

**Submission
No 34**

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Independent Education Union NSW and ACT

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SUBMISSION – INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION NSW/ACT BRANCH

INQUIRY INTO THE NSW SCHOOL CURRICIULUM

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Independent Education Union (IEU) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum, NSW Legislative Council Committee Portfolio 3 (Education).

Context

The IEU represents teachers from early childhood, primary and secondary settings across the non-government sector.

In December 2019, the IEU responded to the NSW Curriculum Review, after consulting widely with its membership of approximately 27,000 teachers. This included two live online forum events with members giving direct feedback during guided sessions.

General feedback

The IEU is broadly supportive of many of the suggestions put forward by Professor Masters. The IEU, however, cautions that many external factors also significantly impact the efficacy of our schools, including but not limited to: external standardised testing regimes, the requirement of schools to address education campaigns not included in syllabus documents, a lack of appropriate resourcing for early childhood placements for all NSW children, the social impact on schools and teachers due to changes in technology and societal expectations, conflicting requirements between state and federal governments regarding NCCD, and the impact of school registration and accreditation requirements upon teacher time. Any changes to the curriculum need to be mindful of external factors that limit teaching time of the curriculum.

Further, the IEU wishes to acknowledge that the NSW education system, with its accompanying exit credential of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) has served NSW students well for over 50 years. It is a world-recognised credential which is demanding, challenging, inclusive, equitable, and has the flexibility within its current structures to evolve appropriately to serve the needs of all students. The IEU is supportive of planned, evolutionary and teacher-agreed development of the HSC.

The IEU acknowledges the value of the aspirations espoused in the Curriculum Review led by Professor Masters, while at the same time stressing that the education sector and education policy cannot bear the sole responsibility for addressing broader issues such as

the lack of meaningful job opportunities for young people, child poverty and inequality of wealth distribution.

1. The extent to which the Masters Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, including:

(a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

The IEU contends that the existing curriculum can already be implemented in a more flexible manner. However, the lack of professional discretion afforded to teachers largely prevents this from happening. In particular the IEU believe:

- That more could be done now to communicate to teachers that they can use the curriculum flexibly. Currently, there is a K-10 outcome continuum that students can access at any point, allowing students the capacity to work above or below their chronological age stage level.
- While teachers echoed the concerns of the Review that the current structures of our schools often fail to 'meet students where they are at' they reiterated that this is largely a function of the lack of professional regard given to teachers which would allow them to exercise their professional judgement on a case by case basis.
- The IEU contends that any reforms to the curriculum, and the school system more broadly, need to ensure the teaching profession is respected. The profession should be invited to inform the change process and empowered to drive it.
- A more flexible and diverse curriculum has the potential to exacerbate the issue of teachers teaching outside of their area of expertise. The IEU contends that this issue can only be addressed by adequate resourcing for, amongst other things, teacher training and staffing ratios.
- The recommendation that there be a 'smaller number of rigorous high-quality senior secondary courses', makes the presumption that current senior secondary courses are 'not' rigorous or high quality and raises concerns that a smaller number of courses limits student choice and stymies them pursuing areas of interest.
- The recommendation for a compulsory major project is flawed and very problematic. Many current courses already offer a major project, for example, Visual Art, Drama, Music, Dance, all the Technologies, Extension Science, Extension History, Extension English, Society and Culture, Aboriginal Studies etc. Equity here is also an issue, with regional and remote schools not having access to the resources that city schools do. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be disadvantaged by not being able to purchase the materials needed for projects.
- The IEU contends that the Government's commitment to reducing by 20% the number of school-developed elective courses is a matter for serious concern. Elective courses exist so that students can pursue areas of interest not provided for through the

mandated subjects. School developed courses are often developed to suit a need of a particular cohort of students or to address student engagement with school generally.

(b) Quality and relevance of the evidence-base underpinning the recommendations (compared to CESE findings)

Without knowing which specific research this question refers to, the IEU notes that Professor Masters engaged in wide consultation with education stakeholders, including teachers and their unions. This consultation ensured that the findings of the review were not simply based on research, but also on the lived professional experience of classroom practitioners.

The IEU notes that it voiced strong concerns regarding the implementation of a project in the senior years. This recommendation remains a concern and the IEU is keen to see any evidence-base underpinning this recommendation.

