



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3

# Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum

## Chair's Discussion Paper

October 2020

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Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education

# **Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum**

## **Chair's Discussion Paper**

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## Terms of reference

That NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education inquire into and report on the contents of and proposed changes to the NSW school curriculum, and in particular:

1. The extent to which the Masters Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, including:
  - (a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy
  - (b) Quality and relevance of the evidence-base underpinning the recommendations (compared to CESE findings)
  - (c) Recommendations for student-centred 'progression points' and 'differentiated learning' in schools and whether such initiatives are research-based and proven to be effective
  - (d) Relationship with the national schools curriculum
2. The extent to which the Masters Review meets key Government policy objectives, including:
  - (a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum
  - (b) Ensuring students' acquisition of excellence in literacy and numeracy, as well as deep knowledge of key subjects
  - (c) Professor Masters' explanation for NSW declining school results and the role a revised curriculum can play in reversing this decline
3. Other matters of public concern and interest in the development of the NSW curriculum:
  - (a) To what extent, if any, 'cross-curriculum priorities' are needed to guide classroom content and teaching
  - (b) To what extent, if any, knowledge and the curriculum are 'socially constructed', requiring the teaching of source verification and fluidity principles
  - (c) Whether and to what extent schools should be involved in the 'social and emotional development' of students, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, and growing popularity of 'wellbeing programs' in NSW schools
  - (d) Adequacy of the content and depth of teaching of Australian history, pre- and post-1788
  - (e) Given the importance of English literacy across the curriculum, adopting the most effective evidence-based approaches to language acquisition, especially for reading and writing

- (f) Role and effectiveness of vocational education syllabuses in NSW schools
  - (g) Effectiveness of NESA in curriculum development and supervision
4. Any other related matters.

The terms of reference were self-referred by the committee on 6 February 2020.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes*, NSW Legislative Council, 25 February 2020, p 794.

## Committee details

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### Committee members

<b>Hon Mark Latham MLC</b>	Pauline Hanson's One Nation	<i>Chair</i>
<b>Hon Matthew Mason-Cox MLC</b>	Liberal Party	<i>Deputy Chair</i>
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## Chair's discussion paper

**This discussion paper, published separately from the Committee's discussion paper, reflects the view of the Chair of Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education. It does not reflect the views of the other members of the committee.**

### Chapter 1 Chair's foreword

- 1.1 The Masters Curriculum Review (April 2020) has been presented publicly as a 'back to basics' document but it is no such thing. Government spin-doctors sold it to the media as a return to spelling bees and times-tables in the classroom, yet the 118-page final report makes no mention of these practices. Much was made of the abolition of school-developed senior-year electives such as 'puppetry', 'leather' and 'wearable art', yet these courses are only offered at one high school each.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.2 This discussion paper examines the reality of the Review and its government-adopted recommendations, rather than rhetorical PR. If the NSW Government wants the development of new school syllabuses to be part of a back-to-basics process, that's a good thing, but saying it does not automatically make it happen. Especially when major parts of the Review head in the opposite direction and the Government is relying on the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), perhaps its least competent agency, to develop the new curriculum material.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.3 Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Education Minister Sarah Mitchell have made many commendable public statements about the direction of NSW schools: emphasising literacy and numeracy, deep knowledge and student inquiry, quality teaching and practices that are known to work in the classroom. It is frustrating, however, that there is no detailed Government reform plan for turning these goals into educational reality. 'Too much trust has been placed in the 'Education Establishment' – the same bureaucrats, 'experts', union leaders and vested interests that talk a big game in schools policy but rarely deliver student academic growth.
- 1.4 This is why the Upper House Education Committee is examining the Masters process and its implementation. When the entire NSW curriculum is being redeveloped, parliamentary oversight and input is vital. Geoff Masters himself has said that since the turn of the century, NSW has the fastest falling school academic results in the world.<sup>4</sup> Our State is not in a position to entrust major decisions about the education system to those who have failed in the past.

<sup>2</sup> *Question and Answers Paper*, NSW Legislative Council, 14 July 2020, p 2589.

<sup>3</sup> NESA has struggled badly in the administration of teacher accreditation, professional development and monitoring classroom practices and school accreditation. See New South Wales Auditor-General, Ensuring Teacher Quality in NSW Public Schools, Performance Audit, 26 September 2019; and Portfolio Committee No. 3 -- Education, NSW Legislative Council, Measurement and outcome-based funding in NSW schools, Informed by the Data: Evidence-based education in NSW (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Referring to the deterioration in NSW schools results since 2000, Masters said, "That decline is almost unmatched in the rest of the world, it's very hard to find places that have seen such a steady decline over such a long period", Pallavi Singhal, 'NSW curriculum review aims to halt Australian students' 'significant' decline in results', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 2020.



- 1.5 Portfolio Committee No.3 – Education is circulating two discussion papers as part of its Inquiry. This discussion paper presents the views of the Committee Chair. A second Committee discussion paper summarises key issues arising from the initial submissions. We invite feedback on both discussion papers by the end of October, which will then inform the Committee’s hearings and deliberations in November. The Committee aims to deliver its final report and recommendations in March 2021.
- 1.6 Submissions responding to the issues in the discussion papers may be provided via the online portal or by email to [PortfolioCommittee3@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:PortfolioCommittee3@parliament.nsw.gov.au).

### **Summary of questions posed by the Chair's discussion paper**

- 1.7 The committee Chair invites responses to these questions posed by the Chair in this discussion paper:
- How can curriculum reform reverse the decline in NSW school results?
  - How and what should teachers be teaching to lift student results?
  - How can untimed syllabuses be implemented?
  - Do theory and practice need to be integrated in all subjects?
  - How does the NSW curriculum reform process relate to the national curriculum?
  - Would the recommendations of the Masters' Review really declutter the curriculum?
  - Do teachers need more or less flexibility in what they teach?
  - What is the appropriate division of responsibility between schools and parents?
  - Why were some of the policy directions of the Masters' Review not adopted by the NSW Government?
  - Should post-modernism be taught in our schools?
  - What is the minimum acceptable standard and outcome for a NSW student after 13 years of schooling?

### **Summary of Chair's interim proposals**

- 1.8 For the purposes of guiding stakeholder input into this discussion paper, the Chair has made initial suggestions about recommendations that could be made in the final report of this inquiry and seeks public comment on the potential effectiveness of the following proposals that the NSW Government:
- Identify key reform goals: use an evidence-based approach to improve NSW school outcomes, de-clutter the curriculum and develop basic/foundational skills and deep knowledge among students.
  - Remove all post-modernist, identity-based and political content from syllabuses.
  - Create Best Practice curriculum use in NSW schools, narrowing the gap between syllabus intentions and what is taught in classrooms.

- Establish a minimum NSW standard so that each student achieves at least one year's progress for each year of class time.
- Postpone implementation of untimed progression points until the evidence base exists to support such reform.
- Clarify the relationship between the new NSW curriculum and the redevelopment of the Australian Curriculum by ACARA.
- Scale up the success of the Hoxton Park model in vocational education and 'job ready' career paths for secondary students. This could include:
  - developing career plans for every senior student.
  - allowing schools flexibility to recruit VET-qualified staff from outside the teaching profession.
  - increasing the number of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.
  - reallocating equity funds for the purchase of VET services on a student capitation basis.
- Designate high schools with low-levels of university placements for graduating students as specialist VET schools, with resourcing, programs and expertise aimed at making students job-ready.
- Implement the Masters' Review proposals related to evidence-based phonics literacy teaching; ending Cross-Curriculum Priorities; and structuring syllabuses around subject areas rather than 'general capabilities'.
- Ensure the new Indigenous syllabus is developed in an objective, factual and independent way.
- Return the focus of schools to academic attainment and vocational qualifications.
- Ensure that the 'wellbeing' functions of schools are supplementary to the core functions of student achievement (academic and vocational).
- Evaluate curriculum changes to identify impacts on student learning.



## Chapter 2 Chair's perspective

### The Problem in NSW Schools

- 2.1** Recent NAPLAN and PISA results show how NSW schools are at a tipping point. Without significant reform our State will continue to slide in academic attainment, economic competitiveness and social fairness. Our young people are paying a heavy price for the failed educational experiments contributing to a 20-year decline in the NSW schools system.
- 2.2** The tragedy is readily apparent: everything about classroom practices and results has been studied in every country over many years. We know what works and doesn't work in boosting teacher quality and student outcomes. This attention to evidence, however, has been sidelined by a desire within the system to pursue fad concepts in classroom content and methods.
- 2.3** The culprits walk into schools every day:
1. The rise of post-modernism, perpetuating the myth that everything we know about ourselves and our society and its history has been 'socially constructed'; that there is no fixed understanding of the facts and records of our civilisation. The purpose of schooling must be to teach truth through knowledge, not to tell students there are no clear-cut facts, that somewhere behind-the-scenes there is a conspiracy to 'socially construct' information. Post-modernism is an anti-educational doctrine: trying to replace knowledge with confusion in the minds of students. It undermines student confidence in what they are being taught, and distracts them with endless, time-wasting source verification exercises. Why would any student trust in the content of their 13 years of schooling if they are taught that the information has been 'socially constructed' and manipulated? (See further detail in Section 10 below).
  2. Out of this confusion, students are then encouraged to question their own identity, to believe that personal characteristics like gender, sexuality and even race can be fluid. This reflects the insidious rise of identity politics in schools, dividing society into groupings divorced from individual merit and character. NSW schools need to return to the values of meritocracy, understanding that a person's skin colour and other aspects of their appearance are irrelevant to their worth. We need to restore the great Australian habit of looking through and ignoring race, gender and sexuality.
  3. Post-modernism and identity politics in our schools are trying to engineer a very different type of society, based on 'progressive' ideology rather than the learning needs of students. English, Geography, History and even PDHPE courses have become intensely political. This is a worrying trend, with regular reports of teachers projecting their worldview in the classroom. The curriculum should be politically neutral. As Minister Mitchell has said, 'The reality is that instilling values sets and encouraging positions on social and political issues is not the job of schools. It is the job of parents. A school's job is to equip kids with the knowledge needed to successfully engage with the world as independent thinkers.'<sup>5</sup>
  4. A critical part of learning is self-knowledge: to appreciate the virtues, history and other civilisational influences of the society in which one finds oneself. If we don't understand

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Mitchell, 'For 20 years our students have been slipping, but money is not the answer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 December 2019.

our own culture, how can we understand others? Yet in NSW syllabuses, every subject is guided by three Cross-Curriculum Priorities (Aboriginal Studies, Asian Engagement and Environmental Sustainability) with little mention of Western civilisation. In fact, in many courses, the material is openly hostile to who we are and where we have come from as a nation – a self-loathing that cannot be allowed to stand. The quality of Australian society is admired internationally; so it seems incongruous for this not to be reflected in the NSW school curriculum.

