NATIONAL ASSESSMENT POLICY IN NEW ZEALAND: IMPROVING THE USE OF ACHIEVEMENT DATA IN SCHOOLS (PHI99384)

David Philips
Research Division
Ministry of Education
Wellington, New Zealand

Abstract

In 1998 the New Zealand Government released a public discussion document on national assessment, the Green Paper, Assessment for Success in Primary Schools. This paper traces the thinking which led to the development of this document, the issues raised in the consultations around the Green Paper and the 1600 submissions received, and the subsequent development by policy officials of a strategy for national assessment. This strategy, while taking into account the feedback from the primary education sector, aims to address the Government’s policy objective of providing schools, parents and Government with high quality ‘externally referenced’ information on student achievement. The rationale for the strategy is presented, focusing in particular on how ‘externally referenced’ data can inform schools’ assessment and monitoring practices, and the New Zealand approach towards national assessment is compared with international developments in national and/or statewide testing.

INTRODUCTION

In September 1999, the New Zealand Government released a document entitled Information for Better Learning outlining the policy decisions for national assessment in primary schools. This was preceded in May 1998 by a discussion document (Green Paper), Assessment for Success in Primary Schools, which presented various proposals for the development of new assessment tools as part of an initiative to provide teachers, parents and others with high quality information on students’ achievement.

In common with many countries, New Zealand has an outcomes-based curriculum, with the knowledge and skills students are expected to achieve in seven essential learning areas (Language and Languages, Mathematics, Science, Technology, The Arts, Social Sciences, and Health and Physical Wellbeing) described as achievement objectives. These are organised according to a progressive series of eight curriculum levels in national curriculum statements. These documents also include suggestions for teaching and learning, and
assessment activities. In addition, schools (boards, principals and teachers) are required to follow the National Education Guidelines which specify, for example, that the New Zealand curriculum has to be implemented and that student achievement should be regularly monitored. Every three to four years all schools are reviewed by the Education Review Office to determine how well they are meeting national requirements.

At the same time, assessment programmes have been implemented to assist in the provision of good quality information about student achievement which will allow schools to monitor how well their students are learning, and to identify where further teaching is required. These include nationally funded programmes such as School Entry Assessment, the Assessment Resource Banks and the National Education Monitoring Project. As well, schools have been using a range of assessment tools such as the standardised Progressive Achievement Tests, and diagnostic tools such as the Six Year Net (to assist with identification of strengths and weaknesses in different aspects of literacy), and so on.

However, as argued in the Green Paper, the Government considered that schools were receiving insufficient information about their students’ achievement compared with external reference points, whether the achievement of whole cohorts of students or against predefined benchmarks or standards, which would assist in improving teaching and learning, and therefore help to raise student achievement. After a period of consultation, the Government’s policy decisions were announced in a White Paper.

This paper provides an overview of the components of the recently announced national assessment policy and the linkages between them. It acknowledges some of the tensions which are perceived to exist between nationally mandated forms of assessment (including compulsory tests) and classroom-based assessment since, in common with many other countries, Government announcements about assessment policy in New Zealand have tended to generate considerable controversy. However, an integrated approach towards raising student achievement not only requires various types of information, whether from informal observations of students learning, or the results of well-designed national tests, but also sound analysis and interpretation of the results by everyone involved in education, and appropriate actions based on this analysis.

**ASSESSMENT DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1989**

Since 1989, and well before then, the role of assessment in supporting students’ learning has been analysed in a number of reports (e.g., *Assessment for Better Learning*) and recommendations have been made about possible changes (e.g., *Tomorrow’s Standards*).

*Assessment for Better Learning*, a public discussion document prepared under the Chairmanship of Sir James Stewart, commented on assessment issues and selected examples of assessment models being implemented in other countries (e.g., basic skills testing, minimum competency testing, and value added assessment), and presented some key assessment principles (e.g., "the interests of the students shall be paramount. Assessment shall be planned and implemented in ways which maximize benefits for students, while minimising any negative effects on them"; "Emphasis should be given to identifying and reporting educational progress and growth, rather than to comparisons of individuals or schools"). It also proposed revising and extending preservice and inservice education regarding assessment, supported achievement-based assessment (assessing students’ achievement against clear learning goals), schools developing a policy statement on assessment, that teachers develop specific learning goals for their students and rigorous collection of evidence on their achievement, folios of work, review points of student progress at the end of junior, middle and senior primary, and Standard Assessment Tasks. Several
proposals were also made about assessment in secondary schools. Responses to the
document, issued in mid-1989 were sought by December 1989.