(c) Recommendations for student-centred 'progression points' and 'differentiated learning' in schools and whether such initiatives are research-based and proved to be effective

- It was unclear how the attainment levels in the Masters Review fit in amongst the current formal and informal measures, including but not limited to NAPLAN, growth points, MAI, learning progressions, A-E reporting, HSC, Minimum Standards Testing etc.
- There was widespread concern that the reform referred to in the Masters Review should not turn into another series of mandated tests and data collection exercises.
- Concern was raised that parents already struggle with misinformation about how to read A-E report cards and NAPLAN. Many teachers wanted to know what the attainment levels would be, who would have access to seeing them and what it would mean psychologically to a student if they established a self-defining narrative of being 'off track'.
- Professional concern was expressed about who makes the decision about what is 'on track', and whether that discussion would be inclusive and informed by feedback from a range of stakeholders. On a positive side, teachers were happy to see the idea that growth would be visually reported to parents.
- Wide-ranging opinion was that much more detail would need to be provided before teachers as a profession could give insightful feedback to this reform proposal.
- The IEU agrees that the traditional transition points in schools currently have the capacity to adversely affect student progress.
- The IEU contends that these concerns cannot simply be viewed through the prism of the curriculum. In responding to the issues around these transition points, adequate resourcing of staff as well as the attention to existing physical limitations of school buildings and infrastructure should be viewed as being of equal, if not more importance.

- Whilst the IEU acknowledges that the terms of reference for the Masters Review do not include 0-5 year old education, we contend that there can be no continuity of learning if NSW does not treat 0-18 years education as one system.

(d) Relation with the national schools curriculum

In June 2020, ACARA announced an impending review of the Australian Curriculum. In light of this announcement, it is difficult to comment on what the relationship will be. During a recent meeting with the CEO of ACARA, the IEU raised the issue of alignment with the National Curriculum Review, particularly with regards to the overcrowding of the curriculum. It is becoming apparent there will be greater alignment between the National Curriculum and the NSW Curriculum.

2. The extent to which the Masters Review meets key Government policy objectives, including:

(a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

The IEU supports the finding of the Review that teachers find the curriculum is too crowded, although there are significant differences in how this is manifested in Primary and Secondary settings. Specifically the IEU believe:

- Standardised testing such as NAPLAN has put time pressure on skills attainment, adding to the perception of overcrowding.
- Primary teachers specifically noted the downward drift of curriculum content into earlier stages, and the contributing factor of external standardised testing on this process.
- Secondary teachers were critical of syllabus documents being content driven, with too many dot points to cover.
- K-12 teachers also noted that the inclusion of additional extra-curricular activities, often driven by politics rather than educational imperatives, significantly impacted teaching time. The Review is urged to look at the impact the teaching of additional topics external to formal NESA syllabus documents has on schools eg road, swim, and e-safety programs.
- Primary teachers report that the open-ended nature of many syllabuses leads to teachers feeling overwhelmed and attempting to 'teach everything'. This is often both a cause of, and exacerbated by, the content stage drift identified above. Specific instructions within individual syllabuses detailing mandatory content and suggested or optional content would provide clarity where confusion currently exists.
- The IEU stresses that any proposed changes to syllabus documents should be mindful of the high level of change or reform fatigue experienced by teachers from K-12.

- Teachers report feeling the need to prioritise administrative activities associated with compliance ahead of their core work of teaching and learning.
- The risk-based auditing process currently used in schools, along with the tendency of sectors to include additional layers of compliance with regards to registration and accreditation, has led to an exponential boom in administrative work for teachers. These compliance requirements from both NESAs and the various sectors drive perceptions of an overcrowded curriculum and result in increased teacher workload.
- The IEU contends that NESAs must provide more information and guidance around their compliance requirements.

