

Statement by children's advocacy groups – September 2012

With record levels of child poverty and social inequality in New Zealand, we [the undersigned children's advocacy organisations] believe there is an urgent need for investment in child-centred education strategies that directly address social and educational disadvantage and ensure all children experience success in their learning.

However, the Government's National Standards policy requires students to be assessed as being "above", "at", "below" or "well below" standard according to their chronological age. Many children who achieve at normal levels, or who have made significant progress in a year, will still be labelled as "below standard" because of the one-size-fits-all nature of National Standards. National Standards ignores the inequalities many children and their schools face and has the potential to make those inequalities worse.

We are concerned that the Government's decision to shortly publicly release primary school students' National Standards achievement data and permit media publication of school comparisons ("league tables") will have harmful impacts on children, schools and their communities and increase social inequality.

By definition, league tables create "winner" and "loser" schools, even when the actual difference in school effectiveness may be marginal. The destructive impacts of introducing rankings and targets - and therefore more competitive behaviour between primary schools - are likely to be felt most strongly in schools in low socio-economic communities where the country's most vulnerable children and their families live.

Schools in these communities need more resources and better support to meet the diverse needs of the children and communities they serve. Factors such as poverty, transience and high numbers of children for whom English is not their first language impact heavily on student achievement and will therefore significantly affect schools' published achievement data. Twenty five percent of children with disabilities live in benefit-dependent homes. National Standards become another form of punishing these families, their schools and their communities.

"Winner" schools will be able to attract more experienced teachers and boost their rolls and resourcing, increasing inequity between schools. For children, the evidence is that being told you or your school is "not up to standard" undermines children's self-confidence as learners and decreases their engagement and motivation to achieve.

When National Standards were introduced, the Government repeatedly said it would not be creating league tables. However, this year, Education Minister Hekia Parata has rolled out a "Public Achievement Information" plan that facilitates the ability of the media to create league tables by publishing all school National Standards data on the "Education Counts" website.

We believe parents have a right to robust information about their child's learning and about their school's effectiveness. But the Government has persisted in publishing what even the Prime Minister calls "ropey" data and refused to focus on the important issue of avoiding harm to children.

Publishing the data is likely to have negative impacts on the equality of opportunity every New Zealand child should have to access high quality education. Instead, we want policies that increase educational equity and quality for all children through collaboration, not competition.

The Government's policy is going in the wrong direction. We call for an urgent re-think of this policy - for our children's sake.