:

Wellington Wairarapa School Trustees Association

P O Box 33-176

Petone

Chris Toa, Chairperson

(027) 733 9561

Bill Courtney, Management Committee member

(027) 448 9815

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