(b) Ensuring students' acquisition of excellence in literacy and numeracy, as well as deep knowledge of key subjects

- The IEU endorses the finding that deeper understanding should be promoted. This directly links to the provision of a less crowded curriculum which would provide teachers with the time to explore the content.
- A comprehensive review of the scope and sequences of all subjects across the K-12 continuum would reduce both content and repetition and, along with the reduction in syllabus content, would assist in achieving deeper understanding.
- The reforms of the Melbourne Declaration speak to a common entitlement for students in Australia and the idea of a common entitlement is enticing and welcomed by teachers.
- The IEU cautions that the concept of a common entitlement as referred to in the Masters Review should not be used either as the basis for an argument to continue to add to an already crowded curriculum or to revert to a reductionist approach along the lines of the 'back to basics' or 'Three Rs' education.
- IEU contends that appropriate K-2 resourcing is fundamental to ensuring all students acquire stage appropriate skills in literacy and numeracy which form the basis of a claim to a common entitlement.
- Similarly, where students are found to have not met the literacy and numeracy standards at this early stage, appropriate resourcing to facilitate effective intervention is essential if each child is to be afforded their common entitlement.
- Learning a language other than English, as recommended in the Masters Review, is a commendable aim, however, previous experience has shown that any attempts to implement this without appropriate, long term planning and funding is unlikely to succeed. This is especially the case in regional and remote areas.
- In relation to Aboriginal languages, the IEU is mindful that the strict cultural protocols required of teaching Aboriginal language as a common entitlement is problematic.
- Although strictly outside the terms of reference for the Review, the Union contends there is a common entitlement for all children aged three or four receive a 2 or 3 day a week preschool education.

(c) Professor Masters' explanation for NSW declining school results and the role a revised curriculum can play in reversing this decline

The IEU believes that there is a direct correlation between the following factors and the decline in school results as indicated by a select set of measurement instruments:

- Disempowerment of teachers and disrespect for professional judgement.
- The combination of an overcrowded curriculum and artificial deadlines for learning proscribed by NAPLAN.
- A regime of student assessment that does not allow sufficient time for students to acquire knowledge and skills before the next round of testing.
- The ongoing inequities with respect to school resourcing.
- Teachers have been forced to prioritise coverage of an unmanageable amount of content, preparation for standardised testing and constant assessing of students over measured, sequenced teaching which allows for both student readiness and intensive consolidation.

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

- Incorporation of the cross-curriculum priorities into existing Key Learning Areas is an effective way of educating students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, History and Culture; Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; and Sustainability.
- The IEU contends that there is an ongoing need for these priorities to be part of the education of children in Australia. As with our comments about the downward drift in the curriculum, with children expected to understand and internalise knowledge and concepts before they are ready, careful consideration needs to be given to the timing of the teaching of these priorities.

(b) To what extent, if any, knowledge and the curriculum are 'socially constructed', requiring the teaching of source verification and fluidity principles

The curriculum development process in NSW has allowed for significant input from multiple stakeholders. The IEU views this as a strength in the curriculum development process. Of most concern to teachers is the amount of content required to be taught and the age appropriateness of that content.

The IEU believes that its members have both an obligation and a desire to support every student in their care. To that end we have presented professional development courses specifically designed to provide teachers with the knowledge, skill and understanding to appropriately support the diversity of students present in their classes:

- Sexuality and Gender Diversity
18/02/2019 (94 attendees)
30/07/2019 (59 attendees)
- Understanding and Supporting Gender Diversity
26/02/2019 (89 attendees)
08/08/2019 (75 attendees)
- Challenging homophobic and transphobic behaviour
06/03/2020 (88 attendees)
14/08/2019 (59 attendees)

(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

The role of social and emotional development in the acquisition of knowledge and skills is well-documented in both educational research and overwhelming anecdotal evidence provided by classroom practitioners. Students who do not have their social and emotional needs met are unable to access the curriculum on an equitable basis. Wellbeing programs which seek to address this issue contribute to the overall success of students who may have otherwise under-achieved or faced disengagement from learning. Wellbeing programs can be embedded into many content areas of the curriculum and can also provide a framework for literacy and numeracy.

(d) Adequacy of the content and depth of teaching of Australian history, pre- and post-1788

The IEU contends that there is ample scope for the teaching of Australian history in the K-10 HSIE syllabuses. An overview of the content which either explicitly or implicitly facilitates the study of Australian content is listed below:

Early Stage 1

Personal and family histories

Provides a study of present and past family life within the context of the students' own world.

Stage 1

Present and past family life

Provides a study of present and past family life within the context of the students' own world. Students learn about similarities and differences in family life by comparing the present with the past.

