

OPINION:



Annette Hill

Annette Hill is the principal of Wharenui School, Christchurch

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As a member of the Literacy Task Force last year, my concerns were confirmed regarding the impact of the National Administrative Guidelines (NAGs) on teaching and learning in the early years of schooling. Thus, it was highly exciting to learn that the NAGs were to be changed and that this would allow primary schools to focus assessment on children’s learning in Literacy and Numeracy in the first four years of their schooling.

At the critical stage when children are beginning their formal education they, and their parents, have high expectations for their learning – we all know about going to school to learn to read and write – so let us keep it simple, and allow children to be successful and to have the opportunity to develop confidence, enthusiasm and a love of learning. It is well known that children enter primary school with a wide range of preschool skills and experiences. Incredibly, most of them do learn the basics of reading, writing, and speaking the language of the dominant culture, together with the basics of mathematics.

Assessment is at the heart of teaching and learning. I strongly support the notion that teaching and learning must be underpinned by assessment that is relevant to the learning needs of the child. Teachers need to be confident that the assessments they carry out relate first and foremost to their teaching and the learning needs of each child; then they can attend to the requirements of reporting to parents and the Board of Trustees.

Among the many roles expected of a primary school, the one I consider most critical is that of ensuring that everything possible is done to help each child develop a strong foundation on which to build further learning. Teachers perform this role using sound judgements and teaching practices. It does not happen through some mysterious process of osmosis. As principal of a low decile, multicultural, inner city school I value the commitment of teachers to ensuring that the decisions they make about how best to meet children’s learning needs are based on data collected through thoughtful and caring assessment.

I do not dispute the need to assess learning across all areas of the curriculum but the recent changes, which provide greater focus on literacy and numeracy in the early school years, I believe, give teachers greater direction for establishing strong foundations for further learning. Timetables and planning will show that the core curriculum has assumed its rightful place as the educational framework on which future learning will be structured. I consider that the key role of the primary school in laying the foundation in these important areas is affirmed.