

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Association of Independent Schools of NSW

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Introduction

The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales (AISNSW) is the peak body representing the independent school sector in this state. AISNSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry by Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education (the Education Committee) into the recent review of the NSW Curriculum, chaired by Professor Geoff Masters (the Masters Review).

The NSW independent school sector is vibrant and diverse, providing Australian families with the widest choice of education options. There are more than 500 independent schools and campuses in NSW, educating 209,000 students or 17% of the state's students. Key characteristics of the sector in NSW include:

- two-thirds (65%) of schools and campuses are in lower socio-economic status communities
- more than 25% are in regional and remote areas
- almost 20% are special schools for students with disabilities or special assistance schools for students at risk of disengaging with education
- over 10% offer boarding as an option to students, and
- many are small schools, with almost half (45%) educating fewer than 200 students.

The sector is characterised by its diversity, being made up of:

- Christian schools and schools of Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, Lutheran, Maronite, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist and Uniting Church schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Schools of other religious beliefs
- Non-faith schools such as Montessori and Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools
- Schools specialising in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools for students at risk of disengaging with education
- Trade schools
- Community schools, including in Aboriginal communities, and
- Boarding schools

NSW independent schools are registered with the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). Most are governed independently, although some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, eg, those within the Seventh-day Adventist systems.

AISNSW represents and advocates on behalf of the state's independent schools. It also supports them through a range of high-quality professional services, ongoing programs and continual advice, relevant to their context.

After comprehensive consultation with sector representatives, AISNSW provided a joint submission to the Masters Review with the NSW/ACT Branch of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia.

In response to the release of the Masters Review on 23 June 2020, AISNSW supported the recommendations for reforms that would allow schools and teachers more flexibility to adapt and respond to the learning needs of individual students. Specifically, AISNSW supported:

- proposed content reforms, particularly decluttering a crowded curriculum to promote deep learning
- identifying mandatory and optional content to meet student need and allow schools to tailor curriculum content to suit their particular contexts
- building the foundational aspects of each child's learning and development - their social and emotional development, oral language, early reading and early mathematics knowledge and skills; and
- promoting better linkages to future work and study for Year 11 and 12 students with new key learning areas and career pathways

Success will be dependent on considered, measured implementation and not rushing syllabus development or retrofitting requirements and credentials to fit the syllabuses. Consideration also needs to be given to any regulatory implications that may need to be considered simultaneously with curriculum change.

Key Recommendations and AISNSW response

1. *Design new syllabuses for each subject, including subjects of the senior years, to reduce the volume of mandated content where appropriate and to prioritise the learning of core facts, concepts and principles.*

- 1.1 *In each subject of the new curriculum, identify essential facts, concepts and principles, the understanding of which is developed in increasing depth over time, and where required, use this to identify content that is more peripheral and could be removed.*

- 1.2 *Decide how this core content is to be sequenced through new syllabuses, informed by evidence of how increasingly deep knowledge and understandings in a subject commonly unfold and are best developed over time.*

The Masters Review highlighted the crowded nature of the current curriculum, including the amount of content some syllabuses expect teachers to cover, saying it is not conducive to teaching in depth or helping students understand the relevance of what they are learning. It cited evidence from teachers who said their ability to teach effectively was hampered by syllabuses overcrowded with content, leaving insufficient time to build skills in knowledge application.

Focusing on the crowded nature of many syllabuses is one way to address the steady decline in education standards, the review concluded. It said the current syllabuses encourage superficial coverage of material rather than teaching for understanding, exploring relevance and meaning, and providing opportunities for students to transfer and apply what they learn.

AISNSW shares the review's concerns about the volume of mandated content and supports the thrust of these recommendations. Addressing these concerns will require the development of new syllabuses that are leaner in content and more focused on developing deep understandings of concepts and principles. Depth must be prioritised over breadth to better integrate knowledge and skills, and to provide greater flexibility for teachers to respond to and accommodate the needs of the full range of learners.