Stage 2

First contacts

Students examine European exploration and colonisation in Australia and throughout the world up to the early 1800s.

Stage 3

The Australian colonies

This topic provides a study of colonial Australia in the 1800s. Students look at the founding of British colonies and the development of a colony.

Stage 4

Australia as a nation

This topic moves from colonial Australia to the development of Australia as a nation, particularly after 1901. Students explore the factors that led to Federation and experiences of democracy and citizenship over time. Students understand the significance of Australia's British heritage, the Westminster system and other models that influenced the development of Australia's system of government.

Stage 5

The making of the Modern World and Australia

Provides a study of the history of the making of the modern world from 1750 to 1945. It was an era of nationalism and imperialism, and the colonisation of Australia was part of the expansion of European power. The period culminated in World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945).

The history of the modern world and Australia from 1945 to the present, with an emphasis on Australia in its global context, follows providing an understanding of Australia's development, its place within the Asia-Pacific region, and its global standing.

(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

Schools frequently engage in professional development designed to reinforce existing evidence-based approaches to language acquisition, keeping the skills of their teaching staff

up to date and relevant. The maintenance cycle for a teacher's accreditation cycle also prioritises ongoing professional development. In line with a school's Annual Improvement Plan, teachers can continue to hone their skills in language education both independently and through the school's professional development framework.

In the classroom, teachers select the most appropriate strategies, and combination of strategies, for the students in their care. The importance of respecting professional judgement in the teaching of reading and writing cannot be underestimated.

The steps, small and large, that students take in their journey to become proficient readers and writers can best be supported and guided by the classroom teacher, who understands the background to a student's learning behaviours and is in the best position to lead them beyond their current skill level.

The Early Years recommendations and the current English syllabus documents already prioritise solid foundations in basic oral language, reading, writing and mathematics knowledge and skills. Competition between schools (perhaps partly generated by the My Schools website) and artificial learning deadlines caused by standardised testing (such as NAPLAN) creates enormous pressure to teach without any consideration for readiness or revision. This emphasis on students being taught concepts earlier and earlier has been proven to result in superficial understanding and inadequate knowledge and skills. Teachers have been trying to raise the futility of ignoring student readiness in many forums and have been largely ignored.

(f) Role and effectiveness of vocational education syllabuses in NSW schools

Vocational Education and Training (VET) currently sits within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The AQF is the agreed policy of the Commonwealth, states and territories and accommodates the diversity of purposes of Australian education, builds confidence in and validation of qualifications and assists young people to move easily and readily between school, other education and training sectors and the labour market. The IEU contends that VET in schools needs to remain within a framework that supports diversity of purpose, validity within industry and within a national framework and facilitates skills for transition to further training and work. The IEU notes the additional workloads of teachers delivering vocational education and training within the current framework and propose the equitable allocation of time and funds to maintain the current status of VET in schools.

The current Maintaining Industry Currency requirements are excessive, and do not sufficiently take the teacher's existing qualifications and expertise into account.

(g) Effectiveness of NESAs in curriculum development and supervision

NESA has a consistent history of engaging practicing teachers in a range of its processes including curriculum development and the HSC process (exam setting, marker briefing, marker supervision, judging/standards setting). While we would always welcome increased engagement with the profession, the IEU does not consider NESAs' current processes to be the main issue. Of more concern is the impact of the extraneous demands (standardised testing and public reporting processes such as NAPLAN and MySchools) which drive education policy and decision making, with little or no meaningful consultation with the profession.

4. Any other related matters:

- The timeline to implement “the biggest curriculum change in 30 years” is unrealistic. It is a decision with significant workload, staffing and organisational implications for schools.
- The government says the reason for its “ambitious” timeline, is to enable students to realise the benefits as soon as possible. The history of education reform is littered with reports that stumble and fall at implementation, as renowned education expert, the late Dr Paul Brock said. Politicians have put this review in the fast lane. The profession wants to put it in place properly not quickly.
- Syllabus development needs to be done in a planned, structured and informed fashion, with extensive input from teachers. Masters' implementation phase is 7 years. The Government proposes that the reform take place over 3 years. The IEU contends that such a timetable is unrealistic and unachievable.

Mark Northam

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