5. The 2008 Melbourne Declaration changed the direction of NSW schools by moving away from academic attainment into ‘a broader frame’ for the ‘social development’ and wellbeing of children. Schools have flooded towards this approach, finding it easier to teach its health-style programs than the traditional focus on scholastic success. There is a role for wellbeing programs in education, but they should be supplementary to the core functions of student achievement (academic and vocational). That is, the programs should be delivered outside of class-time by qualified medical professionals (rather than social workers) and driven by proven performance measures of success. It also remains true: the best wellbeing program in a school will always be the development of engaged, animated and curious learners.
6. As a close ally of these five trends, low-value experimental practices have entered NSW classrooms. None of these fads have a clear evidence base but they have been allowed to flourish. Educationalists have developed a long list of junk programs, such as play-based learning, philosophy circles, guided group work, inquiry-based learning, growth mindset, collaborative classrooms, flexible learning spaces and constructivist teaching. John Hattie’s research (a global meta-analysis of 95,000 studies involving 300 million students) tells us that Direct Instruction achieves the best classroom results. That is, when teachers actually teach, instructing their students on how to do things, creating a rich interchange of knowledge and ideas in the learning process. Yet in many schools this evidence has been wiped and Direct Instruction abandoned.
7. Programs with a poor evidence base can only flourish if Ministers and departmental heads let them. Whereas some countries prescribe curriculum content and teaching methods on the basis of measured successes and failures, NSW has moved in a different direction. Policies such as Local Schools/Local Decisions have given schools wide latitude in deciding what they teach and how they teach it. Fads and ideology have been allowed to proliferate, unchecked by central systems of quality control. The new curriculum must not go down this path. Classroom content, practices, learning materials and consultants should only be used by schools after a rigorous, high-effect evidence base has certified them as beneficial.

**2.4** Given the scale of these problems, inevitably, the 2019 PISA results showed 15-year-old NSW students to be several years behind their Asian counterparts in each of the major subject areas. Why? Because Asian schools don’t use the junk trends, listed (1) to (7) above.

**2.5** In their system, schools function as schools, not as political laboratories or social work clinics. Their teachers actually teach, as the centerpiece of classroom activity – unlike many of our schools, where it has become fashionable for teachers to wander around open-plan ‘learning spaces’, coffee mugs in hand, as ‘facilitators’ of ‘self-starting’ learning groups. Some students hate it; others are confused by it; the remainder gets lost in the noise and chaos of the open-plan environment. The wonder of PISA results is that NSW hasn’t fallen further.

## What's Missing From Masters

- 2.6** In successful education systems, evidence outweighs ideology. What matters is what works. The message for NSW is clear: if the mantra of back-to-basics is to mean anything, schools must return to being schools, with teachers instructing directly, using syllabuses that foster deep knowledge and analytical and problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, much of the Masters Report ignores this evidence and policy direction. It raises little objection to the failed, faddish experiments of the past 30 years and, in some areas, seeks to go further down this path.
- 2.7** The Report is a repetitive but surprisingly incomplete document. It fails to address 10 major issues:

### 1. How Can Curriculum Reform Reverse the Decline in NSW School Results?

- 2.8** One would have expected this to be the Report's starting point, citing case studies of jurisdictions overseas that received a major boost in student results from curriculum reform. Instead, this evidence is absent, with just passing references to international experiences in Chapter 5. Most of the report, therefore, is a reflection of the author's worldview: what he thinks should happen, rather than an evidence base of what needs to happen to benefit our students and State.
- 2.9** Some academics believe that curriculum redevelopment is a relatively futile exercise. Teachers tend to teach what they think is useful, freely deviating from written syllabuses. Subject content in this environment is not as important as effective teaching methods off a strong evidence base of positive classroom practice. Curriculum reform is something politicians like to talk about, without appreciating its marginal impact on student achievement. In schools' policy, it becomes part of the 'politics of distraction'.
- 2.10** John Hattie, for instance, argues that education researchers and policy makers have largely ignored the key challenge in building the quality of school systems: that is, 'the question of scaling up excellence in teaching'. While business management is dominated by the notion of 'scaling up' success, it has been missing from schools policy. As Hattie writes:
- Most attempts at scaling up are related to the structural aspects of schools – that is, timetables, textbooks, curricula, assessment, smaller class sizes, open environments, more teacher aides, (resourcing, infrastructure) and changes in school governance (charter, trusts, academies), etc. These structural changes have much smaller (student outcome) impacts but are visible, and certainly absorb very high levels of funding. They barely change the way teachers think, evaluate or impact on their students... The closer an innovation gets to the core (structure) of schooling, the less likely it is that it will influence teaching and learning on a large scale. Instead, we tinker towards utopia.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.11** While curriculum reform may or may not upgrade student outcomes, it nonetheless becomes highly influential inside schools, particularly in guiding the work of inexperienced teachers. New syllabus material inevitably works its way into textbook content. Teachers having to teach a new subject go straight to the textbooks for guidance. This process also influences professional

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<sup>6</sup> John Hattie, 'Implementing, scaling up and valuing expertise to develop worthwhile outcomes in schools' (2019), *ACEL Monograph Series*, No. 58, March 2019, p 11.

development, as teachers share their syllabus/textbook/class experiences with colleagues. As a high school principal has described it, '[t]he cycle of propaganda grows and grows'.<sup>7</sup>

- 2.12** An alternative to Hattie's approach can be found in a joint research project by Learning First and the Johns Hopkins School of Education, entitled 'What We Teach Matters' (November 2018). It is argued that:

For some years, curriculum has been overlooked as a pillar of school improvement strategy. Education reform has focused on teacher quality, and often seen curriculum as simply a tool that teachers use. Curriculum's role as a battleground for ideologues has also led policymakers to avoid the subject. But that is beginning to change. The research is increasingly clear that quality curriculum matters to student achievement. What's more, there is emerging evidence to suggest that quality curriculum has a larger cumulative impact on student achievement than many common school improvement interventions – and at a lower cost.<sup>8</sup>

- 2.13** The project studied the top PISA-performing nations and found advantages in 'content-rich, standards-aligned curriculum material, especially textbooks'.<sup>9</sup> This approach 'builds their knowledge and vocabulary – the foundation on which reading comprehension, critical thinking and a range of other skills depend'.<sup>10</sup> In particular, 'switching from a low- to a high-quality textbook can boost student achievement more than other, more popular interventions, such as expanding preschool programs, decreasing class sizes or offering merit pay to teachers'.<sup>11</sup>
- 2.14** Surprisingly, the Masters Report does not highlight practical examples of how teachers use written syllabuses in their classroom practices, either in NSW or other Australian and international systems. There is a wide spectrum of teaching and learning in NSW, ranging from best practice to long-running failure. Masters tells us about neither. He does not cite a single NSW school, either as an exemplar for curriculum usage or as an example of failed practices. The detailed, practical experiences of the State's 3300 schools seem irrelevant.
- 2.15** The final Report is also devoid of studies linking various curriculum approaches to high-level student outcomes. Everything about school education has been studied extensively, here and around the world; yet Masters makes no attempt to quantify the impact of curriculum reform on student test results. Throughout the 118-page document, the wording is surreal. In international benchmarking, NSW school results have collapsed, yet now the proposed remedy is to rewrite the curriculum, at times in a radical, experimental way, without any detailed assessment of the likely benefits of this approach.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with school principal (the Hon Mark Latham MLC, School Visit).

<sup>8</sup> David Steiner, Jacqueline Magee and Ben Jensen, 'What we teach matters: How quality curriculum improves student outcomes', Report, Learning First and Johns Hopkins School of Education, November 2018, p 3.

<sup>9</sup> David Steiner, Jacqueline Magee and Ben Jensen, 'What we teach matters: How quality curriculum improves student outcomes', Report, Learning First and Johns Hopkins School of Education, November 2018, p 3.

<sup>10</sup> David Steiner, Jacqueline Magee and Ben Jensen, 'What we teach matters: How quality curriculum improves student outcomes', Report, Learning First and Johns Hopkins School of Education, November 2018, pp 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> David Steiner, Jacqueline Magee and Ben Jensen, 'What we teach matters: How quality curriculum improves student outcomes', Report, Learning First and Johns Hopkins School of Education, November 2018, p 11.

