

Editorial: Let teachers teach, not count

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In education matters, as any teacher will tell you, everyone's an expert. We all went to school; we know what worked for us and we are easily persuaded that we know what works for everyone.

This assumption of universal expertise does not, oddly enough, extend to such fields as dentistry and automotive mechanics: no one claims that their experience of driving a car or chewing confers any sort of specialist authority. But teachers can be sure that they will never want for the advice of others.

They certainly got some this week as Prime Minister John Key and Education Minister Anne Tolley announced new education standards for literacy and numeracy – "the three Rs" – in years one to eight, which will measure achievement against nationally set benchmarks.

The announcement, dotted as it was with buzzwords like "progress", "achievement" "measure" and indeed the word "standards", was calculated to induce warm and fuzzy feelings in parents, whose anxiety about their childrens' education may always be relied upon as a rich source of political capital. But it took place over the furious protests of teachers and principals, whose representative organisations pointedly boycotted the public launch.

For the widely trumpeted fulfilment of an election pledge, it's a bad look. We may be sceptical about opposition from the teacher unions since it is their job to question change that imposes a greater administrative burden on their members. But teachers have justifiably complained that the problematic NCEA regime at secondary level has buried them in an avalanche of paperwork. This rhymes with a disquiet felt more widely in education circles that there is so much assessment of learning going on that there isn't any time left for teaching.

This is all of a piece with modern management philosophy, with its emphasis on key performance indicators and measurable outcomes. But when even those charged with measuring educational achievement question the new standards, it's worth sitting up and listening.

Professor John Hattie, who has won international recognition for his work on student achievement, says the Government's new standards regime looks like a backwards step. Hattie's 15-year study on assessment, published last year, was described as education's "Holy Grail" in the authoritative Times Educational Supplement in Britain and was praised by Anne Tolley. But he has condemned the planned changes as "going back 50 years" and expressed concern that they will force teachers to teach children according to their school year, rather than their ability level.

This process – which teachers commonly call "teaching to the test" – emphasises the importance of ranking achievement and, say teachers, threatens to destroy one of the great strengths of the New Zealand education system, which is teaching children according to their abilities. The Government may take the view that if learning is not being assessed and quantified it is not occurring, but anyone who has found in a teacher a lifelong source of inspiration knows better.

By an unfortunate coincidence, the standards announcement comes just a week after a major report in the UK attacked primary schools for doing precisely what the Government here is proposing. A study led by Cambridge University, the biggest independent review of primary education in Britain in 40 years, criticised – among many other things – the narrowing of the curriculum and the impact of testing and standards on primary school children.

Echoing the objection of many teachers here that in a standards-based regime that talented kids get bored and lesser-ability kids get left behind, the report "found growing concern about the international evidence that some children are put off school, if they feel they have failed formal lessons in the 3Rs at an early age."

It's worth remembering that only two years ago the Education Review Office found that primary schools used assessment information well in 80 per cent of cases for reading and writing and 75 per cent for maths. In short, there is no assessment crisis. What is more, the evidence is that a system incentivising assessment will improve scores, without necessarily improving achievement.

The unpalatable truth which does not fit with National's ideology is that there is an achievement crisis. And under-achievement is correlated with socio-economic status, which is reliably correlated with ethnicity. This approach is like fixing a leaking tap by putting a leaking bucket under it and measuring the amount of water that's being lost.



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