The Government’s decisions were announced in August 1990 in *Tomorrow’s Standards: The
Report of the Ministerial Working Party on Assessment for Better Learning*. These included
the introduction of national monitoring, the development of item banks of assessment tasks
for primary and secondary teachers to use, and a skills test for all year 9 students (although
this recommendation has not yet been implemented). An Education Assessment Secretariat
within the Ministry of Education was established in late 1990 to ensure that these
recommendations were acted upon.

At the same time, following the release of a public discussion document on the New Zealand
curriculum and analysis of feedback from consultation, the New Zealand curriculum was
being reformed. *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum* was the first national
curriculum statement gazetted, in 1993, followed by *Science in the New Zealand
Curriculum* and *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*. Each of these documents contained
more explicit content on assessment than previous syllabuses or official curriculum
documents. The New Zealand curriculum currently being developed and implemented in
schools has a heightened emphasis on student achievement. This is part of the
Government’s strategy to raise levels of achievement to ensure that students will be better
prepared to take their place in the New Zealand economy and society, and is reflected in the

Also in 1993 *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, a statement of the government’s
policy intent for the curriculum, identified several kinds of assessment activity: school based
assessment, assessment at three key transition points (at school entry [generally age 5],
and between primary and intermediate [around age 11], and full primary/intermediate and
secondary school [around age 13]), records of school achievement, national monitoring of
standards, and assessment for qualifications which were considered to be integral to the
curriculum as the means by which students’ progress could be measured against the
defined learning outcomes in the national curriculum statements.

At the same time, curriculum and assessment requirements for schools were modified. The
National Education Guidelines originally promulgated at the end of 1989 were revised in
1993. They include the statements specifically concerned with monitoring aspects of student
achievement, for example, that

In order to provide a balanced programme, each Board through the principal and
staff, will be required to:

- implement learning programmes based upon the underlying principles, the stated
  essential learning areas and skills, and the national achievement objectives; and
- monitor student progress against the national achievement objectives; and
- analyse barriers to learning and achievement; and
- develop and implement strategies which address identified learning needs in order to
  overcome barriers to students’ learning; and
- assess student achievement, maintain individual records and report on student
  progress; and
- provide appropriate career information and guidance for all students, with a particular
  emphasis on specific career guidance for those students who, nearing the end of
  their schooling, are at risk of becoming unemployed.

However, many schools have found the interpretation of these requirements to be
problematic, particularly as the Education Review Office appears to have interpreted them in
a more precise way than many schools and, arguably, the Ministry of Education. A notice in the Education Gazette in 1995 attempted some clarification. The Ministry issued further advice on their interpretation in Governing and Managing New Zealand Schools after extensive consultation, but questions have continued to arise over matters of interpretation.

Two of the main national assessment programmes are the Assessment Resource Banks (ARBs) and the National Education Monitoring Project. The recommendation to begin the development of item banks of assessment resources was initially explored through a series of contracts with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER); the first contract, to investigate the feasibility of both large-scale and school-based assessment in Mathematics and Science for curriculum levels* 3 to 6 (i.e., years 5 [about age 9/10] to 10 [about age 14/15]) began in 1993, and subsequent contracts have allowed the development of an increasing number of assessment resources in Mathematics, Science and English which are accessible through the Internet provided that a password has been used.

The ARBs can be used to benchmark classroom assessments against the achievement objectives in the national curriculum statements. The Ministry continues to contract NZCER to develop banks of standardised assessment items in mathematics, science and English. Teachers can use the items when they choose, particularly with students in Years 6 to 9. The ARBs were well received by teachers taking part in the trials, although full-scale use of the banks has not yet occurred. The ARBs form the current foundation for assessment of students in Years 6 to 9. There are currently several hundred resources available for mathematics and science, and over one hundred for English. Use of the ARBs is not compulsory. However, it is likely that most schools will benefit from using them if they want to monitor their effectiveness in raising student achievement in relation to the New Zealand Curriculum. The website can also now be accessed through the Ministry of Education’s Online Resourcing Centre/Te Kete Ipurangi.

Around the same time, the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) was established, based at the University of Otago’s Educational Assessment Research Unit. The Government approved the implementation of the National Education Monitoring Project, accepting that, at a national level, policy makers need information on how effectively the school system is performing overall, both as a whole and for particular groups, and how this is changing over time and in what curriculum areas. This is the main mechanism currently used to obtain information on student achievement at a system level. It focuses on the achievement in different curriculum and skills areas of a sample of students in Years 4 and 8. The stated purpose of NEMP is to provide a national picture of trends in education achievement which may assist in policy development, resource allocation and review of the New Zealand curriculum. NEMP provides a comprehensive picture of achievement in particular learning areas, covering the whole curriculum over a four year cycle through use of sophisticated (and intensive) assessment procedures.