- 2.16** In examining overseas experiences, Masters briefly points to increased flexibility in the new curricula of Wales, Scotland and British Columbia.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the Welsh reforms don't start until 2022, while finalisation of the Scottish approach has been postponed until June 2021, making it impossible to gauge the impact of their changes on student results. British Columbia has adopted a 'new-age' curriculum with the core competencies of 'communicating, collaborating, creative thinking, critical/reflective thinking and positive personal and cultural identity'. If this is back-to-basics, NSW is in deep trouble.
- 2.17** While it is difficult to find school systems that have improved student results through curricula overhauls, there are some negative case studies – experiences to avoid. In the early 1990s, Sweden performed strongly on international school league tables. But in 1994 an explicitly social-constructivist syllabus was introduced, along with greater school and teacher flexibility. These changes coincided with a collapse in its PISA results.
- 2.18** The new Swedish curriculum maintained that, 'What is knowledge in one place is not necessarily knowledge in other places' and that 'there are no pure facts'. To add to the confusion, it was said that, 'Not all pupils everywhere need to work with the same facts to reach a common understanding.'<sup>13</sup> The Swedish experience confirms the folly of post-modernism in education. Academic growth is most likely to be achieved by teaching students clear knowledge, important facts and deep conceptual understanding.
- 2.19** The Masters Report fails to answer an obvious, outcome-focused question: What's the minimum acceptable standard and outcome for a NSW student after 13 years of schooling? What do we want our students to achieve as they leave the system? Clearly, a job or higher and/or vocational education that further unlocks the benefits of a successful career and active citizenship.
- 2.20** By the end of the Report, readers are more confused than ever about the final purpose of a NSW school education. In particular, the proposal for 'untimed syllabuses' (adopted in-principle by the Government) raises unresolved questions about its implementation and student impact. It is recommended that students work at their own pace and level of achievement through the curriculum, so that the spread of progression in any year-group becomes quite pronounced.
- 2.21** Professor Masters forecasts that under this reform, some 15-year-olds will still be struggling to complete Year 6 literacy and maths. How then can they finish the HSC? By staying at school well into their 20s? This is a real possibility, for which Masters has not developed a workable solution. These are our most vulnerable students, at highest risk of failure and welfare dependency in life. It is irresponsible, indeed reckless, to introduce untimed syllabuses without a workable plan for assisting the bottom cohort of NSW students.
- 2.22** At the other extreme, the brightest students will have completed Year 12 content by age 14. What happens to them? Do they vegetate at school for the next four years, coasting through and even repeating their work, or trot off to university in short pants? These are the unanswered Masters issues the NSW Cabinet has hastily embraced.

<sup>12</sup> Professor Geoff Masters AO, NSW Education Standards Authority, 'NSW Curriculum Review: Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion - Designs for a new school curriculum', Report, 23 June 2020, pp 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Magnus Henrekson and Johan Wenstrom, 'Post-truth and the Decline of Swedish Education', *Quillette*, 18 September 2018.



- 2.23** Surely there should be a NSW standard by which each student achieves at least one year's progress for each year of class time. That is, the best students are not allowed to coast through; that they realise their potential for being extended to higher levels of achievement. And no other student is allowed to fall behind an acceptable level for that age group, languishing in a system that, year after year, lets them achieve less than a year's growth.
- 2.24** Far from recommending this standard, Masters does the opposite: advocating untimed syllabuses that legitimise the notion, indeed, making it predictable, that some students (usually the same students) will get less than a year's progress from their school year.

## **2. How and What Should Teachers Teach to Lift Student Results?**

- 2.25** The Report devotes large tracts to what is clearly the author's pet topic: How do people learn? Much of this material is hardly insightful, such as the observation on page 42 that, 'A general conclusion from these studies is that experts have a great deal of knowledge in their fields'. Who would have thought?
- 2.26** Masters emphasises the importance of 'emotional engagement' (a personal interest in what is being taught) and 'growth mindset' (the resilience to persevere with learning in the face of disappointing results). He uses these conclusions to justify the move to untimed syllabuses: that if students never face disappointment, steadily moving at their own pace (even if it's a slow pace), they will want to keep on learning.
- 2.27** Curiously, however, Masters says little about the bigger question of how teachers should teach to achieve academic growth – a critical area of interest for policy makers, teachers and parents. Item 3 in his Terms of Reference was to 'Explain how the curriculum could be redesigned and presented to better support teaching, learning, assessment and reporting'. Yet this has been largely ignored in the final Report.
- 2.28** As a result, Masters is out of step with the NSW evidence-base for effective classroom teaching. For instance, the Centre of Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) has released its 'What Works Best: 2020 Update' for teachers, detailing eight positive-impact strategies:
- i. A culture of high expectations for students;
  - ii. Explicit teaching of student goals, instruction and understanding;
  - iii. Constant high quality feedback to students;
  - iv. Intense use of data to inform classroom practice;
  - v. Rigorously constructed assessment tasks, teacher collaboration and marking;
  - vi. Classroom management that minimises distractions and maximises learning time;
  - vii. Ensuring student wellbeing fosters classroom concentration and effort; and
  - viii. A common school direction that maximises teacher collaboration and improvement.
- 2.29** Remarkably, Masters does not mention this evidence. He proposes syllabuses disconnected from the NSW research governing sound classroom practice. In some cases, the final Report pulls in the opposite direction.

- 2.30** For instance, the recommendation for untimed syllabuses or 'Progression Points' is certain to lower expectations for what students can achieve. Schools will have a new alibi for poor student achievement: they are not very bright and should be allowed to move through the curriculum at their own slower pace. This is the new ethos Masters recommends, comparing student progress to what each student had previously achieved, rather than the results of their year-group colleagues.
- 2.31** Student comparisons through rankings and grades will become redundant. Year-group tests and assessments will be pointless. The pressure for every student to achieve to a decent minimum standard will be lifted from schools. No student will ever fail or truly succeed, as their only benchmark is against themselves. This new system runs against the CESE recommendation for 'Rigorously constructed assessment tasks, teacher collaboration and marking'.
- 2.32** Untimed syllabuses are a disaster in the making for our weakest students, normalising lower levels of achievement. School reports to their parents will read: 'Your child has made progress compared to last year, and we expect further personal progress', even though the student may be 3-4 years behind the year-group median and heading towards a life of struggle and welfare dependency.
- 2.33** Progression points are likely to entrench socio-economic disadvantage, rather than break it. For students living in poor households and suburbs, their best chance of upward mobility, of breaking the poverty cycle, is a good school. Without basic skills and knowledge drawn from the curriculum, they have little chance in life. Without the high expectations of rigorous testing and grading, how can they show society how good they are, matching other schools and students enjoying the advantages of inherited opportunity in life?
- 2.34** Exams were invented by the ancient Chinese to combat patronage in the selection of civil servants. This is a timeless principle: using the measurement of merit to create a fairer society; allowing people to compete equally according to their ability (as judged by standardised test scores). In the NSW education system, exam marks have always been a poor child's best friend, their best chance of getting ahead in society.
- 2.35** Progression Points work against the interests of our strongest students, denying them the comparative means by which they can excel. Many children thrive on competition: they work hard, strive to be the best and welcome educational opportunities to demonstrate their skills and intelligence. This is why we have selective high schools, for instance, so that every student can find the learning environment best suited to maximising their results and life opportunities.
- 2.36** At page 106 of the Report, Masters compares his recommended 'learning sequences' to 'proficiency levels in swimming'. But as anyone who has been to a school swimming carnival will know, in terms of student motivation, competition trumps proficiency in every event. The kids race their little hearts out. No one stands on the podium with a 'proficiency certificate' for swimming half-a-lap.
- 2.37** The best things achieved by NSW school students have always come from a combination of ability, competitive spirit, work ethic and quality teaching. The enjoyment and recognition of achievement has been all-important. This contrasts with Masters' dismal outlook, arguing:

By the secondary years, there is little joy in learning for many students, and by the completion of secondary school, joy often has been replaced by the stresses of externally

motivated learning and competition with others ... The promotion of positive attitudes to learning also is more difficult when teachers are required to assess and grade each student against age-based expectations and this is prioritised over acknowledging and celebrating learning progress.<sup>14</sup>

- 2.38** What sort of society does the Curriculum Review envisage? One where no one feels pressured to excel? Where competition is seen as synonymous with stress and mental breakdown? Where an ethos of ‘working hard to advance yourself’ is replaced by ‘the system owes me, so I’m doing things at my own rate’? If one thing is certain to hurt our students and their prospects in life, it is schools without striving.
- 2.39** By endorsing untimed syllabuses, Masters and the Berejiklian Government are consigning the NSW school system to further failure. What is the point in CESE developing evidence-based teaching methods around high expectations, rigorous assessment and data usage if the curriculum reform process leads to an entirely different, dumbed-down pedagogy and benchmarking system?
- 2.40** Finally, transition costs in the Government’s curriculum implementation plan should also be noted. English and mathematics are the first syllabuses to be overhauled under the Masters method. If the weakest students fall behind under these untimed syllabuses, what will it mean in related subjects (such as the importance of maths in science) where they are expected to keep pace? The final Report and Government response have not addressed this issue.

### **3. How Can Untimed Syllabuses Be Implemented?**

- 2.41** Progression Points are a radical, experimental idea for a NSW system already sliding down international league tables of school success. Untimed syllabuses haven’t been implemented successfully anywhere in the world. Why should NSW be a guinea pig for this unproven theory of student progress? Especially when it’s a reform associated with weaker standards and less academic rigour: ending grades, rankings and year-level assessments and tests.
- 2.42** If every student is to move through syllabuses in an untimed manner, they will need to be taught their own individual material with their own individual assessment for progressing to the next stage. In practice, a class of 30 students will be 30 different classes in one. We have enough problems with teacher quality and effectiveness now, without increasing exponentially the degree of difficulty in classroom practice. The challenge in NSW is to return the schools system to a proven evidence-base, not to impose upon students a new, unproven sociological theory.
- 2.43** Masters’ only reference point for untimed syllabuses is the Welsh school system, which he writes about at pages 54-55 of the Report. But no mention is made of two key facts. First, implementation of the Welsh Progression Points system won’t start until 2022. If it becomes problematic, say in 2024, NSW will have spent four years going down this path, a wasted venture. Even assuming this is a valid reform, a prudent government would wait for the Welsh evidence to unfold and be verified, before turning our school students into guinea pigs.

