



NEW ZEALAND PRINCIPALS' FEDERATION
National Conference – Wellington
National President, Peter Simpson's Speech

9 April 2011

E nga tumuaki o Aotearoa
Rau rangatira ma
E nga matawaka o te motu
Tena koutou katoa

Nau mai, haere mai ki Aotearoa
Tena koutou/ tena koutou/ tena tatou katoa

Principals of New Zealand
Leaders and groups throughout the land
Greetings to you all
Welcome to the land of the long white cloud
Greetings, greetings to us all

Welcome to Wellington, the coolest little capital in the world, and welcome to our 2011 conference.

First I want to acknowledge our guests from Australia: Presidents, Gabrielle Leigh from the Victoria Principals' Association and Jim Cooper from the New South Wales Principals' Association and Mike Nuttal standing in for Norm Hart from APPA. You have travelled far to join us and we are thrilled to have you here. I would also like to acknowledge Ian Leckie, President of NZEI and Jan Tinetti, the Chairperson of the NZEI Principals' Council and also Gary Sweeny, President of NZAIMS. We have received apologies from Virginia O'Mahoney, ICP President and Mike Welsh from the National Association of Head Teachers in the UK.

To Liz Millar and her organising team - you accepted the challenge of hosting this conference and pulled it together in about half the usual time – but when I look around this venue, I see you've done nothing by halves! We haven't got just a few exhibitors out there; it's like walking through a village of them. And you've exceeded all expectations by registering over 700 delegates. That's a fantastic achievement. The programme you put together for us has been exceptional and the speakers have really challenged us to reflect on our own professional practice.

On the social side, the Beehive opening was a great buzz and we've all been buzzing since. So well done Liz and the team!

Colleagues, I know that through your participation, and through listening to the different views of the speakers, your minds will have been well and truly set free; and I hope you will leave this conference with fresh ideas to improve your own leadership practice.

Today I want to address some freedom issues too. I want to free us from any misconception that our education system is in crisis; I want to free us from any false notion about our ability to change, adapt to new circumstances and be accountable; I want to free us from the well-publicised falsehood that schools need National Standards to identify the 14% of kids in our schools who need extra help to reach their potential; I want to free us from any doubts that we haven't already got good ideas about how to support kids' learning; and I want to free us from any fear we might have about the consequences of doing the right and ethical thing by the children in our schools.

So what might lead someone to the conclusion that our education system is in crisis? The McKinsey report on improving school systems, identifies the ideal conditions for change, and says that if you want to introduce major reform, there are three potential ways to do it. One relates to the stamp of a new leader; the second is to have a crisis and the third is to have a critical report. In introducing National Standards you might think that our Education Minister felt that all three conditions applied in New Zealand, but in two cases this was just plain wrong. Let me tell you why.

The country had a new Prime Minister; that is true. He wanted National Standards to be a flagship policy for the National Party. You might say, that was his 'stamp'. Next - the **crisis**. Well there wasn't one, so it had to be manufactured. The nation was falsely told that 20% of our children were not achieving in the basics of reading, writing, and maths, and this constituted the crisis.

Well let's check that out. Look at the latest PISA report. It shows that New Zealand kids are achieving in the top four countries in the OECD. The only countries ahead of us are non-English speaking and predominantly mono-cultural; countries like Finland. What's more, the report showed that of all the OECD members, New Zealand is in the lowest bracket when you measure government investment in education.

In other words we're punching way above weight.

Frankly, if the All Whites or the Tall Blacks were consistently doing this well, they'd be the lead item in every news bulletin! The Education Minister of New Zealand should be bursting with pride and praise for our profession just as the country did last year over the performance of the All Whites at the soccer world cup.

We are not in crisis.

Finally an ERO report was released which the Minister avidly embraced. It suggested there wasn't enough rigorous assessment going on in schools, and assessment data wasn't being effectively used to set school targets or next learning steps.