These are far-reaching reforms and will be challenging to develop and execute. They will also require considerable time and resources, particularly in terms of professional development for teachers.

2. *Design new syllabuses not only to develop increasingly sophisticated knowledge and deeper understandings of a subject, but also skills in applying that knowledge.*

- 2.1 *Make explicit in new syllabuses for every subject that skills in applying knowledge are part of the intended learning, and show how these skills are to be developed over time. These skills include subject-specific skills, but also skills in using technologies, sourcing and analysing information, critical and creative thinking, collaborating and communicating.*

AISNSW supports deepening students' understanding of subjects and improving their ability to apply knowledge. The new curriculum should provide opportunities for students to develop general capabilities such as critical and creative thinking to enable them to solve complex problems and foster innovation to develop new ideas or concepts and apply them.

These capabilities can be developed through deep learning of content knowledge in specific disciplines, and also through integration across the curriculum and the use of a diverse range of approaches. It is important to provide schools maximum flexibility to determine the best ways to deliver these capabilities, according to their own needs and contexts.

AISNSW supports the recommendation that the new syllabuses should ensure the skills required to apply knowledge are taught with the theory of each subject. Theory and the application of theory must be intertwined. These skills are necessary to use technologies, source and analyse information, think critically and creatively, collaborate and communicate.

3. *Design new syllabuses that do not specify when every student must commence, or how long they have to learn, the content of each syllabus.*

- 3.1 *Make new syllabuses untimed, with students progressing to the next syllabus once they have mastered the prior syllabus. Students who require more time should have it; students ready to advance should be able to do so*
- 3.2 *Specify what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do as a result of being taught each syllabus in a subject and illustrate this standard with samples of student responses and work.*

The current syllabuses specify not only what should be taught, but when it should be taught and how much time is allotted. This assumes all students fully master subjects and concepts at the same pace, forcing some students to move to the next year-level syllabus before grasping the content. Gradually, these students fall further and further behind in their learning.

This is almost certainly a major explanation for the large percentage of students who complete school not having achieved even minimally acceptable standards of attainment. (Masters Review, p105)

Prescribing set times for syllabuses also impedes the progress of students who are capable of advancing to more challenging material sooner. Implementing this recommendation to allow schools the intended flexibility to enhance students' learning will require changes to existing legislation and NESA requirements.

The new syllabuses should allow teachers to develop their students' foundation skills and empower them to deliver a responsive curriculum most appropriate to their students' needs, interests and talents. This is difficult to achieve when existing syllabuses are highly prescribed and time limited.

The Masters Review noted that East Asian countries which have recorded high levels of student achievement in international surveys - including China, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea - are also currently introducing greater flexibility into their curricula.

These countries are now rapidly reforming their curricula to place greater emphasis on creativity and entrepreneurialism and are providing teachers with increased flexibility to do this. For example, Singapore has reduced the content of its school curriculum by up to 20 per cent to allow for 'a wider range of teaching approaches'. (Masters Review, p53)

It recognised that current syllabuses are overloaded with content and too explicitly prescribed. The large quantity of dot and dash points makes learning superficial and alienating for some learners. The new curriculum should provide core and additional optional content and outcomes that allow for deep learning and reflect the underpinnings of subject disciplines.

4. *In the early years of school, give priority to providing every child with solid foundations in the basics, especially oral language development, early reading and writing skills and early mathematics knowledge and skills.*
 - 4.1 *Make explicit in the curriculum that oral language development, early reading and writing skills and early mathematics skills are top priorities in the early years of school, particularly for children who are less advanced in these areas, and that these take precedence over other aspects of learning.*
 - 4.2 *Develop a detailed and explicit curriculum for the teaching of reading as part of new syllabuses for the subject English, structured to assist teachers to establish and diagnose where individual children are in their reading development, and accompanied by evidence based teaching advice.*
 - 4.3 *Structure the early mathematics curriculum to support teachers to establish the points children have reached in their mathematics learning, including by diagnosing conceptual gaps and skills deficits, and provide accompanying evidence-based teaching advice as part of new syllabuses in mathematics.*

AISNSW strongly supports these recommendations. The design of the new curriculum should prioritise the teaching of foundational skills including a focus on the development of students' oral language skills, early reading and writing skills and early mathematics skills. Literacy and numeracy are essential to facilitate much other learning including building knowledge, skills and attributes that facilitate deep learning and enable students to engage in a complex, global world.

