

## **Achievement driven teaching – what’s the debate about?**

There is a debate going on amongst educationalists, policy makers and interested members of the public. This debate is important as it has the potential to have a significant impact on the development of our children throughout their primary school years.

National achievement standards are being proposed for primary schools:

Should we have them or not?

What are the benefits and what are the sacrifices that may need to be made? How might these standards affect the cognitive growth of our children?

Will the standards effectively cast our educational delivery into a narrow focus on what policymakers dictate our children should know?

Of course these are just some of the doubts expressed by those who recall the past mistakes of “standards” in education and they are doubts that need to be expressed, debated, understood and solved with assurances that past mistakes will indeed not happen again.

Many years ago children were assigned to classes. Standard 1 to 6 according to the academic standard they had attained. This worked well for the more able children who were able to progress through the Standards very quickly. Sadly those ‘less able’ or ‘less ready’ children experienced the reality of failure by being “held back”. It was common practice to use rote memory approaches, along with some rather harsh punishments thrown into the learning mix, as a desperate approach to drive the children so they would pass the next test.

Parents want and need to know about their child’s progress at school in terms of individual readiness, expectation and of course in comparison to what is normally expected at each of the class levels. I see nothing wrong about having a set of national standards to benchmark progress norms that provide expectations for children. Teachers at Elmwood Normal hold a significant amount of assessment information that can be shared with parents. The school also provides comprehensive assessment reports to the Board of Trustees highlighting strengths, weakness and trends in the key learning areas. Further, our curriculum managers attend board meetings on a regular basis to share school-wide learning priority needs and to give updates on the progress being made on their annual targets. There should be no hidden progress information and parents are always encouraged to ask for it. Parents can access progress information at any time – that’s why parent interview time is something that should not be missed!

The key concept of the Government’s plan to develop national achievement standards is that all children will have met clearly identified educational standards at points throughout their schooling journey.

The concerns being expressed by some writers on this issue are that a standards system does not account for a child’s learning readiness (starting point), nor recognise that children learn at a different pace, influenced by a range of social, emotional, physical and mental conditions within each individual child. In a worst case scenario, some children might continue to struggle to meet a specified ‘standard’, whilst gifted children could be “held back” by focusing on ‘standards’ that may or may not reflect their giftedness. What we do not want is a system that by its very nature condemns the slower learners (many of whom make excellent progress gains within their individual learning capacity), holds back the gifted and talented and sets schools up against each other.

Introducing league ladders where schools can be compared against other, despite their social economic circumstances, will surely encourage “teaching for the test”, instead of “teaching to learn”, as well as some creative and rather inconsistent moderation systems, as schools drive to attain standards that are designed to fit all rather than to fit the individual needs of the learner. It will be important that we are mindful of the concerns being expressed by a number of educational writers at this time.

Hopefully the intention of the new standards initiative is not about going back to the failures of past systems. However, there has been an increased demand for greater accountability in schools for achievement standards and teachers need to place greater emphasis on tracking progress to ensure that expected achievement levels are met. While it is acknowledged the expected level of achievement can only be measured against the individual’s learning capacity, there can be standard norms that teachers can use to assess against. Ideally, there should be an expected achievement target set for each individual which is based on the starting point and a range of pre-learning readiness tests that teachers can currently use to map out the child’s next learning steps.

Yes, the Government’s plan has caused considerable debate within the teaching profession lately. This is certainly a debate that needs everyone’s attention. National standards throughout education are important; however I think there needs to be more discussion about how these can be reported in a fair and non-judgmental way, without unduly discriminating against schools who may already be doing an excellent job within the scope of the children’s readiness to learn.

For parents it is important to get qualitative, honest and accurate feedback about their children’s learning at school and that the information given is valuable and relevant, can be understood and provides the confidence and reassurance on their child’s progress at school. Parents want to help their children learn, and quality feedback for and from teachers should enable teachers to do just that!

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