The first assessments of students’ achievements in years 4 and 8 were carried out in the latter half of 1995, and focused on science, art and information skills (graphs, tables, maps, charts and diagrams), followed in 1996 by reading and speaking, aspects of technology and music; in 1997 by mathematics, social studies and information skills (library and research), and in 1998 writing, listening and viewing and health and physical education.

Each year about 3,000 students in 260 schools are randomly selected to take part, with the support of the selected schools and the parents of selected students being sought. About 100 teachers are seconded from schools for six weeks (one week of training and five weeks of task administration) each year. Four approaches are used to assess students’ achievement: one-to-one, four students in a group, four students working on their own with the same pencil and paper tasks, and four students working independently around a series
of hands-on activities. Each student works for about 3 to 4 hours spread over 5 days, and some tasks are videotaped to allow detailed analysis. Each year three detailed reports are produced with the results, and a summary of key findings is developed with a large group of experienced educators as a Forum Comment. All schools and the Ministry of Education receive copies of the reports.

NEMP has been well-received by schools. It does not represent a major compliance burden for schools as it involves only a 3% sample of all students in the cohorts tested each year. Participating schools and teachers who administer and mark the tasks (released from their normal duties for several weeks) gain considerable benefits through enhanced understanding of assessment procedures. Over time, NEMP will assist in developing the assessment skills of a large number of teachers. Reports from the first four rounds (a whole cycle) of assessment have now been produced and distributed to schools, and the first assessments of the second cycle (i.e., focusing on the same areas assessed in the first year) have also been carried out.

In mid-1994, the Ministry of Education published Assessment: Policy to Practice which provided schools with advice on the development of school-based assessment policies which took into account national requirements. Also in 1994 the first round of Assessment for Better Learning professional development contracts began, aimed at assisting schools to improve their assessment practices.

Subsequently, the School Entry Assessment/Aro matawai Urunga-a-Kura (SEA/AKA) kit was developed, based on a combination of existing and new components. School Entry Assessment/Aro matawai Urunga-a-kura (SEA/AKA) tasks have been designed to provide teachers with an indication of how new entrants perform in basic literacy, oral language and numeracy. The Ministry is also trying to encourage schools to have more consistent recording and reporting practices. SEA/AKA materials also have recently been produced focusing on reading readiness, oral language and numeracy. These became available for teachers to use from July 1997. Professional development to assist new entrant teachers administer school entry assessment was also carried out. School entry assessment has three uses: to provide teachers with valuable diagnostic information about individual children to complement existing assessment information; to provide school management with information about their new entrant cohort for planning and resource allocation within the school; and to inform policy development and monitoring, and resource allocation.

School Entry Assessment information, which schools have been invited to send in to the Ministry, will help fill an information gap for the Ministry of Education on the skills and knowledge of the new entrant cohort on entry to school, to inform policy development and resource allocation. The Ministry of Education has also collated and analysed the assessment data from SEA/AKA at a national level (Gilmore, 1999). National baseline data are especially important to enable analysis of the achievement of sub-groups, e.g., to evaluate the progress of Maori students or identify the language competencies of children for whom English is a second language.

THE GREEN PAPER

On 7 May 1998 the Government published a Green Paper, Assessment for Success in Primary Schools, designed to promote discussion on Government proposals for an assessment package of new resources. The paper identified gaps in the kinds of information available on student achievement and proposed a package of four kinds of assessment activities to fill these gaps.
The paper noted that while teachers undertake a lot of assessment in the classroom, and use a wide variety of assessment activities and tools, there is a lack of information which can help teachers to gauge the relative effectiveness of their teaching programmes. This makes it difficult for boards, principals, teachers, and parents to identify weak areas and set appropriate targets for improvement.

The Green Paper identified that schools need better information on:

- national expectations of student achievement in relation to achievement objectives, which teachers can use to ‘benchmark’ or check their own professional judgements;
- how well their students are achieving compared with aggregated data for groups of similar students nationwide, which schools can use to evaluate the effectiveness of their programmes for specific groups of students within their schools;
- the achievement trends of subgroups of students that Government can use to monitor the effectiveness of policies.

In addition, many parents are interested in how their child’s achievement compares with children of a similar age and how well their child is learning in different parts of the curriculum. Government is interested in the effectiveness of its policies and needs sound information which will help in determining where policies need to be reviewed, such as allocation of resources to areas of high need.

The assessment Green Paper set out a proposal for an integrated national assessment package to strengthen and support the assessment activities currently undertaken by teachers, and to alleviate pressures arising from duplicating effort unnecessarily.

