



# SPANZ

SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION OF NEW ZEALAND INC.

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## President's Comment 5 2007

Recently NZQA released national comparative figures on NCEA and school achievement. The worthwhile information in this release lies with the external assessment, for the internal assessment doesn't include the 'not-achieved', the absences, the 'failed to submit' etc etc etc. In my mind one needs to be cautious about how this information is used as, in a sense, its release is at conflict with standards-based assessment. Standards-based assessment is about individual achievement, it is not about normative comparisons. Further, is NCEA a measure of how well learning is occurring?

*"There is evidence that the 80-credit requirement encourages a minimalist approach by students. Many students agreed that it was hard to be motivated to do more than the minimum 80 credits and many indicated there is little motivation to aim for Merit or Excellence when those credits carried no extra value."* The Impact of the NCEA on Student Motivation, College of Education and School of Psychology, Victoria University, June 2006.

Historically we have used normative means for comparing learning. We have, through School Certificate and Bursary, ranked everyone from first to last and compared the rankings of students at our school with the rankings of students at all other schools. In a sense that is what normative assessments are designed to do. But, in part, the transforming of our school and the New Zealand education system has been much about making sure that every single individual child learns, not just the ones in the top half. As a consequence assessment practices have also been reformed. The demise of School Certificate and Bursary has allowed for a lot more freedom of course and assessment design. The underpinning principles of the new assessment system is that it is individualised, that it is standards-based, that it is about saying what I, as an individual can do, but not in any comparative way with other students.

The National Assessment System is no longer a useful tool for making judgements about schools and how they are performing.

With NCEA schools can mix and match Unit and Achievement Standards as they see fit. This mix and match allows different schools to develop different assessment practices, according to the needs of the students in any particular school classroom. The result is that some students get their numeracy credits entirely through internal assessment, while others get them by external examinations, and many by a mix of the two. But the problem in terms of comparing students achievement, is that there is nothing standard about the process at all. Internally assessed credits are easier to pass than external examinations, and Unit Standards are easier to pass than Achievement Standards. *"Yet students were more positive about internal assessment than external examinations, but many students felt strongly that external examinations were important as evidence of quality and consistency across schools and in order to have information that will be respected for University Entrance, by employers, and internationally."* The Impact of NCEA on Student Motivation; Victoria University, June 2006.

*"The implementation of standards-based assessment has produced a degree of variability in the results of external assessment that is beyond public and professional tolerances. In parallel, the external moderation of internal assessment by schools was felt by many to be insufficiently robust to ensure national consistency."* Report on the Performance of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority in the Delivery of Secondary School Qualifications, State Services Commission, August 2005.

These comments are not intended to be critical of NCEA because there is much that is good about NCEA in terms of the transformation that is occurring and in terms of involving all of our students in learning. The point of my argument is however that because of the variety of NCEA practices, to use them as a performance indicator for schools simply doesn't make sense. Let me give a couple of examples.

There exists in New Zealand a school with a similar decile rating and student neighbourhood as ours. We used to make comparisons between the performance of those students and ours using School Certificate and Bursary normative assessment. In 2003 when Standards Based Assessment was being introduced, that school offered 15% of its Standards as Unit Standards. In 2005 the percentage of Unit Standards assessed as compared with Achievement Standards has grown to 47%, whilst our Unit Standards assessed has grown from 22% to 26%. It is clear that the two schools have different assessment policies and practices today and there is no validity in comparing the achievement of our school with that other school using NCEA.

In Level 1 Science, Physics, Biology and Chemistry, there are some identical standards (around experiments, skills and technique), but they are separately registered on the National Qualifications Framework and are worth three credits each. It is possible for a student to attempt all four, so earning 12 Credits for doing almost exactly the same work four times over.

The bottom-line is simply don't use standard-based assessment for purposes other than personalising achievement. If it is used as a comparative tool then schools will be forced into the moral dilemma of what is best for the individual student versus how do we make our school look good.

*"Students commented that the current grade bands of Achieved, Not Achieved, Merit and Excellence were too broad and do not provide enough information on their learning and performance. Many students added suggestions for letter grades, options to score each achieved band as high/middle/low, and a system of percentage points."* The Impact of NCEA on Student Motivation: Victoria University.

It is interesting to note this view of the students alongside the fact that NCEA is not intended as a selection tool, it is simply a qualification which says what students can do. How then do universities use NCEA to select their students into restricted-entry courses? One approach is that they don't and rather require students entering university to do a general (Intermediate) year in their first year of study and use the results after that first year of university study to select students into specialist schools. Another is they design tools to select students. Because of this I want to open up two debates or discussions with the wider community.

Firstly, in this new paradigm from teaching to learning how should we measure successful students? Surely learning involves much more than an accumulation of credits.

The second debate I would like us to have is the debate that exists around quantity versus quality of education.

Jeremy Kedian, in Education Today says *"that in the move towards personalised learning, a critical question remains unanswered for many classroom-based learners. This concerns the fundamental question of what is learning. Many teachers appear to adhere to a view of learning that is concerned primarily with learning outcomes, rather than the actual process of learning itself."* What Jeremy does here is raise the whole debate around quantity versus quality of education. By over-emphasising specific measurable learning outcomes we run the risk of narrowing the focus of schools down to mere schooling. If we put too much emphasis on standard setting and targets and reporting against those targets then the role of a school will simply become one of being a credit accumulation agency, i.e. we will only do it if it counts. Which is ironic when one realises that education is one of the social branches of science – it is a humanistic branch. Education is more qualitative, it is about quality of life. Education is an art and that is why advances in education do not produce a science of education.



Graham Young  
**President**