

**OPINION: Dominion Post, Monday 30 November 2009**

The Government's plan to introduce national standards is under fire from educational experts, but **Education Minister Anne Tolley** is certain they are what New Zealand needs and is offering no concessions.

I think parents have had enough of all the scaremongering. It's time to sort out the facts from the fiction about national standards.

In the last election campaign, the National Party promised to address the shocking statistic that almost one in five young New Zealanders leave school without the reading, writing and maths skills they need to have a chance of success in life.

I am making sure we deliver on that promise. Yes, our best pupils are among the best in the world. But international studies show that the gap between our highest and lowest performing pupils is getting wider. In the past two decades, while other countries have significantly raised the reading ability of their 10-year-olds, there has been no marked improvement in the achievement of our young readers.

So if we keep on doing what we're doing at the moment, it's likely things will stay the same, and almost 20 per cent of young New Zealanders will be robbed of a bright future.

I don't intend to let that happen. We need to make changes now, and that's why national standards will be introduced in primary and intermediate schools next year.

First, we need to find out which kids need help, and how much help they need.

Would you believe, that as education minister I can tell you how many toilets a school has, but I can't tell you how well pupils are achieving in reading, writing or maths at that school?

It's clear we need national standards. They have nothing to do with labelling children as failures, as some have claimed. They are all about identifying those youngsters who need extra help in literacy and numeracy and making sure they get the support they need to make progress. The Government is making an additional \$36 million available for this.

These children can't be left to fail any longer. Maybe the critics would rather we continue to turn a blind eye, to spare any hurt feelings? I have news for them. It hurts pupils and families when we deny them an education and when we deny them the opportunities to live full and successful lives. This problem is not going away. To do nothing would be scandalous.

National standards are simply signposts that will describe what children should be able to achieve and by when. From next year teachers will assess their progress against the standards.

Twice a year parents will receive plain- English Plunket-style reports on their child's progress, as well as advice on how they can support their youngster's learning.

It's no surprise then that the New Zealand School Trustees Association, which represents the boards made up of parents and community members, is a strong supporter of national standards and can see the benefits they will bring to pupils.

And despite what some would have you believe, I know many, many teachers and principals can see the potential if national standards are implemented properly.

Make no mistake, teachers and their professional judgment are vital if we are to succeed.

But those who have been against national standards from the start, continue to recycle the same old misinformation.

They say that similar schemes have not worked overseas. That is exactly why we are not introducing the kind of national testing seen in the United States and England. National standards are very different and the rest of the world is looking to New Zealand and our unique approach to increasing pupil achievement.

There have been hysterical claims that we are no longer investing in subjects such as art and the sciences. Wrong again. Teachers asked for professional development next year to support them with the teaching of literacy and numeracy and the introduction of national standards. We are delivering this to them, just as they asked.

Or how about schools being identified as failing and being forced to close? Complete nonsense. Additional funding will be made available to those schools that need support.

Results being used to give performance pay to teachers? Rubbish.

League tables? Never on the agenda, but we can't stop parents, school boards and the ministry getting the information they need on pupils' progress.

As the introduction of the standards draws near, we can expect more threats from unions and naysayers. But this Government will continue to put children first.

There will be no concessions, there will be no trial period. Parents want national standards and they are going to get them from next year. There will be constant evaluation, the tenders are just being let, and if adjustments need to be made, then that will happen.

Those who have spoken out against the standards will continue to do so. By all means, have your say. But please get your facts straight and stop trying to mislead parents. Let's get on with doing the very best we can for New Zealand's children.