It was proposed to develop:

- additional diagnostic tests that teachers can use to provide detailed information on the learning needs of individual students in specific areas;
- national exemplars of student work that would set out assessment tasks with associated samples of student work, along with discussion of how a teacher marked that work and the conclusions the teacher drew about the child’s learning in relation to selected achievement objectives. The exemplars would help teachers to decide whether the judgements they are making about student achievement are consistent with national expectations;
- new externally referenced tests to enable teachers to identify how well their students are achieving compared with national and group levels of achievement. This information could help teachers to identify how effective their programmes are for specific groups of students. As proposed, the tests, which would be mandatory, would occur during Years 6 and 8, consist largely of multiple-choice questions, and focus on the essential learning areas of language and mathematics; and
- modifications to the National Education Monitoring Project to include in-depth ‘probe studies’ to focus on the achievement of specific groups within the school population. This information would enable Government to identify the achievement of groups of students in order to develop policy and monitor its effectiveness.

The main issue which the Green Paper sought to address was how best to fill the current lack of national information on student achievement at primary school which would allow a school to compare its students’ achievement with national and subgroup profiles of achievement for purposes of self-review. All the proposals in the Green Paper were designed with this information need in mind.
The package was developed to provide the teaching profession with the assessment information necessary to establish and monitor expectations and to help identify where improvements might be needed. Multiple copies of the Green Paper were sent to every school, with extra copies for interested parents. Each school also received booklets to send to all parents.

**Consultation**

There was wide-ranging consultation. The Associate Minister of Education and officials from the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office consulted extensively from early May to mid-August, meeting staff in universities and Colleges of Education, key assessment experts, principals, key Maori educators, teachers, Pacific Islands groups, and national education organisations.

Written submissions on the Green Paper closed on 7 August after a 3 month consultation period. About 1600 submissions were received. These were analysed by an independent research team headed by Dr Alison Gilmore at the University of Canterbury, and the Ministry of Education received a final report at the end of November 1998. Over 22,000 responses to the parent booklet were also received. Responses to the parent booklet were analysed by the Ministry of Education Research Section. A final report was produced in early September 1998.

In early August, the Minister and Associate Minister of Education announced that the timeframe for the introduction of national tests had been extended to 2000. The extension of the timeframe for the introduction of the proposed tests was to allow for:

- further discussion about the most appropriate test model for New Zealand schools;
- more time for government decisions about the tests to be implemented;
- more time to consult with assessment experts and practitioners about the design and implementation of a national testing system.

The Education Review Office (1998) also developed its own proposal for national testing, largely based on the notion that teachers would test children when they considered them to be ready to take the test. The Education Forum (1998) advocated testing at age 10. However, neither of these proposals gained much support.

**RESPONSES TO THE GREEN PAPER**

In general, there was widespread support for the proposals for new diagnostic tools, exemplars of student work and continued development of the Assessment Resource Banks and modifications to NEMP.

**New externally referenced tests**

The proposal for mandatory tests has been seen as inconsistent with the ‘self-managing schools’ philosophy, whereby school decide what resources and systems to use to fulfil the National Education Guidelines. However, the other side of that philosophy also includes the mandatory New Zealand curriculum which sets national learning outcomes, and the requirement for self-review and accountability to the community for providing effective education. The self-managing schools model provides flexibility for schools to meet national education goals in whatever ways they choose. In return for local decision making about implementation and operational issues, Government has set up tighter requirements for monitoring the outcomes of schooling, as part of schools’ accountability to government and the local community. Mandatory national tests are consistent with this approach.
Feedback on the proposal for national tests showed concern about the potential misuse of any test data. While many of those consulted support the underlying purpose of the proposed national tests to provide additional information for school self-review, concerns were raised about the detrimental effects of league tables creating high stakes testing, such as narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and parents placing undue emphasis on the results. The Ministry of Education agrees that if a test were to assume high stakes, the effects could be detrimental to teaching and learning. This is why Cabinet agreed that Government would not publish league tables. The challenge now is to work out ways to manage the stakes of whatever policy eventuates following the consultation, to ensure that it can effectively meet its purpose.

Some feedback suggests that teachers would prefer more comprehensive national assessments covering a broader range of learning objectives from the curriculum. The tests, as currently proposed, would include only selected language and mathematics achievement objectives which could be assessed using written tests. This includes multiple-choice, short answer and longer, open-ended responses which can assess some performance-based learning. However, there are obviously some performance-based achievement objectives which could not be assessed using pencil and paper tests. If non-written activities were to be included in the tests, teachers would be needed to carry out the assessment tasks in a standardised way, including observing, recording and evaluating the children's learning.

The advantage of testing a broader range of learning objectives using non-written activities is that teachers and principals would obtain a wide range of information about student achievement. This could provide them with more comprehensive indicators of the relative effectiveness of their teaching and learning programmes. One area which was frequently mentioned was oral language. However, a more comprehensive testing programme including an oral language component would involve more testing time for both teachers and students, and more work for teachers in carrying out and evaluating performance-based tasks.