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<sup>14</sup> Professor Geoff Masters AO, NSW Education Standards Authority, ‘NSW Curriculum Review: Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion - Designs for a new school curriculum’, Report, 23 June 2020, pp 71-72.

- 2.44** Second, the Welsh system is not a free-for-all, with each school and student doing their own thing. In introducing her curriculum reform legislation to the Welsh Assembly on 8 July 2020, the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, said:

The Bill requires Ministers to issue a progression code setting out the way in which progression must be reflected within a school's curriculum. Issuing a progression code with mandatory elements will ensure that there is consistency in an approach to progression across the country ... We have to have assurance that children will be moving forward and the expectations of what children can do are the same, across a national basis.

- 2.45** One assumes the Welsh code will have mandatory intervention and accountability measures for schools that do not meet nationwide expectations for their students. Quality education systems have zero tolerance of failure. In Asian systems, for instance, there are intense efforts to lift up the weakest students, often going outside of school hours with additional tutoring. There is no detail in the Masters Report of how this might work in NSW.
- 2.46** Masters assumes that struggling students will feel better about school because their report card will no longer record a series of Ds. It's not clear how this will help them get through their work at a faster rate. Most likely, these students will gravitate to the easiest option – an example of 'moral hazard', whereby if the system allows students to do the thing most convenient for them (with no consequences) that's exactly what they will do.
- 2.47** The Report also assumes these students are stupid and naïve – that by doing easier work than others in their year, they won't actually know they have fallen behind. In the realities of playground culture, the entire year-group will know the students doing the 'dummy work' and those top-of-class. Replacing A-E grades with Progression Points will fool no one.
- 2.48** NSW Cabinet decision 3.1 on the Masters recommendations, unlike the Welsh system, has no mandatory elements, no assurances and no progression code. It simply allows for: 'Students who require more time should have it; students ready to advance should be able to do so' – a free-for-all, devoid of Statewide consistency and mandatory standards. Did Cabinet actually know what it was doing in supporting this change?
- 2.49** Moreover, Masters makes it clear that Progression Points are synonymous not just with the abolition of A-to-E grading, but also the end of ATAR testing and ranking.<sup>15</sup> He proposes a HSC where the highest syllabus achieved in a subject is recorded on a student's certificate, even for subjects that weren't studied in the senior years. ATAR competition will be replaced by a bland record of curriculum partial-completion.
- 2.50** Masters' recommendation to abolish the ATAR was noted by Cabinet, with 'further advice to be sought from NESA'. In a report to the Federal Government in July, NESA's Chairman, Peter Shergold, also predicted the end of ATARs, outlining their 'slow death over the next five years'. He wants to replace them with a system of 'learning profiles' (a student portfolio outlining achievements both at school and in the community).

<sup>15</sup> Professor Geoff Masters AO, NSW Education Standards Authority, 'NSW Curriculum Review: Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion - Designs for a new school curriculum', Report, 23 June 2020, pp 92-93.

- 2.51** 'We are saying you don't just learn complex problem solving by studying maths or science or indeed by doing vocational education', Shergold declared, 'You can learn complex problem solving by being captain of the netball team.'<sup>16</sup> Not many parents would see netball (or football) as comparable to the importance of maths and science qualifications for their children. They would see it as part of the constant dumbing down of NSW schools.

#### **4. Do Theory and Practice Need to be Integrated in All Subjects?**

- 2.52** NSW high schools have a massive problem: how to engage 13-16 year-old students (mostly boys) who have lost interest in academic subjects and start to dislike school. Their attendance rates drop and when they do turn up to class, they are disengaged and disruptive.
- 2.53** When the Hawke Government lifted the school leaving age and aimed at 100 percent HSC attainment, non-academic students were promised a 'seamless interface between school and vocation education and training', especially with TAFE. Thirty years later, this promise remains unfulfilled. Some high schools in disadvantaged areas have no relationship with TAFE. The number of school-based traineeships and apprenticeships in NSW is desultory.
- 2.54** Instead of developing clear career pathways for non-academic students, some schools have allowed them to do what they want (mainly soft, time-filling courses like project-based art), believing any form of engagement is better than the classroom chaos they can create. This is producing a growing number of unemployable school 'graduates', with neither academic nor vocational prowess.
- 2.55** What is Masters' solution to this problem? To inject more theory into vocational courses – the thing that contributed to student disengagement in the first place. Recommendation 6.1 (supported in-principle by Cabinet) reads:
- Eliminate the current bifurcation of learning in the later years by developing over time a new set of HSC subjects, each of which involves rigorous high-quality learning that integrate knowledge and the practical application of knowledge.
- 2.56** Again, Masters presents no evidence of how this approach is likely to lift student outcomes. He ignores the experience of best practice high schools in NSW achieving, against the odds, strong vocational outcomes. The aim of education policy should be to scale up these successes, not to follow the untested Masters pathway simply because he has a personal preference for the theory/practical integration model.
- 2.57** Take for example the approach of senior teachers at Hoxton Park High School in South-West Sydney. They have developed career plans and pathways for each of their senior students (50 percent of whom do not go to university). The school has high expectations about these vocational pathways and its students respond positively to them, with an upbeat, energetic outlook on their career prospects. This experience contradicts Masters' view of VET stigmatisation in schools.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jordan Baker, Call for 'learner profile' of students to end dominance of ATAR, Sydney Morning Herald, 24 July 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Professor Geoff Masters AO, NSW Education Standards Authority, 'NSW Curriculum Review: Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion - Designs for a new school curriculum', Report, 23 June 2020, pp 70 and 80.

- 2.58** The school leadership at Hoxton Park hasn't sat back complaining about obstacles to VET success. Instead, they have innovated. Year 10 students committed to leaving school are in a 'Moving Forward' class, with their own home-room and a single teacher. The curriculum has been modified to make the students job-ready. As they have no interest in algebra, for instance, but can see the relevance of trigonometry for future carpentry and engineering jobs, that's what they are taught in maths.
- 2.59** Moving Forward also involves work-experience placements, TAFE training, school-based vocational preparation and constant liaison with Hoxton Park's dynamic careers advisor. The students are respectful, purposeful and resourceful – a credit to their school and community.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, they believe they will only be ready to leave school and enter the workforce when the schools says they are ready – a measure of the trust created. The school would also like to establish a Year 9 Moving Forward class, extending the program's reach to 14- and 15-year-olds disengaged from the academic syllabus.
- 2.60** Vocational streaming (or 'bifurcation') of this kind works in practice. Additional theory components for these students, for the sake of theory components (as per the Masters Report) are unnecessary and most likely, counter-productive. The Hoxton Park Principal is better qualified to recommend vocational policy directions than Masters, who, remarkably, has written a report without having visited a single NSW school during school hours.<sup>19</sup>
- 2.61** NSW can achieve huge gains in school-based VET by combining the Hoxton Park Model with four other reforms:
- i. Giving schools flexibility to recruit from outside the teaching profession for VET-competent staff to run classes (overcoming the current VET teacher shortage);
  - ii. Increasing the number of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships;
  - iii. Reallocating Gonski equity funds to allow schools to buy in VET services on a student capitation basis;<sup>20</sup> and
  - iv. Designating high schools with very low levels of Year 12-university transition as specialist VET schools, with resourcing, programs and expertise aimed at making students job-ready.
- 2.62** For the first 93 pages of his Report, Professor Masters says he opposes streaming students into vocational courses. But then at page 94, faced with the problem of what to do with slow-progressing students at the end of Year 10 (under untimed syllabuses) he moves them into 'vocationally oriented programs'. It's a contradictory mess. VET streaming is beneficial for students if undertaken with the finesse and inspiration of the Hoxton Park model.
- 2.63** So too, many students relate best to abstract forms of learning in the academic curriculum. They don't want 'practical applications' getting in the way of their development of higher learning concepts. For them, Masters' theory-and-practice integration is a nuisance. In any case, some

<sup>18</sup> The Hon Mark Latham MLC visited Hoxton Park High School on 24 July 2020.

<sup>19</sup> *Question and Answers Paper*, NSW Legislative Council, 17 August 2020, p 2898.

<sup>20</sup> For examples of how badly the Gonski funds are being wasted and misallocated, see NSW Auditor-General, 'Local Schools, Local Decisions: Needs-Based Equity Funding', Performance Audit Report, 8 April 2020.

subjects (such as ancient history, advanced maths and science) do not easily lend themselves to a practical component.

- 2.64** At page 68 Masters writes of how, 'Every school subject should provide a mix of theory and application, with opportunities for students both to acquire new knowledge and understandings and to apply their new learning to practical, real-world issues and experiences.' For many parents, this will have alarm bells ringing, asking, 'Who will pick the real-world issues and vet them for political content?' One suspects that Greta Thunberg will appear more often than Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill.

