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Two Cheers for National Standards

Implementing a commitment on which it was elected, the government is introducing national education standards in schools.

From 2010, parents of children at primary and intermediate schools will receive regular school reports showing how their child is doing in literacy and numeracy (reading, writing and mathematics).

The stated purpose of the national standards is to let schools, teachers, parents and children themselves know if they are achieving at an expected level for their age and stage or whether additional support is needed.

Such a move is long overdue. In 1998, the Education Forum, comprising educationists and business sector representatives, published a report *Policy Directions for Assessment at the Primary School Level*, authored by Professor Alan Smithers, a distinguished British education adviser.

The Forum stated that “it is strongly in favour of national assessment in primary schools. It fully recognises that accurate information and feedback have a major part to play in improving education performance.”

In effect, the state school system is an enormous government monopoly (which would benefit from competition). We can't expect it to perform well without objective performance data.

There have been interesting themes in commentary on the government's plans.

The New Zealand Principals Federation (representing primary school principals) has pointed out that assessment will focus on literacy and numeracy rather than other areas that are “just as important.”

This is going too far. The Forum's report said that it made no apologies for concentrating in the first instance on these subjects: “no New Zealand child

is going to get as much out of life as he or she could without fluency in English and mathematics.”

Another objection has been that standards only show whether a student's achievement is below or above average; they don't necessarily show what progress has been made.

But while progress is important, Smithers pointed out that it does children no favours to focus on so-called 'value added' when they still can't meet standards, and that value-added measures are not sufficiently reliable to hold schools to account.

Perhaps the most emotive commentary (from teachers) has been about the publication of results that would allow schools to be compared in 'league tables'. By contrast, editorial writers and others have condemned the idea of an official 'conspiracy of silence', saying parents have a right to be able to compare schools.

In my view, both sides have a point. Smithers argued that it is important not to confuse assessment which benefits children with judging the effectiveness of schools.

Other things besides literacy and numeracy are relevant in assessing school performance; many primary schools are too small for scientifically reliable comparisons to be made; and other approaches, such as competent Education Review Office assessments, should be more helpful in assessing school performance.

On the other hand, parents should not be regarded as unable to take socio-economic and other factors into account in assessing schools, and in the age of the internet, information cannot realistically be suppressed.

As Brendan Nelson, a former Australian minister of education, said: “[I'm] not an advocate of government-constructed league tables but if someone wants to construct a league table on the basis of publicly available information, they should be able to do so. The last time I looked, this was a free society.”

My feeling is that more serious issues are being lost in the debate. One issue is the quality of the underlying curriculum. A second is the reliability of the methods of assessment. There is little point in imposing a testing regime on top of a bad curriculum.

There are still real grounds for concern about New Zealand's outcomes-based model of curriculum development.

A 2006 study for the Education Forum by Australian education consultant Kevin Donnelly pointed out that here is increasing international evidence that New Zealand's approach is intellectually flawed and obsolete. The Rudd government in Australia has replaced an outcomes-based model with a more academically rigorous subject-based approach.

And despite the use of exemplars, it remains to be seen whether internally assessed achievement of standards will be rigorous and reliable – a problem that plagues the NCEA. In the United States there are attempts to benchmark local standards against prestigious international tests like TIMSS to ensure rigour and quality.

Evidence from Britain indicates that the introduction of national education standards lifted achievement in the 1990s.

But as Alan Smithers recently commented, subsequent governments would have done better “to hone the blueprint they inherited: a national curriculum, external tests and rigorous school inspections.”

Finally, standards are no silver bullet for upgrading education.

Perhaps the most important reform would be moves towards greater parental choice and competition in the system, and greater school autonomy.

Teacher quality (including teacher training, professional development and certification) is also vital, as is how better teachers are rewarded and under-performing teachers dealt with.

But the government's national standards initiative deserves two cheers.

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