



Encouraging Success: Confronting Failure

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University of Auckland Education Campus, Epsom

John Key MP

NATIONAL PARTY LEADER



Dr John Langley, Dr Liz McKinley, principals, teachers and future teachers, those who are passionate about education; thank you all for coming here today.

I can't exaggerate the importance of education enough, both for individual students and for the future of New Zealand.

To make this country great we have to ensure we get the best out of the 11 or so years every young New Zealander spends at school.

Without a good education I know I wouldn't be where I am today.

I was lucky to have some excellent teachers, including Robin Duff, who is now President of the PPTA. So here's a very public thank you to Mr Duff and all the other teachers who backed me to set my sights high.

I want to congratulate all the New Zealanders who put their best efforts, and their hearts, into our education system. We should be proud to have some of the world's best teachers, best schools and best researchers.

I'd also like to thank the people here today who are embarking on a career in teaching. You have the power to shape the New Zealanders of tomorrow. That is an extraordinary responsibility.

Your teaching will feed the minds, and expand the horizons, of hundreds of Kiwi kids. I urge you to have high aspirations for what you, your pupils and your country can achieve.

No matter where they live, or what their parents do, or what colour their skin is, good schooling gives our kids choices, and puts rungs on the ladder of opportunity. Poor schooling removes those choices.

By and large, kids only get one shot at an education. It is therefore vitally important that we – and they – get it right.

National is committed to getting it right.

Before this speech is finished I will have issued a challenge to the Prime Minister; talked about a school that's impressed me and outlined a cornerstone of National's education policy.

To give you all an idea of where I am headed, here is a question for you:

How many Kiwi kids left primary school last year without reaching the minimum expected standard in reading, writing or maths?

While you ponder that question, I want to outline what this speech is not about: it is not about NCEA.

New Zealanders deserve a national qualification system that is robust, credible and most importantly fair. Under Labour, the NCEA is not living up to those tests.

In a future speech I will outline the specific changes I think we need to make to NCEA. But today is not the day for that.

Today I want to say this – when it comes to education this Government is stuck in a rut.

In the words of the NZEI, we need a sense of urgency. The status quo in education is no longer appropriate for New Zealand's future social and economic well-being.

Why? Because although a lot of young New Zealanders do very well at school, there is a tail of kids who are slipping behind and leaving without even the most basic skills.

The Education Review Office (ERO) said in its 2005 annual report that New Zealand's best students perform with the best in other countries but there is a group at the bottom, as large as one in five kids, who are currently not succeeding in our education system.

One in five students is about 150,000 kids. It's a staggering number – the equivalent of all the kids in Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch combined.

Come secondary school, more than half of Maori boys are failing to achieve even NCEA Level One. Around one in four students are failing basic NCEA literacy standards. At some schools as many as two out of three kids don't earn a qualification before they leave.

There's no doubt that some of those kids are part of the underclass I spoke of in Burnside earlier this year.

Let me tell you a story that brought this all home to me.

On a recent visit to Ruatoria I spoke to a committed and enthusiastic tutor from Tairāwhiti Polytechnic.

She said, "Look John we're geared up to teach young people skills in mechanics and carpentry and other skills that businesses are crying out for. But I'm forced to turn away huge numbers of applicants.

"We've got room to take them and they're super-keen, but they just can't read, write or do maths well enough to keep up with basic course requirements."

I was shocked. The future of these young people is on hold because of a lack of basic skills – skills they should have picked up in primary school.

We have to blow the whistle on educational failure well before kids leave school.

I'll tell you a couple of other things ERO said in its report about failing students.

First of all it said that the area where the school system is least effective is in identifying these students.

That finding is just staggering – the school system is not identifying these students.

Now, you would have thought that was happening already: that schools were testing kids,

seeing whether they had developed the skills appropriate to their age or year level, and setting off alarm bells if they weren't.

But obviously a lot of schools are not doing this.

The second thing ERO said about this group of failing students was that parents, whānau and the community are least likely to be involved in the education of this group.

Clearly, some kids are being let down by their parents. There are parents who need to be more actively involved – or even just interested – in their children's education.

But schools also need to take responsibility for the quality of their communication with parents.

Yes, parents get school reports and are invited to parent-teacher interviews. But how meaningful is the information they receive?

The reality is most primary school reports don't include any objective achievement information.

Professor Hattie did some really interesting research into this, by studying reports from more than 150 schools.

He found that 98% of students got positive comments about their achievement, were putting in effort and were described, for example, as "a pleasure to teach" or "a joy to have in my class".