## **5. How Does the NSW Reform Process Relate to the National Curriculum?**

- 2.65** This issue is barely mentioned in the final Report. Clearly, the Masters approach departs from some aspects of the National Curriculum, especially in abandoning the three Cross-Curriculum Priorities and organising syllabuses in conventional subject areas rather than 'general capabilities'. NESA and the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) are said to be talking to each other about what's core.
- 2.66** Early in his Report (page xxi), Masters writes that, 'If possible, new syllabuses should be developed in consultation with ACARA as it redevelops the Australian Curriculum.' This requires clarification from the Government, as do potential areas of difference and commonality. Does NSW still support the principles of a national curriculum or, given the unique needs of a State experiencing educational decline, should we stand apart in syllabus design?
- 2.67** The vague nature of the Masters Report and its recommendations means that the implementation of the new syllabuses will be critical. Looking at the recent record of NESA, there is clear reason for concern. Its performance in teacher accreditation and the management of the State's 42,000 professional development courses has been substandard. Moreover, NESA's Curriculum Committee is chaired by a representative of the NSW Teachers Federation, which advocates for radical constructivist teaching and gender fluidity teaching (supposedly banned at the time of the 2017 Safe Schools decision).
- 2.68** Adding to these concerns, in recent years, NESA has dramatically shed staff numbers and capacity for curriculum development. In July 2018, it had 41 in-house curriculum staff and 55 contracted curriculum writers (typically, teachers on a short-term basis). As of 1 July 2020, these numbers were down to 30 and zero, a 69 per cent staffing reduction.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps more work is planned for Geoff Masters and his team. Either way, the Government should outline the full detail of its curriculum implementation plan, including a rigorous oversight model to ensure NESA is up to the job.
- 2.69** If his reworking of the English syllabus is any guide, further use of Masters in curriculum redesign will be problematic. The final Report offers little detail about the type of syllabus it envisages, other than at pages 72 and 74, where an example is given of turning English classes into 'argument'. Using resources such as 'documentaries, posters, speeches, gestures, stand-up comedy, photojournalism and social media' (with no mention of novels):

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<sup>21</sup> *Question and Answers Paper*, NSW Legislative Council, 3 August 2020, p 2772.

Students understand that the thrust and shape of argument is influenced by the contexts of composition and reception. They learn that: argument is the logical development of a supported thesis with the purpose of bringing audiences to a new intellectual or emotional understanding; rhetorical devices are chosen for their effect for particular audiences and purposes; and argument, despite claims to objectivity, comes from a particular perspective.

- 2.70** It sounds more like political argument school, underpinned by a post-modernist belief that English texts are socially constructed. What happened to back-to-basics and the study of the classics?

## **6. Is Masters Really Decluttering the Curriculum?**

- 2.71** The major concern about the syllabus within schools is its breadth. There are too many ‘nice to knows’ in the curriculum, as schools call them – the bits that would be taught if they had time. If teachers are spreading their class-time too thinly, students are denied opportunities for deep knowledge and conceptual understanding, the type of depth that sparks their learning interests and engagement.
- 2.72** De-cluttering the curriculum has also been the Government’s mantra: a back-to-basics approach for literacy and numeracy in particular. Unfortunately, the Masters Report fails to advance detailed recommendations in this regard. In some cases, Masters heads in the opposite direction, advocating extra syllabus content in the following areas:
- A theory component in vocational education;
  - A practical component in academic subjects;
  - More identity politics via proposals for an ‘Inclusive Curriculum’ and ‘Recognition of Diversity’;
  - Every student being required to learn more of ‘Aboriginal cultures and histories’, incorporated into Human Society and its Environment (without a critique of why current syllabuses are inadequate);
  - Year 12 students undertaking a Major Investigative Project, without any evidence of benefits flowing from such a commitment, especially from other State systems that have tried this approach;
  - Legitimising the ‘social development’ role of schools, taking up teaching time and resources in various forms of health and pastoral care; and
  - Requiring every student to commence a second language during the primary years (Noted, but not supported by Cabinet).
- 2.73** Then there are the transitional costs in redesigning every NSW school syllabus, plus implementing experimental ideas like Progression Points. This is not de-cluttering but a laborious exercise in taking NSW schools down an unproven curriculum pathway. None of the Masters proposals listed above are needed. His task was to take things out of the syllabus, not add items devoid of an evidence base. This is how the system got into trouble in the first place.
- 2.74** Remarkably, the NSW Cabinet has adopted this reform plan without publishing any indicators of what success might look like. The recent experience in NSW government schools has shown



that without firm measures of performance and accountability, the system will veer into random, often dubious directions. There are huge costs of implementation in curriculum reform, yet the Government has not attempted any cost-benefit analysis. Disruptions such as this should always be assessed for their likely impact.

- 2.75** The policy solution is simple: remove the failed fad-elements from the classroom, thereby boosting the potential for improved academic attainment and de-cluttering the curriculum. Return the system to the basics of learning (foundational skills and deep knowledge) from which it should never have deviated. Give students the essential understanding in literacy, numeracy, science and history they need later in life to deal with the challenges of economic and social change.
- 2.76** Schools need to drop the modern obsession with turning themselves into political laboratories, gender fluidity factories, mental health clinics, social work centres and cultural propaganda tutorials. Our NAPLAN and PISA results tell the story. We have 'growth mindset' but not growth in academic results. We have high school students who have heard of 'gendered words' but cannot read or write.
- 2.77** If post-modernist, identity-political and social development content were dropped, the curriculum would automatically be de-cluttered. Vast amounts of teaching time and resources would be freed up for the basics. Post-modernism, in particular, is a time consuming and wasteful process for students. It makes them concentrate on 'source verification' when they should be absorbing factual content. It makes them question the veracity of knowledge when they should be valuing and developing their own skills in knowing how to learn.
- 2.78** Masters spends large slabs of his Report reflecting on how to make students passionate and 'emotionally engaged' with learning. Yet he never raises the single greatest problem in the system: Why would anyone be keen to learn anything that's said to be twisted and manipulated in the process of 'social construction'?

## **7. Do Teachers Need More or Less Flexibility in What They Teach?**

- 2.79** Masters' proposal for greater flexibility in how teachers use the curriculum pulls against the Government's direction in ending its Local Schools Local Decisions (LSLD) policy. While a replacement for LSLD is yet to be announced, the Education Minister has said she no longer believes in 'totally devolving decision-making power to each school'.
- 2.80** 'It is time to rebalance LSLD, giving greater ability for interventions in instances where schools are seeing particularly concerning outcomes for their students', Sarah Mitchell said in February 2020, 'Essentially, LSLD has removed the policy levers the government needs to address school underperformance (and) to scale evidence-based best practice across the system.'<sup>22</sup>
- 2.81** If too much school flexibility has failed, there is little sense in the Curriculum Review giving teachers extra classroom flexibility. In any case, Masters (yet again) does not make an evidence-based case for his proposal. In practice, for any 10 schools in the NSW system there would be 10 different interpretations of delivering syllabuses. So why advocate for a more flexible

<sup>22</sup> Jordan Baker, 'Unhappy' minister to curtail school principals' freedom', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 February 2020.

curriculum? The objective should be to narrow the gap between the intended syllabus use (as set out on NESA's website) and what's actually taught in the classroom.

- 2.82** Wouldn't it be wiser for the Government to require teachers to teach from a certified menu of programs and practices proven to be beneficial to students? The know-how exists to adopt this approach but, in too many schools, it is ignored. John Hattie's extensive research points the way forward, as does CESE's advocacy for what works best. Anything else is a distraction from the main game: scaling up quality teaching and school leadership.
- 2.83** A key CESE recommendation is for a common school direction and classroom practice (see Section 2 above) or what Hattie calls 'collective teacher efficacy'. This cannot be achieved if teachers have greater flexibility in constructing their own syllabuses (something made easier in recent years by the accessibility of material online). Collective Efficacy requires a standardised teacher and student experience inside schools, from class-to-class and year-to-year. In Hattie's research, it has very high positive impacts on student outcomes.
- 2.84** In the curriculum, this means creating consistent syllabus material, with clearly sequenced learning steps, allowing students to accumulate deep knowledge and understanding as they progress through school. Too much flexibility diminishes this opportunity. It also hampers the possibility of scaling up best practice in schools through system-wide reform. As the Learning First/Johns Hopkins research project concludes:

The large variation in the curriculum used within and between schools hampers systemic school improvement efforts. When systems don't know what is being taught, it is difficult to know how it is being taught and what support teachers and school leaders might need to improve teaching and learning. For example, while a system might choose to pursue a numeracy strategy in response to poor results on state tests, they probably won't know how best to target professional learning and other resources if schools across the state are using different mathematics curricula of varying quality.<sup>23</sup>

- 2.85** The US State of Louisiana is regarded as an exemplar for a common core curriculum. In 2009-10 it introduced rigorous standards in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA), along with aligned assessments. By 2015 its academic results had improved significantly, sparking international interest in the Louisiana reforms. Even though NESA commissioned a case study into this success (available on the Curriculum Review website) it was not mentioned in the final Masters Report.<sup>24</sup>

## **8. What is the Appropriate Division of Responsibility Between Schools and Parents?**

- 2.86** Successful education systems concentrate on what's happening in the classroom, instead of having endless funding and infrastructure debates. As John Hattie has found, 'One major feature that distinguishes most of the top countries educationally from those in the middle is that they

<sup>23</sup> David Steiner, Jacqueline Magee and Ben Jensen, 'What we teach matters: How quality curriculum improves student outcomes', Report, Learning First and Johns Hopkins School of Education, November 2018, p 15.

<sup>24</sup> Jacqueline Magee and Ben Jensen, 'Overcoming challenges facing contemporary curriculum: Detailed case studies: Lessons From Louisiana', Report, Learning First November 2018, p 4.

focus their efforts within the school and within the classroom (especially by privileging teacher and school leader expertise) rather than spend their resources outside it.<sup>25</sup>

- 2.87** By contrast, the NSW system is overflowing with distractions. In his Interim Report, Masters provided a telling list of ‘political announcements’ creating:

A diverse set of issues that schools were now being asked to address, including anxiety/depression, resiliency training, childhood obesity, road safety, water safety, Asian studies, healthy school canteens, bushfire safety awareness, languages, cyber safety, anti-bullying, drug education, first aid, stranger danger, healthy eating and pet safety.<sup>26</sup>

- 2.88** Instead of recommending that schools return to their core function of delivering classroom excellence, Masters’ final Report legitimises the all-purpose role of NSW education, especially in the moral and social development of children. At page 4 he argues that:

With the decline of other institutions – sometimes including families – that once played a leading role in inculcating values and developing character, schools have found it increasingly necessary to give priority to students’ social and emotional development.