Digital literacy skills are also considered foundational skills that are essential to facilitate other learning; students must have the ability to decipher and navigate digital content from a variety of sources.

5. *In the middle years of school, give priority to providing every student with challenging learning material appropriate to their current level of attainment in the expectation that they meet (and ideally exceed) a minimally acceptable standard in each mandated subject by the completion of school.*

- 5.1 *Maintain the existing set of mandated subjects; for each subject define the minimum level of attainment every student should achieve by the completion of school; and provide teachers and parents/carers with a way of monitoring whether individuals are on track to achieve that standard.*

- 5.2 *Require every student to commence learning a second language during their primary years, making use of technology where possible.*

- 5.3 *Develop a curriculum that specifies what every student should know and understand about Aboriginal cultures and histories, and incorporate this curriculum into Human Society and its Environment.*

AISNSW supports the intent of these recommendations. The curriculum content and outcomes should be organised more flexibly to reflect different paces of learning, instead of fixed age-based stages, to allow students to make good progress from their own starting points and to support continuity of learning.

Learning another language is a rewarding and enriching experience for students and develops skills essential to intercultural understanding. Flexibility is needed to enable school-based decision-making around languages, so that a school can best consider its local context and student needs.

The new curriculum should include the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and languages to ensure that students can learn about, acknowledge and respect the world's oldest continuous living cultures. It would also help our society work towards true reconciliation and achieving the aims of the "Closing the Gap" policy.

6. *In the later years of school, give priority to providing every student with opportunities to pursue personal interests and strengths through rigorous, specialised subjects, each of which builds solid theoretical foundations, provides opportunities to transfer and apply knowledge, and develops skills in the practical application of subject learning.*

- 6.1 *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 integrates knowledge and the practical application of knowledge.*

- 6.2 *Replace the existing learning areas in the later years with a newly defined set, allocate all future HSC subjects to these areas and promote them as focal points for schools' connections with relevant industries and post-school providers and pathway and career advice.*

- 6.3 *Require every student to undertake a major investigative project in a subject of their choosing, with common assessment criteria, moderation of teacher assessments, and performances forming part of a student's HSC results.*

- 6.4 *Establish a taskforce comprising representatives of the higher education sector, the school sector and the Universities Admissions Centre, to investigate the feasibility of not calculating and reporting the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).*

Credentials such as the International Baccalaureate and the Cambridge Assessment Program should be welcomed in NSW. AISNSW also supports, in principle, the freedom of schools to choose to offer credentials recognised in other Australian states.

Current HSC requirements and the calculation of the ATAR should be relaxed, as the requirement for students to complete 10 units of HSC courses appears to be based on assumption, rather than valid justification. Consideration should be given to reducing the minimum number of units required to be studied. There should not be one single pattern of study to attain the HSC and calculating the ATAR.

Removing mandatory units and hours would provide students with more flexibility to attain the HSC and allow deep learning. Schools are best placed to understand their students and make judgements about whether more or less time is required. The removal of mandatory hours is crucial to enabling teachers to engage students in deep learning of both content knowledge and practical skills.

In its submission, AISNSW suggested a new NSW school credential could be developed that included certain characteristics or elements of schooling such as micro-credentials, community service and industry or business-based credentials. It also suggested that some credentialing could be delegated to the School Principal.