Now if you believe these reports, only two percent of kids are doing badly at school. We know that's not true.

School reports shouldn't read like real estate ads. If your child can't read you want to know that – not whether they're a joy to have in the class.

So what is National going to do?

Our policies will be guided by some basic principles.

First, we are not prepared to accept that some kids can't learn.

I don't think a child's home circumstances – be they from a poor family, a single-parent family or any other sort of family – should determine our expectations of how they will do at school.

The Maori Party talk about a 'deficit mentality' that permeates our education system. This is an expectation that some kids, particularly Maori kids, will fail.

I don't want that mentality to continue.

I want us to be aspirational. I have high expectations for every child and I expect schools and teachers and students to share those expectations.

There is also a need to quantify those expectations.

This is the really important point. We say we want all kids to do well, but what does doing well mean? And according to who?

How do we know when kids aren't doing well? We won't know, unless we measure what they are doing.

What is more, we need to measure what they are doing on a consistent scale across students, across schools and across the country.

Second, we think parents have a right to be fully informed about their child's attainment.

I've talked to far too many parents who are baffled about how their child is actually doing at school.

I want to put parents back in the education loop.

Schools should do everything they can to communicate with and involve parents.

Third, we have to tackle underachievement as early as possible in our school system.

Kids who are struggling at school have most likely been struggling for some time. It doesn't come suddenly out of the blue.

If a Year One kid is finding it hard learning how to read, then we need to deal with it then, not leave the problem for later years. By then it will have compounded.

If we don't ensure that kids master the basics of reading, writing and maths at primary school, then we are robbing them of future opportunities.

Finally, we don't believe we'll improve the education system simply by throwing money at it.

If money was the answer, we would have solved most of our education problems in the last few years.

If money was the answer, then we would not be seeing, for example, that over the last four years the average eight-year-old has got worse at basic maths.

No amount of ill-directed money will make a kid learn.

Don't get me wrong. I have no intention to rob our schools of the cash they need. But it's an insult to reduce the issues of education to a who-will-fund-more contest.

I told you a bad news story before; now let me tell you a good one.

I had the pleasure last month of visiting Glen Taylor School in Glen Innes.

ERO inspectors used to be seriously concerned about this school. They found that students were struggling with reading, writing and basic maths.

In 2004 Lin Avery was appointed Principal and she is turning the school around.

Lin has the same bottom line that I do; all children are capable of learning.

Her goal is for Glen Taylor kids to be achieving at the same level, on average, as kids anywhere else in the country.

She uses a range of assessment tests to monitor where pupils are at and to set targets for them. These tests enable the school to build a picture of where their students sit compared to other Kiwi kids.

The information from these tests is shared with the students and it's shared with their parents. It allows the Principal, the Board and the school community to set clear goals and identify where more support and effort is needed.

The results speak for themselves.

Every year since Lin became Principal the achievement of Glen Taylor kids has advanced in leaps and bounds.

Don't just take her word for it – she has quantitative test results to prove it.

That visit convinced me that all New Zealand students deserve the Glen Taylor treatment.

Last Friday, two major reports – from ERO and the NZCER - confirmed what people in this audience will already know. Most teachers do a lot of testing and most schools collect up this data.

I'm pleased that most teachers use assessment for learning and use it to direct what they do in the classroom.

But I was shocked to hear that more than half of primary schools are not using this information to improve overall student achievement.

Not only that, but most schools are not reporting kids' achievement information to their parents.

What's the point in doing all this testing if it's not improving achievement and parents don't even know about it?

There's no reason in teachers collecting piles of data if their schools can't use the information to measure progress towards clear targets.

Teachers must have a reliable measure for identifying failure in the critical areas of reading, writing and maths. Once teachers have identified failure schools must have a plan for tackling it.

So today I am announcing a National Party policy which will introduce three key requirements for all primary schools: national standards, effective school-wide assessment and upfront reporting to parents.

Clear National Standards

- Firstly, we will set national standards in reading, writing and maths. The national standards will describe the things all kids should be able to do by a particular age or year at school. They will be defined by benchmarks in a range of tests.

Schools already have access to lots of good testing tools and we want this to continue.

The difference is that National wants tests to include benchmarks that give teachers shared definitions of what all kids should be achieving.

National standards will give teachers from Otara to Epsom a common language to describe the progress of their students.

Most kids will reach the benchmarks easily.

But if you're missing the benchmarks that will send a loud signal that you're off-track.

And if you're off-track, your parents ought to know, and your school and community ought to be doing something about it.

Only with national standards will we know exactly which kids are at risk of becoming a permanent part of the 'tail'.