- 2.89** What an insult to the millions of loving, devoted parents in NSW who don’t see their families as in decline, who see themselves as doing the best job they can in raising their children. If there’s one institution in decline, it’s the NSW education system; just look at the PISA results. Masters provides no evidence for his slur against families.
- 2.90** In reality, most families still see themselves as part of a clear division of responsibility in relation to the education system. Schools are there for academic excellence, vocational skills and imparting knowledge and intellectual growth in students. Parents are responsible for the emotional, social and moral development of their children, especially on intensely personal issues such as gender and sexuality. No decent parent would contract out guidance in such matters to school staff.
- 2.91** Where have the non-academic functions of schools come from? Traditionally, schools were seen as having a single role: giving young people their best start in life through intellectual growth and qualifications. Over the past 30 years, however, activists have re-conceptualised schools as agents of political and social change. The focus has moved from classroom results to reshaping the values, beliefs and ‘wellbeing’ of the child.
- 2.92** Schools have flooded towards this approach, partly out of political intent, partly because it’s a more comfortable style of work for teachers. Delivering academic growth for students can be tough and challenging; teaching performance can be measured and reported on. By contrast, ‘wellbeing’ is a nebulous concept, very often a state of mind, without accurate performance measures and accountability. The flaws in this approach were highlighted in the May 2019 NSW Auditor-General’s report, ‘Wellbeing of Secondary School Students’.

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<sup>25</sup> John Hattie (2015), *What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise*, London: Pearson, p 26.

<sup>26</sup> Geoff Masters, NSW Education Standards Authority, ‘NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report’, October 2019, p 27.

- 2.93** It says a lot about education in NSW today that just one government school (Marsden Road Public) has a strategic objective of ‘achieving academic growth’ for its students, while 60 have signed up to the ‘Grow Your Mind’ consultancy, with its work sheets on animal yoga, gratitude meditation and ‘shark versus dolphin thinking’.<sup>27</sup> These activities are mostly futile. There is no firm research to say that schools can teach or measure personal attributes like resilience, optimism and ‘growth mindset’. Why then are vast amounts of teaching time and resources being diverted away from knowledge development that can, in fact, be measured and taught? Masters never answers this question.
- 2.94** If schools spend less time on academic subjects, they inevitably achieve weaker academic results. This is the biggest de-cluttering challenge: to return schools to their core purpose of intellectual growth and qualifications, without the political and social engineering of students’ beliefs. While student wellbeing is important, we cannot afford schools to see themselves primarily as healthcare centres. Health-related issues are primarily a job for medical experts, assisted by parents. In any case, by far the best wellbeing program schools can deliver is to ensure that each of their students is an engaged, active and successful learner.
- 2.95** Under the banner of ‘mindfulness’ and ‘mental wellness’, our academic standards have already fallen away. NSW schools are dropping their testing, grading, ranking, award-recognition and homework requirements to achieve a different type of classroom: less stress, less anxiety, less discomfort. Naturally, some students are milking this new approach to minimise their workload. If a student doesn’t want to do something at school, they simply need to say they are anxious about it.
- 2.96** Like other parts of society, ‘anxiety’ (what we used to call ‘worrying too much’) has become an all-purpose alibi for avoiding effort and responsibility. As a school leader has said, ‘The mental health issues in schools are a mixture of the real and the confected and quite frankly, teachers find it impossible to know which is which.’<sup>28</sup> Teachers are not trained in this field, so ultimately it is unfair to expect them to be in the frontline of these issues. A strange and unexpected day has arrived in NSW education, where we need to say: Schools need to be schools.

## **9. Why Were Some Masters Policy Directions Downplayed?**

- 2.97** While there are many valid criticisms of Masters, there are also commendable proposals in his thinking. It is bizarre, however, that the best parts of the Masters approach are virtually invisible in his final Report. It’s as if political correctness has taken hold, that he’s too worried about backwash from the Education Establishment to clearly state several reform propositions. There are three examples of this process.
- 2.98** The first is in the teaching of literacy. Masters has little to say on the vital question of how to best teach children to read. Yet the evidence is clear: Hattie’s research assigns Phonics a 0.6 effect level and Whole Language 0.06 (with 0.4 as the ‘hinge point’ at which something is worth teaching). Learn-to-read programs in the NSW curriculum must be based on the explicit teaching of Phonics. Despite the weight of evidence supporting this approach, many school leaders persist in pursuing failed ideas involving Whole Language reading.

<sup>27</sup> *Question and Answers Paper*, NSW Legislative Council, 14 April 2020, p 1903; *Question and Answers Paper*, NSW Legislative Council, 26 May 2020, p 2230.

<sup>28</sup> Conversation with school leader (the Hon Mark Latham MLC, School Visit).

- 2.99** Incredibly, Masters makes no positive mention of Phonics in his report. The closest he comes is at page 99, where he advocates, 'This curriculum should be grounded in research into how young children learn to read' and footnotes a 2018 Macquarie University report by Castles, Rastle and Nation. This is quality, evidence-based research highlighting the importance of Phonics. The authors argue:

There is intense public interest in questions surrounding how children learn to read and how they can best be taught. Research in psychological science has provided answers to many of these questions but, somewhat surprisingly, this research has been slow to make inroads into educational policy and practice. Instead, the field has been plagued by decades of 'reading wars' ... We present a comprehensive tutorial review of the science of learning to read, spanning from children's earliest alphabetic skills through to the fluent word recognition and skilled text comprehension characteristic of expert readers. We explain why Phonics instruction is so central to learning in a writing system such as English.

- 2.100** Instead of a footnote, this conclusion should have been up in lights. Nothing matters more than the foundational skills of literacy. The new curriculum should embed the Macquarie research findings into every NSW classroom.
- 2.101** Second, by recommending a traditional subject structure in the new curriculum, Masters rejects the faddish approach of building syllabuses around so-called 'general capabilities'. This is a Left-wing economic theory that the nature of work is being transformed, requiring students to equip themselves with the 21st Century skills of 'communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking'. Every 20-30 years this speculation is recycled under the banner of 'the coming of the machines', with automation supposedly creating mass unemployment in Western economies.
- 2.102** Obviously these theorists are in the wrong business. If they can accurately predict workplace and industry trends, they should be working as investment advisors and share market billionaires. In practice, the chances of education bureaucrats and politicians anticipating the changing nature of work in a complex market economy are minimal. There is no need to punt wildly on matching up the school curriculum to unpredictable labour market trends.
- 2.103** The best approach, in the best interests of students, is to concentrate schooling on the foundational skills of literacy, numeracy and deep knowledge – a base from which students can then develop more specialised work-related skills, as the need arises. This was CESE's conclusion in its 2019 paper on 'General Capabilities', finding that attributes such as critical and creative thinking 'are best developed in the context of a knowledge-rich curriculum, where learning is carefully sequenced. This will enable learners to develop an increasingly sophisticated capacity to understand and apply knowledge, as they journey from novice to expert.'<sup>29</sup>
- 2.104** The third mystery is why Masters believes in abolishing the three Cross-Curriculum Priorities (for Asian Engagement, Environmental Sustainability and Indigenous Studies) but fails to say so in his final Report. Given Australia's deteriorating relationship with China, Asian Engagement has become problematic. There is no sound reason why it needs to be taught across all NSW curriculum domains. The Federal Government now has a policy of diversifying Australia's trade and diplomatic links. The high point of optimism about Australian-Asian relations from the 1990s has long passed.

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<sup>29</sup> NSW Department of Education, 'General capabilities: A perspective from cognitive science', Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation Report, July 2019, p 7.

- 2.105** So too, as Australia enters a deep and nasty recession, it is difficult to know why ‘Sustainability’ is a higher cross-curriculum priority than say ‘economic growth and recovery’ or ‘workplace productivity and prosperity’. An obvious way of de-cluttering the curriculum, of easing the teacher classroom load, is to abandon the notion of all-purpose syllabus priorities.
- 2.106** In Indigenous Studies, Masters has recommended and the Government supports a stand-alone subject 'that specifies what every student should know and understand about Aboriginal cultures and histories, and incorporate this into Human Society and its Environment.' (Recommendation 5.3) This appears to be part of a trade-off whereby Masters would abandon the Cross-Curriculum Priority in Indigenous. Yet this is not spelt out in his recommendations or the Government’s policy response. At the moment, therefore, it’s double Indigenous: the new subject combined with the old priority. This is a strange aspect of today’s politics, with many ‘leaders’ afraid of stating the obvious in Aboriginal affairs.
- 2.107** In comprehending this mess, it is worth quoting in full Masters’ intent at page 105 of the Report:
- The Review’s recommendation is that a curriculum be developed that clarifies what every student should know and understand about Aboriginal cultures and histories. The Aboriginal community should play the central role in the development of this curriculum, which should be incorporated into Human Society and its Environment. The recommendation is not to address Aboriginal cultures and histories opportunistically across the school curriculum, but to make this a mandated part of student learning based on an explicit curriculum taught and assessed in all schools.
- 2.108** It seems extraordinary for the new subject to be devised by the Aboriginal community itself. Usually by now the Education Establishment would be jumping up and down, defending the integrity of ‘professional educational qualifications’ in syllabus design. It is unprecedented to hand over curriculum content to a group who themselves are the subject of the content. The potential loss of objectivity and historical accuracy is obvious.
- 2.109** In the political system, the Aboriginal lobby clearly wishes for something more glorified than the truth of a nomadic people (hunter-gatherers), but the facts do not support such revisionism. Historians as diverse as Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey have reached the same conclusion: that by the end of the 17th Century, Indigenous Australians had a quality of life comparable to the European peasant class. But thereafter, geographic isolation left Aboriginal society behind, compared to the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution.
- 2.110** Historians are united in what happened, mainly because it did happen. The colonial settlement of Australia involved significant mistakes but generally, governors such as Lachlan Macquarie tried to civilise those around them, in both the Indigenous and convict populations. They tried to turn a prison into a new society, ultimately building the best nation on Earth. This is one of the great achievements of human history and should be recognised as such in the curriculum.
- 2.111** The fiction underpinning Bruce Pascoe’s book ‘Dark Emu’ has no place in NSW schools. It’s an act of fantasy to say that pre-1788 Aborigines lived in townships with sophisticated agriculture. So too, that European settlers deliberately destroyed the evidence of this civilisation; and that 20th century Australian academics systematically suppressed information about it. We should be teaching facts in our schools, not conspiracy theories.
- 2.112** There’s no shame in a people being nomadic. Logically, it meant that a written language, history books and wheeled transport were not practical parts of such an existence. That’s how

Aboriginal Australia was for 60,000 years, and that's how it should be taught in schools. In fact, there is nothing more disrespectful to Indigenous people than rewriting the truth of who they were and how they lived.