Since any national test would only provide information on a sub-set of learning objectives, it is important to identify what learning can actually be assessed appropriately using standardised tests. Since the tests would only form one part of a much larger picture of student achievement, assessment information from all the other assessments a teacher undertakes would be needed to place the test data in context. It may, therefore, be more appropriate for other areas of learning to be assessed using other tools.

Some respondents suggested that whole cohort testing was unnecessary, and that sampling would be sufficient to provide schools with information on their students' achievement compared with national and group achievement. However, this option is flawed as it fails to acknowledge that sampling would mean that only a percentage of students in each school or a proportion of schools nationally would be assessed. In most schools, the number of students tested would be insufficient for that school to draw any conclusions about overall achievement of that cohort, or of groups within the cohort, and the majority of schools would receive no information about their students' achievements.

Submissions Analysis

The submissions were analysed by an independent researcher from the University of Canterbury. In general, the findings supported comments made at the consultation meetings held around New Zealand. About 25% of respondents either supported or partially supported the proposal for national externally referenced test. The most common reasons were their potential to provide 'benchmarks' against which the achievement of students of a similar age could be compared, and to provide parents with information on their child's achievement.
compared with the national picture. Some respondents were supportive provided that the results would not be published and used for between-school comparisons.

However, 73% of the respondents did not support externally referenced tests. Some claimed that there was no demonstrated need for additional information. Other reasons were reflected concerns that the tests, as proposed, would have negative effects on children, teachers and schools; have limited validity; foster misleading comparisons and competition among schools; be an inappropriate use of resources; and increase teachers' workload.

In addition, more than 22,000 responses to a parent pamphlet were analysed (Kerslake, 1999). While these represented only about 5% of the pamphlets distributed, the findings indicated that parents/caregivers valued the idea of receiving additional information on their child’s progress through primary school. About two-thirds of the respondents supported the notion of literacy and numeracy tests at Year 6 (Standard 4), and about 75% at Year 8 (Form 2).

In October 1998, the Government announced a Literacy and Numeracy Initiative, including the goal that ‘all children will achieve success in reading, writing and mathematics by the age of nine’. Teachers will need mechanisms to help them track student achievement towards this goal. Existing tools such as SEA/AKA, the Six-Year-Net and the Progressive Achievement Tests are unlikely to be sufficient on their own.

National Assessment Reference Group

In order to work towards a preferred option for national testing, the Ministry of Education established a National Assessment Reference Group in early November 1998. This group of about 20 people consisted of educators such as principals or senior staff and contractors involved with substantial assessment contracts and met three times before mid-February 1999. At the first two meetings of the Reference Group, continued opposition to the proposed national tests was expressed. However, a framework for national assessment was outlined as a possible way forward, which included schools using a wider range of national assessment tools (some of which still have to be developed) to assist in meeting more specific requirements for monitoring student achievement.

THE WHITE PAPER: INFORMATION FOR BETTER LEARNING

Subsequently, in September 1999, after further policy advice was provided to the Minister of Education and consultation took place with other Government agencies represented on the Cabinet Social Policy Committee, the Government’s decisions about national assessment policy were announced in Information for Better Learning. The text of the main policy announcements is attached as an appendix.

Information for Better Learning presents the Government’s decisions about national assessment policy. It provides a rationale for the provision of new assessment tools, including parallel development of tools for Maori medium education, for assisting teachers develop better skills for monitoring student achievement, and for providing high quality information for different groups (stakeholders).

The National Education Guidelines include a requirement for school boards to document how the National Education Guidelines are being implemented and to have a programme of self-review. In order to do this effectively, schools need policies and procedures which ensure that they are monitoring their own practice and able to meet external reporting requirements. Reliable information on student achievement within the school is a key element in this activity, but schools also require information which will allow them to monitor
trends in the achievement of their students compared with the national picture and various subgroups to inform their self-review. As a basis for self-review, schools require objective externally referenced information on their students’ achievement; hence the decisions to develop new assessment tools providing this kind of information as few assessment tools are currently available for use before year 11 (School Certificate) which provide this kind of information. However, in addition, not enough is yet known about effective ways of using a range of assessment data – hence the decision to conduct a pilot which not only focuses on the use of new tests of literacy and numeracy but also on how the information is used in addition to what is already available to schools.

Implementing the new assessment decisions

Diagnostic tools

Little systematic information is available about what diagnostic assessment tools are currently used in schools, nor the criteria they satisfy, nor the gaps in existing provision of tools. The Green Paper submissions analysis included an appendix listing a large number of assessment tools used by schools, but further analysis is required to identify how commonly used these tools are, what information they provide to assist teachers and whether they meet appropriate quality standards.