Effective Assessment

- Secondly, we will require all primary schools to use assessment programmes that compare the progress of their students with other students right across the country.

The reports I discussed earlier indicate that many schools are already doing this by using tools like asTTle and PATs.

Teachers like these tests because they can use them to back up their own professional judgments.

Instead of saying, "Johnny is trying hard in maths", they can use these tests to say things like "Johnny performed below the national norm in this maths test, so that's where he needs help".

Principals can then use the tests to set clear, measurable school-wide goals that are understood by teachers. That's what Lin Avery does at Glen Taylor.

At this point, I need to stress here two very important things.

One, the Government won't choose which test is best for your school or your child.

There are already a range of nationally comparable tests for kids of all ages. Good schools already use them and under this policy they will continue to do so.

This policy simply ensures that all schools do what the good schools are already doing.

Right now the Government does not require this to happen.

Two, this is not “School C for six year olds” as some people put it. It is not anything close to this.

There will be no national exams for primary school kids. That is not our policy and it is not on our agenda.

Upfront reporting

- Finally, we will give parents the right to see all assessment information, and to receive regular reports about their child’s progress towards national standards. We will also require schools to report each year on the whole school’s performance against national standards.

Parents shouldn’t be served up school reports containing faint and meaningless praise.

We want them to get straight answers to straight questions like: is my child reading, writing and doing maths at the expected level?

We want parents to know that the ‘expected level’ is the same at their child’s school as it is at other schools in New Zealand.

When you turn up to your child’s school, the teacher should be able to pull out some charts, show you how your child is doing, how they have progressed throughout the year and how they are performing against the national standards.

Many schools are already doing this and they are to be applauded. This policy is aimed at the 49% of schools that ERO says are not doing it.

Again, the current Government does not require this to happen.

So these three things - clear national standards, effective assessment and upfront reporting - make up the policy I am announcing today.

To bring this policy to fruition we are going to need the co-operation of teachers, education experts and parents.

I’m open to the advice you have to offer about how we set the national standards benchmarks, which assessment systems schools should choose from, and which reporting frameworks are best.

But I won’t negotiate on the need for these measures.

I know schools don’t like being told what to do.

I know that many schools are already doing a great job of assessment, without being told what to do.

But the fact is, too many primary schools don’t have an effective school-wide approach to

assessment and too many schools don't give good assessment information to parents.

I'm confident that it's within the grasp of all schools to implement robust, benchmarked assessment and reporting systems.

So I say today to all those involved in the education system; let's get together and make this work. We want the same things and we agree that quality teaching is underpinned by quality assessment.

I am open to your ideas and I want to work with the people who know our education system best and who put their best into it.

There's going to be more to National's education policy than the bottom-lines I laid out today. But let me be very clear; this policy forms the cornerstone of what I want to do in education.

Once schools are reliably identifying and reporting failure, all number of other improvements are possible.

Over the coming months, together with my education spokeswoman Katherine Rich, I will be detailing more policy to improve our education system.

But before I end today I want to pose an important challenge to the Prime Minister:

Helen Clark doesn't generally have that much to say about education.

But today I want her to tell me whether she agrees that in order to help the kids who are failing in our school system, we need to know who they are.

I want her to answer the question I posed at the beginning of my speech:

How many Kiwi kids left primary school last year without reaching the minimum expected standard in reading, writing or maths?

That seems like a pretty basic question to me. I think it's fair enough to expect an answer to it. The thing is though; Helen Clark can't answer it.

That's because in 2007 our country hasn't even decided what the minimum national standards are - let alone gone about finding the kids who don't meet them.

How can we expect to help the failing kids if schools don't even know who they are?

How can parents get any useful information about their child's progress if the school doesn't report it?

If Helen Clark wants to do something about these problems then I have a solution for her:

Sitting on Parliament's Order Paper right now is a very sensible bill, the Education (National Standards of Literacy and Numeracy) Amendment Bill.

The purpose of that Bill, which is under Katherine Rich's name, is to allow the Minister of

Education to publish agreed national standards in literacy and numeracy, and to require schools to provide information about the progress of students in relation to those standards.

In other words, just what I have been talking about.

Passing that bill would be a good first step to improving our education system. I challenge Helen Clark to put her 49 votes behind it.

I sincerely hope that National's support of the bill doesn't put her off.

After all, the future of our great country is at stake. We shouldn't let petty politics get in the way.

With that challenge firmly made, let me ask you once more to join me in a mission to make our education system great. Together we can do amazing things.

Thank you.