

NCEA results – more questions than answers *(Published in the Wairarapa Times Age, March 22nd 2018)*

This week, finalised NCEA results for last year are made public to schools and communities. Paul Green, Makoura College principal, recommends questions we should be asking about the bigger picture.

‘Which NCEA results?’ is the first question. NZQA, the qualifications authority, issues two sets of results: participation-based and roll-based. Schools are invited to choose which results suit the story they want to tell their community.

The roll-based method of calculating results is to divide the number of students on the school-roll by the number of students who have ‘passed’ or achieved the required credits total. The participation-based method is the number of students who have passed individual unit or achievement standards divided by the number of students entered for those standards.

Each method can present a different picture from the same results. For example, you have a school of 100 Year 11 students and 20 of those students are, for whatever reason, not sitting NCEA Level One. Using the participation-based method, if 60 of those students passed – the net participation-based pass rate for the school is 75% (60 out of 80 entered). The roll-based pass rate, however, is only 60% (60 out of 100 students in the year group).

Overall, on a national level, participation-based pass rates are around 11 percent higher than roll-based results at Levels One and Two, and 17 percent higher at Level Three – leading many to claim that the roll-based percentage is a more ‘honest’ means of measuring a school’s results.

The participation-based method is regarded by some as a fairer way to calculate pass rates because of how it allows for the unique circumstances of some students. For example, there may be students who are unable to attempt a full NCEA course because they have learning difficulties or they are on an alternative education programme. As NZQA observes, not all students are seeking to achieve the normal set of secondary qualifications.

However, participation-based data is also potentially vulnerable to manipulation. Apparently dramatic increases in the NCEA pass rates of some schools around the country over recent years have sometimes been attributed to withdrawal of ‘failing’ students from the data submitted to NZQA by the school. So when it becomes clear that a student cannot cope with (or is not ready for) the demands of a particular standard, s/he is not entered and the school’s pass rate is not undermined by a Not Achieved result.

The notion of ‘being ready’ to tackle a challenge is, of course, at the heart of standards-based assessment – and one of the key reasons this country is now working with programmes of individual unit and achievement standards focused on specific skills instead of the ‘defining’ one-off overall percentages of School Certificate and Bursary examinations. The argument is that students need to be able to learn and achieve at their own pace.

Further results presented to schools by NZQA include pass-rate data analysis by gender and ethnicity as well as overall comparisons to the national average and to other schools across the country in the same decile range, plus Merit and Excellence endorsement percentages. All of this data prompts interesting questions and can help schools understand more about where they might need to more pointedly target their efforts, but it also raises a critical further question – What *isn't* shown by the results?

What isn't obvious from NCEA results is how far a young person has come in their learning since they started in school. There remains no credible national measure of broad academic capability at primary, intermediate or junior secondary levels – and many would contend that this is a good thing given the way National Standards have narrowed the curriculum in recent years and how government-imposed ultimatums about performance targets frequently induce a 'teaching to the test' mentality in schools.

The results also don't show or take into account the differences between year group cohorts. One cohort may have a lower pass rate than the year before, but this current cohort may have a larger number of students who have made more significant improvements since starting college. Without good quality earlier measurements, it is not possible to determine how much progress individual students have made or what challenges may have been overcome. We might well also ask why we should presume that one year's cohort should have the same aggregate performance capability as another year's cohort.

Crucially, too, NCEA results offer little real insight into capabilities in the 'soft skill' competency areas increasingly sought by employers and tertiary institutions. Creativity, initiative, self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability are all touted as desirable, if not vital, attributes in the contemporary era. But how well a young person has developed these skills is barely going to be visible in their NCEA results summary.

After almost two decades of coming to terms with this qualifications model, schools are certainly ready for this year's national review of NCEA's strengths and shortcomings. We hope that what emerges from the inquiry deals well with most of the long-standing unanswered questions.