One of the decisions in Information for Better Learning was that a comprehensive study would be carried out of the diagnostic tools available in literacy and numeracy during the first four years of schooling, and the commissioning of the development, over three years, in English and Maori, of complementary new diagnostic tools. The recommendations in the report of the Literacy Taskforce included “the development of further externally referenced assessment tools, so that they are available to assess progress and achievement in literacy in each of the first four years of instruction”, and that “schools be required to use externally referenced tools on an annual basis, and that this data be sampled to monitor the system’s progress towards the goal.”

The purpose of the study which would provide a stocktake and/or evaluation of existing diagnostic tools is to:

- identify what tools are most frequently used in schools in the first four to five years of instruction (i.e., to about the end of Year 5 or Standard 3) to assess students’ reading, writing and mathematics’ skills/knowledge;
- evaluate the diagnostic information provided by the tools, and the extent to which teachers are provided with appropriate strategies to address any specific weaknesses identified;
- evaluate whether each tool provides information which helps schools/teachers to establish how well students are learning reading, writing and mathematics (e.g., are statistics included on the achievement of a nationally representative sample of children?); and
- to identify where the most significant gaps appear to be in terms of tools for diagnosing students’ reading, writing and mathematics’ skills/knowledge.

The stocktake/evaluation will also help to inform recommendations about the development of new diagnostic tools (or adaptations of existing tools) which will assist in addressing the Government’s decision to develop new diagnostic tools.
Exemplars

The White Paper also announced the development of publications of exemplars for each essential learning area. These are intended to provide clear examples of expected levels of student achievement in relation to achievement objectives. Each exemplar will be linked to relevant achievement objectives, a curriculum level, and a specified context. The features of the student’s work which indicate achievement at the stated level will be described.

A review was commissioned from Peddie et al (1999) as part of background work to assist Ministry officials and contracted personnel develop exemplars of student work as part of the national assessment policy. It examined how other systems, national and federal, have developed exemplar information, i.e., assessed and graded samples of student work, accompanied by annotations or a form of scoring rubric, used to promote better learning by indicating the curriculum levels at which students are working, most particularly the nature of the documents and other materials supporting the curriculum statements, and how this information has been used to inform judgements about students’ achievement against the stated achievement levels in the outcomes-based curricula.

Information discussed in the review was located from a variety of online library databases, websites and academic journals, and international contacts. It focused mainly on exemplar developments in England/Wales, Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand. The review identified that while many national and federal systems use exemplars, very little research appears to have been carried out on their use; exemplars are a potentially promising way of advancing teachers’ professional understanding of aspects of standards-based assessment, and of helping to ensure consistency of judgement nationwide; teachers should be involved in developing exemplar materials to help ensure effective use; exemplars developed by the Ministry of Education should include: a clear statement of the task and context; samples of authentic student work; statement of the curriculum level achieved; indication of why the curriculum level was achieved; and a commentary identifying the features defining the curriculum level achieved; and that further research should be carried out on teachers’ needs for exemplars and how teachers use exemplars.

The report will help to inform future work on the development of exemplars. The Curriculum Division has already convened a working group for two days in July 1999 to consider the use of exemplars. The findings in the interim research report were considered by this group.

In addition, apart from continuing the development of the Assessment Resource Banks (ARBs) for a further two years, an independent evaluation of school-based uses of the ARBs is being carried out. This will provide further information about the ways schools access the ARBs and use the information, and help to identify areas where possible improvements could be made.

National Education Monitoring Project

The second cycle of NEMP, when the curriculum areas assessed in the first round are re-assessed, began in 1999. There are some changes compared with the first cycle. Agreement has been reached with Te Runanga Nui O Nga Kura Kaupapa that students in Maori immersion settings (these include kura kaupapa Maori as well as students in immersion classrooms within a school where English is the main language of instruction) will be assessed at Year 8 only, for the foreseeable future, and not at Year 4. Additional samples have been drawn to ensure a greater number of Pacific students take part in NEMP, so that results for Pacific students can be reported with more confidence.
In addition, further funding of $275,000 per annum for four years (over the second NEMP cycle) has been made available for the conduct of probe studies. These studies will allow additional mining of the data from the annual assessments, as well as exploration of alternative ways of presenting tasks. It is intended that these will be in three categories, ranging from small studies chosen by the NEMP directors through to studies of $15,000 or more which will be approved by an advisory committee. These will be advertised in January 2000, and on a regular basis thereafter.

