

## **INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

**Organisation:** Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)

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# Inquiry into the NSW School Curriculum

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*Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No.3 – Education*

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## 1. Terms of Reference

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is pleased to make this submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education inquiry into 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.



## 2. About ARACY

ARACY aims to improve the wellbeing of all young Australians aged 0-24 years. We focus on bringing researchers, policymakers and practitioners together to turn the best evidence on 'what works' for child and youth wellbeing into practical, preventive action to benefit all young Australians. Established in 2001, ARACY continues to build on the founding idea that the complex issues affecting young Australians can't be solved by one individual or organisation working in isolation.

ARACY, along with its members, is in the business of brokering practical and innovative strategies to improve child and youth wellbeing. We are an independent, evidence focused organisation that consistently and intentionally collaborates with diverse stakeholders to ensure their work amplifies each other's and a complete picture of the child is considered.

Given ARACY's commitment to the wellbeing of young people, we believe schools must support the whole child throughout their entire education. As such, in this submission we wish to comment on the following items:

- 1.(a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy
- 3 (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.

## 3. ARACY feedback

### *1.(a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy*

ARACY is keen to emphasise **wellbeing** as a critical consideration for all NSW students. However, the question is not whether wellbeing should be specifically included in the school curriculum, or on an as-needs or extracurricular basis, but rather that the concept is viewed holistically by the NSW Education system.

There are two points ARACY would like to make in relation to wellbeing. The first relates to how we define student wellbeing, and the second is to emphasise that student wellbeing needs to be a prime focus of all educators, throughout all schooling years.

In his review, Professor Masters notes, "*In summary, the promotion of student wellbeing and mental health, the development of desired personal attributes and the building of character were seen by school systems, teachers and parents as central and vital purposes of schooling – at the heart of the school mission and relevant to all aspects of school life at all times.*"<sup>1</sup>

ARACY is pleased, though not surprised, to see the importance of student wellbeing and the building of character recognised in this way by school systems, teachers and parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Masters, 2020, p.16

However, we note that the Review goes on to assert that, *"For this reason, it was considered inappropriate to consign the development of these attributes to any particular learning area or any particular stage of school."*<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Review also questions whether wellbeing – referred to here as the social, ethical, emotional and physical development and health – should indeed be given priority in the curriculum:

*"But in the twenty-first century, should the curriculum of schools explicitly include and give greater priority to the social, ethical, emotional and physical development and health of every student, and recognise these as school-wide and schooling priorities?"*<sup>3</sup>

ARACY notes that of the recommended syllabus changes, social and emotional development and wellbeing is explicitly given a high priority in the early years, but not so the middle or later years.<sup>4</sup> We also note that in the NSW Government's response to the Review, acknowledgement is made of the link between higher levels of wellbeing and higher academic achievement, and therefore, *"...the NSW Government is expanding access to additional support for mental health and wellbeing, by ensuring every high school has a full-time counsellor or educational psychologist by 2023".*<sup>5</sup>

As we navigate the ongoing uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to understand student wellbeing, help students build it, and for us to measure and monitor their wellbeing. Therefore, it is important to have a shared understanding of the concept and why we need to take a holistic view of 'wellbeing'.

There is currently no global definition of wellbeing, which creates different translations and interpretations about the concept. We often see different terms being used interchangeably with wellbeing, such as 'mental health', and in the education sector particularly, 'social/emotional skills' or 'social/emotional learning' are used synonymously with the concept of wellbeing. This is problematic because it adds to the ambiguity of the concept and means that the wider population have different understandings; it means different things to different people. It also impacts on our ability to measure it, particularly in relation to students.

The current descriptors of wellbeing include:

- **thriving** rather than just surviving. In the case of students, this is more than getting through a school year without needing some type of extra support, but of young people living their best lives.
- a **dynamic state**, changing in both the short- and long-term. This encompasses the normal ebb and flow of life, and importantly is not about being 'happy all the time'.
- is **multi-faceted**, in that it takes an ecological frame, and is multi-dimensional.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.16

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.81

<sup>5</sup> NSW Government, 2020, p.26





- is, for a young person, closely linked to their family's wellbeing, more so than for an adult, and is also closely linked with quality of life, and is a major contributor to quality of life.
- is **subjective** and **objective**. It is subjective in relation to how a young person feels and thinks about their life, and objective referring to collecting data from measurable conditions.
- is **holistic**. It encompasses more than just 'mental health' or 'social/emotional skills'. While these are crucial aspects of wellbeing, we know that wellbeing is not limited to these areas.

ARACY is undertaking a study into this area and currently are using the following **working definition of wellbeing**:

*Wellbeing is the state of a person's overall system.*

*System:* Rather than considering the physical body as the system, here we are referring to a person as a system, which includes their resources, e.g. their autonomy, their social support networks. It includes a person's conditions, e.g. what they face daily. It encompasses sub-systems and interconnections, and those networks that feed back on, and regulate, each other.

