

## **MEDIA BRIEFING NOTE**

### **LETTER FROM EDUCATION ACADEMICS AGAINST PRIMARY SCHOOL LEAGUE TABLES BASED ON NATIONAL STANDARDS**

There are currently 107 signatories to this letter drawn from across the New Zealand universities that teach and research in education. Nearly a third are professors or associate professors. We will continue to gather signatories from university academics and will also invite signatories from staff in polytechnics and wananga who are teaching and researching in education.

### **PROBLEMS WITH THE PROPOSED ‘LEAGUE TABLES’ OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PERFORMANCE BASED ON NATIONAL STANDARDS**

1. National Standards data are unsuitable for comparing schools.
2. The contextualising data are incomplete.
3. League tables are educationally harmful.
4. The political argument for league tables is weak.

#### **1. National Standards data are unsuitable for comparing schools**

The performance of schools cannot meaningfully be compared with each other unless it can be demonstrated that assessment measures, processes and moderation have been used consistently across schools. National Standards (NS) are not nationally moderated and rely on processes and teacher judgments that will certainly be inconsistent across schools.

The first year report of the RAINS research<sup>1</sup> led by Professor Martin Thrupp illustrates very different pathways into NS enactment in six case study schools. There is likely to be much greater variation over the 2,300 primary and intermediate schools nationwide. The Ministry of Education is developing a ‘Progress and Consistency Tool’ that is intended over time to reduce variation of ‘overall teacher judgment’ between schools.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nzei.org.nz/site/nzeite/files/reports/RAINS-Final-2012-03-01.pdf>

However, the tool cannot control variation in the processes used prior to entering the data online, nor the more subjective elements allowed for within the tool.

Many schools that are providing NS data to the Ministry include explanatory comments or withhold data related to particular sub-groups of students because the numbers are small and the children may be identifiable. Almost half of New Zealand primary schools have fewer than one hundred and fifty students, which means that a school's reported NS achievement performance is likely to fluctuate widely from year to year for reasons that are entirely beyond the control of the school and its teachers. These important qualifications and caveats will not appear in league tables as they cannot reflect school level details.

National Standards measure numeracy and literacy achievement only. These are only part of the primary school curriculum and only a fraction of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children learn at school.

## **2. The contextualising data are incomplete**

Many elements of the school's local community context affect teaching and learning processes and children's achievement. These include socio-economic and other intake differences (such as ethnicity, student transience rates, the proportion of English language learners or children with special needs) and other school and area characteristics (local labour market, urban/rural location, popularity compared to surrounding schools).

There are also internal school contexts, such as past leadership or reputational issues, significant staffing changes or schools being damaged. In addition, certain student level contextual data (e.g. prior attainment, disposition to schooling and family support) are essential if comparisons of school performance are to be fair.

Overall it is very difficult to take full account of school contexts in a way that allows schools to be compared with each other fairly. The proxies used for community, school and student context in value-added analyses are simply not adequate to permit meaningful judgments about a school's performance.

Many attempts at comparing school performance do not even try to use the best available statistical methodologies. New Zealand does not collect the necessary individual student and family level data. Instead the school decile rating is typically used as a proxy for all these contextual indicators. Yet there may be enormous differences between the contexts

of schools within deciles making decile rating completely inappropriate for contextualising school performance.

### **3. League tables are educationally harmful**

The compilation and release of achievement data in league tables to enable comparison of schools has the potential to cause harm: to learners, teachers, schools and local communities. We know from international experience of system-wide assessments that encouraging public comparisons of school performance leads directly and indirectly to behaviours that harm the education of the very groups of students that governments say they want to help.

These harmful behaviours include: ‘teaching to the test’ and ‘narrowing of the curriculum’; valuing of some students over others because of their ability to perform and to conform; prioritising the teaching and other support given to some students over others in order to maximize the numbers that ‘reach the standard’; and damaging effects on students’ anxiety levels and conceptions of themselves as learners – ‘I’ll be below standard’.

### **4. The political argument for league tables is weak**

The argument that the Ministry of Education should release league tables in order to prevent the media doing so, does not address the problems that their effects will be damaging and the data used to compile the tables will be incomplete. Data release in league table form will consequently misinform rather than inform parent and community judgments about how well children are learning.

We do not know of any reliable research evidence that supports the government’s assertion that parents in New Zealand are ‘desperate’ for the release of league tables in order to be able to better judge the quality of their child’s school. In any event, parents already have other sources of information and methods available to make judgments about the quality of their child’s school and its provision for learning. There is no obvious information ‘gap’ that league tables would fill.

National Standards data are also said to be ‘official information’ and automatically subject to release to the media on request under the provisions of the Official Information Act (OIA). Consequently, it is claimed to be ‘in the public interest’ for NS league tables to be compiled and released. But, the public’s interests are diverse and often conflicting. Even if it could be demonstrated that a majority of the public supports league tables, the potential

benefits of release need to be weighed against the potential harms that ‘league tables’ may cause.

In particular, the moral principle of social justice demands that the situation of the most disadvantaged in our society should not be made worse through the release of official information. The intention of Section 9 of the OIA is clearly that a state organisation may only responsibly release official information when it can demonstrate that the potential for harm has been fully identified, assessed and mitigated.

Recently, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s (ACRA) ‘My School’ website has been cited by the Minister of Education as an example of a responsible approach to compilation and release of achievement information, and one that the New Zealand Ministry of Education may seek to emulate.

However, My School does not compile or release league tables. Indeed, the My School website Terms of Use specifically prohibit the compilation of league tables for commercial gain, and the public use of information extracted from the website in misleading ways. Prospective users are required to acknowledge that national assessment program data (NAPLAN) from limited national tests of literacy and numeracy are only one source of information, and that other ‘statistical and contextual’ school information (on the site and from the school itself) needs to be collated and interpreted by the user in order to gain a more complete and truthful picture of the quality of the school. The My School site and its Terms of Use are together designed to minimise the possibility of harm caused by simplistic, incomplete or ill-informed comparisons of school performance. Even so, well-informed critics of the ACRA system have identified gaps and flaws that have the potential to lead to harm to learners.

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