New ‘externally referenced’ tests

The Ministry intends to let contracts for the conduct of the pilot of new ‘externally referenced tests’. It is intended that the pilot will last for two years. This will involve a contract for the development of new tests of literacy and numeracy for students in Years 5 and 7, in English and Maori. The agency carrying out the development of the tests will need a sound infrastructure and experience in large-scale test development, skills in statistical analysis, reporting of results and administration. A contract will also need to be let for the professional development component of the pilot, whereby participating schools will receive support in the analysis and interpretation of student achievement data, one group of schools for their use of existing assessment tools, the other for the use of information from the new tests as well as existing tools. There will also be an independent evaluation of the pilot, which will help to inform Government’s decision about the future of the new tests.

Other initiatives

An evaluation of the Assessment for Better Learning professional development programmes is also planned, as these have now been running for six years, and in 2000 a series of regional seminars on assessment will take place.

CONCLUSION

The refinements to national assessment policy announced in the White Paper do not owe their origin to any conscious borrowing of policies or ideas adopted in other countries. The refinements to existing tools acknowledge their continuing value and the need to improve the quality and comprehensiveness of information they provide. The development of exemplars can be seen as a natural extension of an outcomes-based curriculum. The proposed pilot of new tests of literacy and numeracy could be interpreted as the precursor to full-scale implementation of national testing, but at this stage this outcome is not a foregone conclusion. Compared with other countries where statewide testing (such as Australia) or national testing have been implemented, along with their attendant controversies (Daugherty, 1995), in some respects New Zealand educators have a unique opportunity with the pilot to evaluate the quality of the information provided by the new tests and ways of evaluating the usefulness of the information for informing decisions about teaching and learning, and school self-review.

The debate about the relative merits of classroom-based or formative assessment (e.g., Black and Wiliam, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 1999; James and Gipps, 1998) and assessment of whole cohorts of students at the same time on the same tasks ignores the contribution that different kinds of good quality information on student achievement can make to improved learning. The pilot to be implemented in 10% of New Zealand primary schools will provide evidence which has been lacking in other countries which have taken a different approach towards the implementation of national assessment policy.
REFERENCES


Kerslake, Jacqui (1999) Assessment for Success in New Zealand Primary Schools: Parents’/caregivers’ views on aspects of monitoring their children’s achievement which could impinge upon proposed assessment initiatives for primary schools, Research Division: Ministry of Education.


APPENDIX: POLICY DECISIONS ANNOUNCED IN INFORMATION FOR BETTER LEARNING

The following text summarises the policy decisions announced in *Information for Better Learning*:

The Government has decided to proceed with developing more robust and comprehensive assessment tools linked to the New Zealand curriculum in the key areas discussed in the Green Paper. These assessment tools will be available to assist with identifying problems early, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and with monitoring the effectiveness of teaching programmes. The package provides for the parallel development of tools for Maori medium education.

This initiative will: increase the number of quality assessment tools available to teachers; help to define more clearly for teachers and parents expectations about the standard of work achieved by students; assist teachers to monitor students’ literacy and numeracy learning more effectively to ensure early intervention where required; provide a richer basis for reporting to parents on their child(ren)’s strengths and weaknesses; give schools better information on the achievement of Maori students, to assist in better meeting their specific learning needs.

How these resources can be used:

- Teachers, principals and boards will receive assistance to develop their skills in data analysis and interpretation. The information and analysis will help their strategic decision-making about ways of raising student achievement, allocating resources and working out development needs;
- Parents will receive objective information on the educational progress being made by their child(ren). This information will help them to place their child(ren)’s achievement in relation to the national picture, provide one indicator of the quality of education at their school, and give them better information to help them to support child(ren)’s learning;
- Maori parents and communities will receive more and better information about the progress of their children, in whatever educational model they choose. A coordinated strategy is needed to develop assessment activities for use in Maori medium settings;
- Government will be able to receive good quality information to monitor students’ learning across the whole primary system, provide a better information base for intervention in schools, monitor effectiveness in reducing achievement gaps, and refine policies aimed at raising student achievement.

The package is made up of four components: diagnostic tools; exemplars; extensions to NEMP; a pilot of externally referenced tests of literacy and numeracy.

*Diagnostic tools*

Government will undertake a comprehensive study of the range of diagnostic tools available in literacy and numeracy during the first four years of schooling and will, over the next three years, commission the development, in English and Maori, of complementary new diagnostic tools. These new diagnostic tools will provide additional information for teachers, principals, parents and
schools on the extent to which individual learners are progressing in meeting the Government’s literacy and numeracy goals. A key purpose of these activities is to provide teachers with tools which allow them to diagnose particular strengths and weaknesses in student development in literacy and numeracy, and provide them with insights into how weaknesses may be addressed.