- 2.113** Australian history is important, both pre- and post-1788, but there is no reason for Indigenous culture and history to dominate the curriculum. Currently in the Years 7-10 History Syllabus, there are 133 mentions of 'Aboriginal', 37 of 'British' (mostly negative), 14 of 'Western' and 7 of 'Christianity'. This is part of a pattern: downplaying and stigmatising the achievements of the West, while idealising Indigenous culture beyond its historical truth.
- 2.114** As with every other subject, Indigenous Studies must be proportional to student need. Masters does not make the case for a new stand-alone subject; he merely asserts it. At a minimum, the Government needs to clarify what it plans to do with the study of Indigenous content. The best option would be to abandon the cross-curriculum priority (as per Masters' intent) and ensure the new Aboriginal syllabus is developed in an objective and independent way.

## **10. What Happened to Tackling the Antithesis of 'Back To Basics': Post-Modernism?**

- 2.115** In 2019 the then Chair of NESA said the Masters Report would tackle the problem of post-modernist content in NSW syllabuses.<sup>30</sup> No such thing happened. It's a stunning omission, overlooking the core problem with how the curriculum is currently being interpreted and taught in NSW schools. Masters has made no attempt to return classroom teaching to a reliable, scientifically-sound base of knowledge and analysis. Instead the anti-education, anti-intellectual notion of knowledge being 'socially constructed' has been allowed to stand.
- 2.116** This is the antithesis of the Government's back-to-basics policy goal. It makes a farce of where the curriculum reform process is now headed. Unless the Government addresses this problem, self-evidently, NSW's school academic results will continue to decline. Our Asian competitor nations are not wasting classroom time on gender studies in English, endless source verification in History, project-based learning in Maths or Indigenous content in Science. They do education the way we used to and not surprisingly, they get the results we used to get.
- 2.117** When NSW changed direction at the turn of the century, our results began to slide. The correlation is clear. So too is the solution: Using teaching methods that are known to work in the classroom, developing the basic skills of factual inquiry around key subjects. The post-modernists complain about colonisation, but in the NSW curriculum they have been the great colonisers. Here's the extent of the problem in four key areas:

### ***a) Post-Modernism in English***

- 2.118** The English curriculum has become more like a tutorial in identity politics than the development of comprehension and writing skills. Studying the great works of English literature has also become optional. If students choose to study politics at university, good luck to them. But it shouldn't be compulsory during their school years under the fraudulent banner of 'English'.

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<sup>30</sup> Conversation with NSW Education Standards Authority senior executive (the Hon Mark Latham MLC, Briefing).

- 2.119** Large parts of the NSW high school English syllabus now focus on identity issues, promoting gender theory and the politics of 'diversity'. The curriculum stresses how, 'Students experience and value difference and diversity in their everyday lives. Age, beliefs, gender, language and race are some of the factors that comprise difference and diversity. English provides students with opportunities to deal with difference and diversity in a positive and informed manner, showing awareness, understanding and acceptance.'
- 2.120** Students are asked to 'Identify the ways in which cultural assumption is presented in texts, for example, gender, religion, disability and culture.' The 'conventions of speech' are said to 'influence community identity' while language 'embodies assumptions about issues such as gender, ethnicity and class.'
- 2.121** Multimedia, film, animation and speech studies have been introduced, usually with intensely political content, such as the actress Emma Watson's address to the United Nations promoting Left-feminism. The class time allocated for studying the classics of prose, plays and poetry has been substantially reduced. For Years 7-10 students, the NSW syllabus contains no requirement for reading novels, let alone the great works. What a tragedy for our society: teenagers who will never experience the mastery of a Dickens, Orwell or George Johnston.
- 2.122** For the few classics that remain in the classroom, they have been recast through the prism of Leftist politics. Even the meaning of Emily Brontë's work has been rewritten. In the NSW curriculum, 'Wuthering Heights' is traditionally read as a novel about intense human relationships but contemporary alternative readings include a political reading, seeing it as a novel of social class and bourgeois exploitation in Victorian England and a gendered reading, with gender stereotypes.' Little did Cathy realise she was coming home to a tutorial in cultural Marxism.
- 2.123** In Year 10 English, students have to answer the question, 'Is This Who We Really Are?' as part of a unit on 'Media Gender Representations'. The course aims to 'make young people aware that besides media representations, gender stereotypes also exist and are perpetuated by many factors, such as peer pressure, family upbringing, culture and tradition.' This is not education, but an attempt to push young people away from observable truths in their lives, in favour of post-modernist propaganda.
- 2.124** Like the discredited Safe Schools program, it seeks to pressure students into disregarding the things they have learnt in the family home. The unit presents students with a list of so-called gendered adjectives, including 'clever', 'decisive', 'responsible', 'hardworking', 'leader' and even 'frigid' – a bizarre English exercise in sex education. There is no evidence of words such as these being 'gendered' (even if that mattered in the teaching of English).
- 2.125** In Years 11 and 12, post-modernist texts have become common, such as Alain de Botton's ridiculous 'The Art of Travel'. The author constantly complains of how the things he is witnessing as a tourist are not real. Yet if there is one thing in our lives that is practically self-apparent it's the act of travelling and witnessing firsthand famous places. No one pays good money for tourism to believe that nothing is real.
- 2.126** This is typical of the post-modernist agenda: encouraging students to believe that all they know and feel about themselves and society is inherently fluid, that there is no valid reality in their young lives. This is not the study of English, but a weird attempt at indoctrination.



- 2.127** Take, for example, the way in which English is taught at Maitland High School. The school's website presents its Year 7-12 courses as examining 'The ways that composers create meaning, manipulate us as an audience to respond in a particular way or even believe something. We then teach you this power, this great skill in creating meaning out of nothing and manipulating the world around you.'
- 2.128** This is not even intelligent post-modernism. How many NSW parents want their children to 'create meaning out of nothing' and become manipulators of those around them? The English outline at Maitland then continues with a statement on 'Identity', describing it as 'shaped by our physicality, our intellect, cultural prejudice, historical bias, education and even our language itself. We can control it but this may not be without danger because we can also lie to ourselves through it.'
- 2.129** Presumably the purpose of English classes is to clean out the 'cultural prejudice and historical bias' in students and stop them lying to themselves. The Year 7 class has studied topics and worksheets relating to Black Lives Matter, police 'racial profiling' and the school's definition of 'Equality'. This sounds more like a cult, a brainwashing exercise, than scholarly learning about the great themes and insights of English. Schools like Maitland are indicative of what's gone wrong in this subject area. English was once the showpiece of NSW school education. Now it's a forum for trash teaching.
- 2.130** Post-modernism and identity politics need to be removed from the NSW English curriculum. Priority needs to be given to literacy, comprehension and writing skills. Secondary students need to study the great works of our civilisation, the literary classics that tell us who we are and the creative ways in which our culture expresses itself. They need to learn English, not politics.

***b) Post-Modernism in History***

- 2.131** The facts of history are well established. No amount of politically motivated revisionism can recast them. Yet the NSW history curriculum encourages this foolhardy process. The K-10 syllabus starts by declaring: 'There are many differing perspectives within a nation's history and historians may interpret events differently, depending on their point of view and the sources they have used.'
- 2.132** Thus students are forced to spend vast amounts of time on 'source verification'. Instead of learning about the joy and wonder of historical events, they are required to question how our knowledge of history has been 'socially constructed'. As if the causes of World War I are unknown or China's objection to 19th century colonisation remain a mystery.
- 2.133** This is an insult to historians and the diligence and records of the academy. It's part of the post-modernist pedagogy of promoting doubt and confusion ahead of deep knowledge. Source verification involves asking how history was recorded, rather than the key question of how and why it happened. Many students find this process torturous and drop out of senior-year courses such as Modern History, which has over-dosed on verification techniques better suited to university-level history.
- 2.134** A constant theme in history teaching is distrust in history itself. Year 7 students are introduced to high school history with Napoleon's apocryphal quote that, 'History is a set of lies agreed upon'. How does this build enthusiasm for learning the wonders and detail of history? To have students thinking they are wasting their time studying a pack of lies?