On closer analysis we found that the ERO report covered years 1 and 2 only and failed to note that beyond these beginning years, schools were using a wide range of reliable norm referenced tests to assess children's progress and achievement levels.

Nevertheless, it was on the basis of this report and a **manufactured crisis** that the government tried to justify the introduction of its National Standards policy.

Our profession questioned the policy, not because we don't want standards. We have always aspired to excellence in our schools. That's why we rate so highly in the world for our kids' achievement.

And we don't stop at the 3Rs either. We have a curriculum which is the envy of the rest of the world. It allows every single child, academically inclined or not, to have the opportunity to learn. For some it's through the Arts or through sport that they learn best. For others it may be through environmental programmes, or through ICT. We aim to provide children with the learning environment that's best suited to them.

We questioned National Standards because they were supposed to be an assessment tool to measure achievement levels in a national way. Achievement would be measured against a 'standard' which applied to all children of a particular year in New Zealand, no matter what school they went to or where they lived. With this information, parents would **apparently** know whether their child was above, at, below, or even **well below** this 'national' standard. Professionals are always open to evaluating new ways of assessing children's learning and we took a keen interest in how National Standards might help.

It wasn't long before the educational experts were ringing alarm bells in the corridors of the nation's schools. These 'standards' first assumed that all children are the same and progress at the same pace and can therefore all reach the same standard at the same time. Well, any parent can tell you

that their own children didn't all learn to walk or talk, or grow at exactly the same age and neither is it realistic to think that they'd learn to read, write, or conquer maths equations at exactly the same time. As we all heard in this auditorium yesterday, children are just like popcorn. Some pop early and some pop late.

Children learn in uneven ways, and that's **normal**.

Unlike the many existing assessment tools such as STAR, PATs, AsttLe and others that are norm referenced for the New Zealand population, the National Standards were hurriedly **constructed** and **were not tested**.

In the end they are neither national nor standards. They are **fundamentally flawed**. They depend on teacher judgement as much as anything else and are not clearly defined. Instead they are **vague descriptors**. Applied in schools, there would be as many so called 'standards' as there are teachers. It would therefore be impossible to compare any one set of 'national standards' data with any other. You'd simply be comparing shipping containers with apples.

We have endlessly pointed out all these limitations to the Minister.

Nothing has changed.

The Minister expects us to use Standards in their current form and report achievement against them. Mrs Tolley expects unreliable school data to be available to parents and to the Ministry and Mrs Tolley expects league tables are inevitable.

To allow this to happen would be irresponsible and dangerous. The data would be unreliable and its publication would merely serve to mislead parents.

The government's National Standards are also hugely harmful to children who don't make the so called 'standard' in a particular year. You're telling those children that they've failed, even though those children might have made great progress during that year, and even though they may be working to the absolute limit of their ability. Then, you're telling their **parents** they have failed too.

At the same time, a child who does reach the standard or is above it is called an achiever, even though that child may have made little or no progress during the year and is not reaching their full potential.

Professionals won't allow this to happen.

As teachers, everything we do is in the best interests of children. Our practice is guided by a moral and ethical stance that says we will keep children safe and free from harm. And we will respect every child's learning needs and do all in our power to help children reach the highest standards they possibly can.

Being critical of National Standards doesn't mean that teachers don't want to be accountable or to assess children's progress and achievement levels. Quite the contrary. We believe that every school should have systems of assessment and data recording. We believe that reliable assessment data should be used in setting next learning steps and in setting annual targets. Further we believe it's the role of ERO to ensure that all schools are employing robust assessment practices and that it has the power to monitor such practices.

While we don't believe National Standards can help in this we cannot as professionals ignore the 14% of children who are underachieving. We've developed many unique ways to support the special learning needs of these children.

Some of these programmes have evolved in response to the societal changes that we face. For example we have a growing proportion of children presenting at school with quite severe behavioural and social problems. These problems impede learning and in part stem from the increase in violence

in society, the proliferation of drugs and child abuse, and the increase in child poverty. Programmes such as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) have been introduced in recent times to deal with children whose behaviour is difficult to manage.