**Maori language proficiency**

Maori language proficiency tests will be developed to assist teachers in Maori medium education to diagnose their pupils’ level of Maori language acquisition. Initial development of a Maori language proficiency test for students in Maori medium settings at year 5 has been undertaken. A further proficiency test will be developed for use with year 9 students. These tests will allow the assessment of Maori language proficiency in oracy and literacy. They will be of particular use with pupils learning in Maori medium or bilingual education programmes. The year 5 tool will become available for use in 2000.

**Exemplars**

The Government will develop exemplars in both English and Maori at levels 1 – 5 of the curriculum in each of the essential learning areas. These exemplars will be examples of real pieces of work produced by students which meet the standards of a particular achievement objective. The exemplar will therefore illustrate or exemplify the features which a teacher, parent and in some cases a student could point to as meeting the achievement objective. The development of exemplars will require a coordinated strategy over several years. New technologies will be used to make the widest possible range of material available. As these technologies develop (and increasing bandwidth becomes available), exemplars will be able to provide increasingly rich profiles of the student work being assessed. It is proposed that the exemplars be developed in three phases. This will allow time for the gazetting of the national curriculum statements, and for exploration of the development of exemplars which require representation in a non-written form.

**Exemplars of assessment activities**

The current contract for the development of the Assessment Resource Banks has been extended for a further two years from 1 July 1999 until 30 June 2001. In particular, this will entail on-going development of resources in English, Mathematics and Science. A key priority is to develop items to support teachers and schools working in Maori medium education. Further information is needed on how schools use the ARBs. A contract has been let for an independent evaluation of the ARBs. It will focus on their use by schools, and examine ways of improving the technology by which teachers access these resources.

**Modifications to the National Education Monitoring Project**

From 1999, the NEMP project will be expanded to include assessment in Maori for students in Maori medium education at year 8. At present, the 3% sample is too small to provide detailed information on the performance of Pacific students in New Zealand schools, although the general picture has caused some concern. Oversampling of Pacific students in the next cycle will
allow the information relating to this group to be analysed in greater detail. Probe studies will be funded to explore the data with respect to particular issues of interest. For example, the 1998 assessment of writing has resulted in a rich database of student writing in varied styles and genre. Detailed study of aspects of this database may provide insights into how children develop the ability to express themselves in differing ways. The National Education Monitoring Project has to date provided national baseline data on student achievement in New Zealand. With the commencement of the second cycle, it will begin to provide evidence of trends in the achievement of pupils in years 4 and 8. Government intends that the National Education Monitoring Project be further strengthened by its expansion into Maori medium education, and through adding new probe studies and increased sampling of Pacific students. No other changes are contemplated.

Externally referenced tests

Government will implement a pilot of externally referenced tests of literacy and numeracy over two years. The chief purpose of the pilot is to evaluate how a 10% representative sample of schools uses different types of externally referenced data with year 5 and year 7 students. The pilot will look at how externally referenced tests are used to: monitor student learning; inform decision making with respect to teaching programmes; improve the consistency and effectiveness of reporting to parents using nationally comparable information.

The pilot will involve two groups: half using new tests of literacy and numeracy (plus any other data already being gathered), and half using any existing tools. All schools in the pilot will receive support in analysing assessment data as part of an enhanced professional development model. Benefits of the pilot include the opportunity to evaluate the usefulness of the information and how the data can be used to improve monitoring of and reporting to parents on student achievement. The pilot will also provide examples of good practice for schools in meeting the assessment and reporting requirements of the National Administration Guidelines. It will assist in refining the policy detail, including the best possible design of the tests and effective ways of using and presenting the information. The pilot will also provide a more informed basis for deciding on the future role of these tests, by showing how the information could be used to help raise student achievement and close achievement gaps. As the pilot will take place in a research environment, the individual school results will be kept confidential to the individual school and the researchers. Schools not in the pilot will also be able to use the new tests. These schools will receive the test papers, and a report with the aggregated results of the pilot schools.

Key features of the new tests are that they will be: newly developed each year; in literacy and numeracy, based on achievement objectives in the New Zealand curriculum; developed in parallel in English and Maori, taking into account issues of equivalence of curriculum coverage. The Green Paper stated that the tests should be for year 6 and 8 students. Consultation identified the usefulness of moving the tests to years 5 and 7 so that schools could make maximum use of the resulting information with their students. In addition, assessment at year 5 will assist with monitoring of the literacy/numeracy initiative.
A research team will conduct a formal evaluation focusing on the quality of the test data, and how schools use it to inform teaching and learning and reporting to parents. This will provide Government with information to help decide whether the use of the new tests should become voluntary or compulsory. The evaluation focus will include changes in decision-making practices about teaching programmes as a result of teachers using the test data. It will also record the decision-making practices of principals and boards of trustees as a result of having externally referenced data to inform their decision-making.