- 2.135** By taking this approach, the history curriculum is confusing students rather than educating them. The priorities are also wrong, with too many fad political subjects entering the syllabus. For instance, when Aung San Suu Kyi was a darling of the Left, a 'Pro-democracy Movement in Burma 1945–2010' course entered the Year 12 History curriculum. But then Suu Kyi was accused of genocide, losing political favour. In the 2019 HSC, less than one per cent of students attempted the exam question on this topic – another lesson in the folly of constructing courses around transient political trends.<sup>31</sup>
- 2.136** In the teaching of history, school resources are spread too thinly. The syllabus deals with many cultures and peoples across the world, without developing a clear, deep knowledge of Western history. If we don't properly understand ourselves, the history of our nation and culture, how can we understand that of others?
- 2.137** In Stage 4 (Years 7-8) it is possible to study 'The Ancient World' without the history of Rome or Greece being taught – the birthplace of democracy, humanism, architecture, arts and legal codes. Again, in studying 'Ancient to the Modern World', it is possible to not learn European history, to overlook the Renaissance, Enlightenment and rise of classical liberalism. A combination of the Ottoman Empire, Khmer Empire and Mongol Expansion can be studied instead.
- 2.138** In 'Modern World' classwork, there's nothing mandatory about courses on the rise and fall of communism, the Cold War and post-September 11 war-on-terror. Rather, the emphasis is on 'rights and freedom', 'popular culture', 'the environmental movement' and 'migration experience'. In senior-year Modern History, there are case studies on the West, but mostly from a negative perspective. Several courses are trivial and quite strange, such as 'Tibet in the Modern World' and 'The 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing, its impact on environmental awareness and the impact on Earth Day 1970'.
- 2.139** These problems are clear to students and parents, indeed anyone scanning through the NSW syllabuses. Yet Masters is silent on them. So too, Premier Berejiklian has publicised the importance of the 'basics' without clearing away the dross in the curriculum that makes the classroom teaching of basic history (and other subjects) more difficult.

### *c) Post-Modernism in Science*

- 2.140** One would normally expect the teaching of science to be immune from political content. It's a pure subject, universal in its knowledge base and application. Yet even school science has been tainted by post-modernism, with attempts to position it as culturally and socially 'constructed'. Students need to 'appreciate the contribution that diverse cultural perspectives have made to the development, breadth and diversity of scientific and technological knowledge'.
- 2.141** The K-6 science syllabus claims to 'foster in students a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world'. Instead, it is more like a course in Environmental Studies, interwoven with diversity, Indigenous and 'intercultural understanding'. In studying the 'Earth's relationship with the Sun', for instance, students are required to 'Investigate how changes in the environment are used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop seasonal calendars'.

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<sup>31</sup> Answers to questions on notice, Mr Paul Martin, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Education Standards Authority, 17 April 2020, p 93.

- 2.142** In understanding the fusion of materials, students need to 'identify a range of natural materials available locally and through trade used by Aboriginal people for a specific cultural purpose.' There's also a requirement to 'identify how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples care for the Earth's resources on-country, for example: ochre, fish and seeds.' In studying agricultural technology, classes 'explore the plants and animals used in customary practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.'
- 2.143** Due to the requirement for Aboriginal content in every course, some of the material is a massive stretch, bordering on comical. In understanding 'Digital Technologies', for instance, K-2 students are required to 'explore the uses of digital devices in developing and sustaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages'. Indigenous culture had no books or written history but now apparently, it is sustained by digital devices. Bruce Pascoe, eat your heart out.
- 2.144** There is also considerable environmental overload. 'Sustainability education' is said to be, 'futures-oriented, creating a more ecologically and socially just world'. What does this mean in practice for a young NSW science student? Desperate to include any and all environmental content, they are taught to 'turn off dripping taps and unnecessary lights' and develop 'reusing/recycling campaigns'. In a strike against the commercial world, the syllabus aims to 'develop informed consumers' among nine-year olds, 'making sustainable choices'. It is hard to understand how this is the study of science.
- 2.145** Too much of curriculum development has become an exercise in virtue signaling. In 2018, for instance, ACARA published 95 ways in which science teachers can incorporate Indigenous culture into their lessons. This included:
- Students examining the transformation of energy by studying Aboriginal fire techniques;
  - Researching Indigenous knowledge of celestial bodies and the origins of the universe; and
  - Studying increases in velocity and impact-force through Aboriginal use of spear-throwers.
- 2.146** Some of this is actually anti-science. It's typical of how subjects are being taught through the lens of white-Leftist-guilt, rather than academic integrity and political independence. It might cleanse the conscience of political-types, but it is doing nothing to help our students or economy compete internationally. Aboriginal fire techniques, knowledge of celestial bodies and spear throwing should be taught – in Aboriginal Studies, not science.

***d) Post-Modernism in Classroom Practice***

- 2.147** In their teacher education and instruction booklets on classroom practice, NSW universities are also spreading post-modernism. Many schools still use the Department's Classroom Practice Guide (2003) prepared by Dr James Ladwig and Professor Jennifer Gore from Newcastle University. This talks of 'knowledge not as a fixed body of information but rather as being socially constructed and hence subject to political, social and cultural influences and implications.'
- 2.148** In the Ladwig/Gore teaching style, vast amounts of time are likely to be wasted as 'teachers or students dig out the historical background behind the knowledge presented in a topic'. Apparently source verification is more important than actually learning science, history, geography and literature.

- 2.149** Some of the references for teachers are not only outdated but also unusual, such as the claim that, 'People living with HIV have developed a unique knowledge of Australia and its institutions that is recognisable as cultural knowledge'. Similarly, no one is too young to avoid the reach of post-modernism, such that:

Kindergarten students can be introduced to the idea of knowledge as problematic. For example, in talking about my family, they can see that families mean different things to different people (one, two or many parents; no siblings or many; extended family or nuclear) and that the notion of family depends on circumstances.<sup>32</sup>

- 2.150** Really? In the name of education, five-year-olds are told it's possible to have more than two parents. How could this be seen as a useful part of kindergarten tuition?
- 2.151** As daft as it may seem, family fluidity also features in the NSW K-2 History curriculum. Little children are taught 'Present and Past Family Life', having to answer the question, 'How has family life changed?' In some schools, this can be an invitation for teaching about various sexuality types and gender fluidity. It is indicative of a system more interested in social engineering and superseding the role of parents than actual education.
- 2.152** Moreover, telling young students that knowledge is 'problematic' damages the effectiveness of the education system. Under the Ladwig/Gore method, students are taught from the beginning of their school years not to trust in the information they are given, to believe that everything they are told in the classroom has been 'socially constructed'. The point of a quality education is to pass onto the next generation the great reservoir of accumulated learning and scientific achievement, tested and proven through the ages. To undermine this process among kindergarten students is counterproductive.
- 2.153** Any sensible government would ensure that the likes of Ladwig/Gore and the other post-modernists have no role in the NSW schools system. Instead, their role is expanding. The NSW Department of Education has collaborated with Newcastle University in running so-called 'Quality Teaching Rounds', with Ladwig and Gore guiding teacher professional development groups.
- 2.154** In coming years, this program is projected to reach an additional 30,000 NSW teachers, inculcating the post-modernist method into classroom practice. The head of the Department, Mark Scott, has described the program as 'profound'. What does this mean for our academic results and international standing? In draining student trust and confidence in what they are being taught, and distracting them into endless source and historical verification, NSW's downward spiral is certain to continue.

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<sup>32</sup> James Ladwig and Jennifer Gore, NSW Department of Education (2003), 'Classroom practice guide: quality teaching in NSW public schools', p 17.

## Conclusion

- 2.155** Whenever we receive confirmation of Australia's declining school results, there's generally surprise among the political class. Yet this disturbing outcome has been utterly predictable. Every move away from the evidence base for what works in classrooms has been a move in the wrong direction. The central problem with the Masters Report is the absence of clear evidential material. In many cases, it asked the NSW Cabinet to fly blind and that's what they are doing.
- 2.156** There is no sense of how the Government intends to get from the Masters recommendations to its back-to-basics objective. Leaving it to Masters himself and other members of the Education Establishment runs into the problems listed above. Relying entirely on NESA is also risky, given its range of administrative shortcomings.
- 2.157** From the Masters Curriculum Review, the NSW Government should aim to achieve the following:
- Key reform goals: using an evidence-based approach to improve NSW school outcomes, de-clutter the curriculum and develop basic/foundational skills and deep knowledge among students. The emphasis must be on quality classroom teaching and school leadership expertise.
  - Removing all post-modernist, identity-based and political content from syllabuses. This would clear more class time for the basics of literacy and numeracy, and content-rich courses in science, history, geography, other social sciences and the great works of our civilisation. This is genuine de-cluttering.
  - Creating Best Practice curriculum use in NSW schools, narrowing the gap between syllabus intentions and what's actually taught in classrooms. This is an important way of realising the benefits of Collective Teacher Efficacy within schools and across the NSW education system.
  - Establishing a NSW standard by which each student achieves at least one year's progress for each year of class time. This means extending the best students to their highest level while also ensuring any student falling behind receives intensive, evidence-based interventions and assistance. There must be zero tolerance of failure.
  - Not proceeding with Progression Points as an unproven, high-risk reform. At a minimum, NSW should wait and learn from the Welsh experience, especially in the implementation of its national standards and accountability code.
  - Clarifying the relationship between the new NSW curriculum and the redevelopment of the Australian Curriculum by ACARA.
  - Scaling up the success of the Hoxton Park model in vocational education and 'job ready' career paths for secondary students.
  - Highlighting and implementing the Masters proposals that 'dare not speak their name': Evidence-based phonics literacy teaching; ending Cross-Curriculum Priorities; and structuring syllabuses around subject areas rather than 'general capabilities'.
  - Ensuring the new Indigenous syllabus is developed in an objective, factual and independent way.

- Returning the focus of schools to academic attainment and vocational qualifications, ending attempts to engineer the ‘social development’ of students. Schools must teach classroom material in a manner consistent with the values of parents.
- Putting the ‘wellbeing’ functions of schools in their proper perspective. That is, they must be supplementary to the core functions of student achievement (academic and vocational). Wellbeing programs should be delivered outside of class-time by qualified medical professionals and driven by proven performance measures of success.
- Ensuring all curriculum changes are evaluated for high-effect impacts on student learning. Parameters for what success looks like must be clearly defined. Cost-benefit analyses must drive government policy and implementation, rather than the worldview of a single curriculum reviewer.