New Zealand has long been at the forefront in advancing support programmes for children with reading difficulties. Marie Clay developed what became the world's best known reading recovery programme, now used throughout the world. It is just as relevant in helping children today as it was forty years ago.

We have some of the best ICT solutions for our disabled children and those with specific learning disabilities. The profession is constantly reviewing and looking for new and better ways to support the learning needs of children in our classrooms.

We recognise with sadness that there is an over-representation of Maori and Pacific Island children among the 14% of underachievers. The new strategy for Maori, Ka Hikitia is showing promise in helping us better understand how to create a more culturally appropriate learning environment for Maori children in mainstream schools. The programme leads the way in demonstrating the importance for Maori children of first establishing relationships and whanau connections. It is through these connections that they will gain a sense of identity with the school and feel they belong. Once Maori children feel that sense of belonging they are far more likely to be successful in their learning. The latest NCEA results show that Maori achievement is already accelerating.

Our profession has been under attack from several directions since the National Standards debate began. One criticism consistently levelled at us for our stance against the National Standards is that we're reluctant to make changes. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Adopting new ideas is something New Zealand teachers have always welcomed. In the last two decades we've accommodated many changes including Tomorrow's Schools, which altered the entire structure of our education system, and resulted in self-managed schools governed by Boards of Trustees, and led by principals.

With this change came further innovations such as performance reviews and property management. We've embraced the mainstreaming of special needs children into our schools. Our NZ curriculum has undergone two major transformations which have resulted in the present world class version, of which we are truly proud. In our eagerness to adopt new ideas we've learned the importance of critique to ensure that whatever we embed in our professional practice is actually going to benefit children.

I say to you today, feel proud. We have one of the highest standards of education in the world and that's because of the leadership you give your teachers and schools. It's time we celebrated the great things going on in our schools, and the whole country should be celebrating with us.

I know the lengths you take, to ensure that the children in your schools get the best. Take the Christchurch earthquake for example. Teachers and Principals did not leave school that day until the very last child was safely dispatched off the premises. For many that was well into the night. In some cases, where parents couldn't get to the school, children were taken to the teacher's home.

Teaching isn't just a job.

It's a vocation. It doesn't start at 8.00 in the morning and finish at 5.00. There is no beginning or end. It's just one continuous commitment to make a difference for our children's future.

To date, the Minister of Education has consistently refused to engage with the very real concerns of the professionals doing the work. We hope this will change.

Would citizens of this country allow the Minister of Health to dictate clinical practice for its patients?

What must be understood by all New Zealanders is that National Standards represent a direct and serious threat to the quality of our education system. The huge inconsistency of practice and philosophy that will exist between schools and teachers under this model will not improve education. It will take us back to an archaic model of “basics”. At a time when we seek to engage our children with authentic contexts, this government wants to incentivise school performance around a narrow set of invalid standards.

We will not sit back quietly and watch this happen. The government is accountable too. When NZ’s world class education system starts to falter, as it has in the UK and USA, we will be there pointing to the evidence of this policy’s failure.

We ran a survey not long ago. 95% of you said you agree with NZPF when we say we want a full review of the National Standards. I’m going to ask you to endorse that position today. I’m going to challenge you to stand by your profession and to make a moral and ethical decision on behalf of the children of New Zealand.

There is no crisis in education; but we have work to do. We can’t waste any more time on National Standards that are too underdeveloped to be of any use and that have the potential to harm our most vulnerable children.

I’m asking you to utterly reject this policy in which you as a body of professionals have no confidence. This is a watershed moment in our history. National Standards will never help underachieving children and **we’ve never been convinced they would.**

This policy is not about improving the education of children.

It is purely political.

Generations of educators have encountered dilemmas like this before. Each time, our profession has pulled together, re-asserted what we believe in and made the right decision.

We will do that again. We will be strong. We will do what we know is right for children.

Tumuaki, Kia Kaha!