AISNSW supports recommendations to promote better linkages to future work and study for Year 11 and 12 students with new key learning areas and career pathways. The curriculum should provide opportunities to incorporate VET courses, non-NESA registered courses, work experience and apprenticeships, whilst still qualifying for the HSC. VET is a valued and valid pathway, and the new curriculum needs to support this.

Developing diverse pathways provides opportunities for students to form a connection between institutions and real-life experiences. It increases their reputation and reconsiders the perception that university is the only path to a rewarding career. Further, this supports the need to strengthen the vocational education sector, which is currently in decline, to ensure that this is a pathway that continues to be available for all students.

Specific Education Committee matters

National curriculum

The Masters Review recommends developing the new syllabuses in consultation with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as it redevelops the Australian Curriculum.

It also recognises the national policy contexts in which NSW schools and systems have participated over the past two decades following the establishment of three key national education agencies – ACARA, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and Education Services Australia (ESA). It notes that these agencies have helped to develop:

- an Australian Curriculum which has now been implemented fully or in part in all states and territories
- NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) to assess, report and monitor student performance in priority curriculum areas including literacy and numeracy (accompanied by a national website to report publicly every school's performance); and
- national standards for teaching, school leadership and initial teacher education.

Meeting Government policy objectives

The Education Committee seeks views on the Masters Review's explanation for declining school results in NSW and the role a revised curriculum can play in reversing this decline.

The review report acknowledges and addresses these concerns, noting that student attainment in NSW has been in steady decline as measured against several international indicators. It states that reforms to the content and structure of the curriculum are part of the solution to addressing this challenge. The review recommendations address this through reducing the content in the curriculum and re-envisioning curriculum to have a focus on deep knowledge of subjects.

For students to develop essential knowledge, skills and attributes, the curriculum must facilitate learning processes that develop intellectual curiosity and are common across learning areas such as acquisition, mastery, application, transfer and generalisation as the basis for the development of metacognitive and social emotional skills.

The design of the curriculum recommends the identification of foundational skills and the facilitation of deep learning to build knowledge, skills and attributes and ensure that students engage in authentic experiences important in our complex, global world. This does not appear to be a simple redesign of each syllabus document. This fundamental change is required to support effective teaching and learning in schools.

Standardised testing (such as NAPLAN and PISA) has a place in terms of accountability of the education provided, but it should not be the sole measure of the success of schooling and the school curriculum.

Student health and wellbeing

The Education Committee seeks views on whether, and to what extent, schools should be involved in students' social and emotional development.

Children spend 13 of their first 18 years of life in school, a period that significantly shapes their personal development. The families of students are also often strongly connected to the school. It is important, therefore that schools are able to provide an environment that supports health, wellbeing and learning. Healthy students are more alert, engaged and more able to focus and learn.

By incorporating into the curriculum a focus on children's health, social and emotional wellbeing, schools can positively affect their capacity for academic learning as well as contribute to the development of healthy behaviours.

Many factors can contribute to a student's health and wellbeing. AISNSW regards physical activity as essential to physical, cognitive and social development and improved quality of life. It also helps to address broader social concerns such as mental health outcomes.

AISNSW encourages regular and varied, structured and unstructured, physical and wellbeing activities and programs appropriate to the context and culture of each school.

Concluding remarks

AISNSW recognises the importance of regularly reviewing the NSW school curriculum to ensure it is meeting its goal of enabling every child to receive a high-quality education based upon agreed educational standards.

The Masters Review has, in AISNSW's view, delivered on its Terms of Reference and recommended a way forward for a re-designed curriculum, one with more flexibility to enable teachers to develop their students' foundational skills and be responsive to their needs, interests and talents throughout their schooling. Flexibility is particularly vital to enable independent schools to deliver on their mission and principles and meet the specific needs of students.

The challenge now is to ensure that adequate time and resources are allocated to achieve the intent of the Masters Review's recommendations.

This will require appropriate resourcing to enable the development and implementation of robust new syllabuses, and the development and provision of quality professional learning across all school sectors to ensure efficacy and delivery within the Government's timelines.

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