Although there is no established or globally recognised definition for wellbeing, we know how to describe it, we have a working definition for it, and ARACY has a well-established set of dimensions for wellbeing in *The Nest*, launched in 2013.

The Nest is Australia's first evidence-based framework for national child and youth wellbeing (0-24 years); a national plan for child and youth wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> It was developed in conjunction with 150 of ARACY's partner organisations, and included a comprehensive consultation with thousands of children and young people in Australia.

The Nest promotes a shared vision for Australia's children and young people (aged 0-24) where: 'All young people are loved and safe, have material basics, are healthy, are learning and participating and have a positive sense of identity and culture.' This applies to all Australian children and youth, regardless of age, gender, ability, ethnicity, race and socioeconomic status.<sup>7</sup>

The Nest shows that for a child to truly have high wellbeing, they must be doing well in six key, interlocking dimensions:

- Being Valued, Loved and Safe

<sup>6</sup>ARACY (2014). *The Nest action agenda: Improving the wellbeing of Australia's children and youth while growing our GDP by over 7%*. Canberra: ARACY, p. 5. Retrieved from [https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download\\_file/id/329/filename/Second edition The Nest action agenda.pdf](https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/329/filename/Second%20edition%20The%20Nest%20action%20agenda.pdf)

For further information on *The Nest* and the *action agenda*, see <http://www.aracy.org.au/projects/the-nest>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.4

- Healthy
- Learning
- Having Material Basics
- Participating and,
- Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture.



**Figure 1: The Nest: a wellbeing framework for children and young people, ARACY**

There are many topics and areas that sit underneath each of the six areas, however one factor that is integral to each and every domain is **responsive relationships**. None of these six domains can be fully supported unless responsive relationships exist. Essentially, young people need positive and trusting relationships to have good wellbeing.

ARACY is keen to emphasise that if wellbeing is narrowly defined in terms of only a subset of these six areas /domains, then we are missing the holistic lens so vital for student wellbeing. Continuing to adopt a narrow view of wellbeing entrenches a siloed way of thinking, which entrenches a siloed way of working, which then exacerbates the issues of not seeing students as whole people who have full lives outside of the school environment, and who need to have good, holistic wellbeing to be ready and able to learn to the best of their ability.





### *3 (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*

ARACY is supportive of the (new) Alice Springs Declaration recognising education's role in supporting the wellbeing, mental health and resilience of young people: "*Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society, and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing.*"<sup>8</sup> We are also pleased that this vision for Australian education emphasises that the middle years in particular require investment in emotional wellbeing, and that "*developing healthy peer relationships should be encouraged, including a focus on student engagement and wellbeing.*"<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, student wellbeing isn't about having the right 'program'. Indeed, wellbeing isn't a program. Rather, supporting student wellbeing is about schools having the skills to implement, or enact, a holistic, evidence-based wellbeing framework such as The Nest. One example is [The Common Approach](#)<sup>®</sup>; a way to talk to children and young people, and their families, about wellbeing - best-practice conversations about wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

Professional development in a model such as 'The Common Approach' needs to include every adult who may have a positive and trusting relationship with a student, not only educators. In a school environment this encompasses front desk administrators, teachers, visiting allied health practitioners, education support workers, leadership and executive teams, and sporting coaches and others. It is the responsibility of every adult to protect our children and young people, regardless of position descriptions or roles, and being equipped to have quality conversations about wellbeing is how that can occur.

Supporting the ongoing wellbeing of each and every student needs to be a prime focus of all adults working with student, throughout all schooling years, not just the early years. Systematically delivered professional development is required to ensure all are equipped to have best-practice conversations about wellbeing.

Wellbeing conversations can be complimented with wellbeing surveys, which tend to be completed annually. A more effective way to check on whole groups of students is through apps such as the [Wellbeing Pulse](#) which allows real time collection of wellbeing data using an evidence based framework. Pulse also includes a way for students who need help to reach out to a person of their choosing.

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<sup>8</sup> Council of Australian Governments Education Council (2019), p.2

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.13





## 4. Summary of Feedback

Overall, ARACY is supportive of the proposals put forward in the NSW Curriculum Review. In particular, we commend and encourage the consultation with young people during the process, through the targeted student survey.

ARACY would like to explicitly express our support for the Review's assertion that curriculum reform is urgent, and that a redesigned curriculum is part of the solution to ensuring that every young person learns successfully and is well prepared for further learning, life and work.

ARACY's recommendations:

- That wellbeing is recognised as a critical consideration for all NSW students in the new curriculum, and importantly, that that the concept is viewed holistically.
- That in defining and measuring student wellbeing, consideration is given to leveraging Australia's first evidence-based framework for national child and youth wellbeing, *The Nest*.
- That supporting ongoing student wellbeing is recognised as a prime focus for not only educators, but all workers who interact with students within the school environment throughout all schooling years
- Targeted, evidence-based professional development is delivered to adults in a position to have a trusted relationship with children and young people to ensure they are equipped to have best-practice conversations about wellbeing.





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