

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Institute of Public Affairs

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Portfolio Committee No. 3 Education
Parliament of New South Wales
6 Macquarie St
NSW 2000

7 August 2020

Dear Committee

INQUIRY INTO THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

I write on behalf of the Institute of Public Affairs (“the IPA”) in response to the Portfolio Committee No. 3- Education’s Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum. This current enquiry has been launched in response to proposed changes to the NSW National Curriculum, and in particular the Masters Curriculum Review.

We appreciate the opportunity to make a submission. The issues raised by the Committee are important, and for this reason the IPA has prepared a Research Report, which is attached, and which together with this letter and the attached document, *Is Western Civilisation Part of Your Life Today?*, forms our submission.

Yours sincerely

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Institute of Public Affairs

Enc (21)

*Research Report: Cross-Curriculum Priorities and the Teaching of History in NSW
Is Western Civilisation Part of Your Life Today?*

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CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES AND THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN NSW

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Introduction

The Institute of Public Affairs is committed to undertaking research to promote the importance of Western Civilisation in Australian society. The Foundations of Western Civilisation Program was established in 2011 to defend and extend Australians' understanding of the influential, historical role of the West in establishing many of the liberties enjoyed by Australians today. A significant focus of the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program is on education, ensuring that the next generation is capable of learning and understanding our past and heritage in the most academic and informative ways possible.

As part of this research program, the IPA has investigated the NSW school curriculum in the context of the Masters Curriculum Review and the further inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum undertaken by the Parliament's Portfolio Committee No. 3- Education.

This document addresses the inquiry's following Terms of Reference:

- 3. (a) To what extent, if any 'cross-curriculum priorities' are needed to guide classroom content and teaching;
- 3. (d) Adequacy of the content and depth of teaching of Australian history, pre and post 1788.

3. (a) To what extent, if any 'cross-curriculum priorities' are needed to guide classroom content and teaching

One of the most significant and problematic elements of the New South Wales curriculum is the existence of three cross-curriculum priorities; 'Sustainability', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures', and 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' which have been taken directly from the National Curriculum which was introduced by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2011. The NSW Education Standards authority has decided to replicate and retain the cross-curriculum priorities in the NSW curriculum.

Currently, the curriculum is structured in such a way that each and every priority must be emphasised and incorporated across all learning areas from Kindergarten to Year 10. This means students will encounter the priorities in the syllabus for the majority of their schooling. Whether it be English, Mathematics, Science, Technology, Human Society and its Environment (HSIE), Creative Arts, Languages, or Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. (PDHPE), the priorities are well and truly embedded.

According to ACARA, the cross-curriculum priorities benefit all students because they 'provide dimensions that will enrich the curriculum through development of considered and focused content that fits naturally within learning areas.'¹

Meanwhile, the NSW Education Standards Authority also believes that the priorities are beneficial, stating that the 'cross-curriculum priorities enable students to develop an understanding about and address the contemporary issues they face.'² These are ambitious claims indeed, but unfortunately they have been shown to be patently wrong.

Since their invention in 2011, it has become apparent that embedding the cross-curriculum priorities across all learning areas is highly detrimental to the quality of primary and secondary education in New South Wales, both in terms of its negative effect on classroom content and on teaching.

1 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 'cross curriculum priorities', accessed 22 July 2020. <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-year-10/cross-curriculum-priorities>

2 NSW Education Standards Authority, 'learning across the curriculum' accessed 18 July 2020, <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/stage-6-english/english-standard-2017/learning-across-the-curriculum>

Classroom Content

The first major problem with these priorities is that while they might well be worthy topics of consideration, they are ideologically driven. This was brought to the attention of the Federal Department of Education by the IPA in 2014, when it proposed that the cross-curriculum priorities were ‘inappropriate and ideologically driven’³ and that the curriculum would benefit from them being taken out altogether. As we said at the time:

It is surely not appropriate for a Health and Physical Education curriculum to prescribe learning objectives about Aboriginal cultural identity. Nor should Mathematics classes include instruction on sustainability⁴

While a curriculum will always be ideological in some way or another because in the basic sense, an ideology is the lens through which we understand the world, the fact is that by calling ‘Sustainability’, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures’, and ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’, priorities, the National Curriculum’s designers were consciously prioritising them over everything else in the curriculum.

By the same principle, I could just as well argue that the Foundations of Western Civilisation be included as a cross-curriculum priority as a replacement for or in addition to those already listed. In this way students would at least be assured of learning about the sources of the ideas, institutions and values of modern Australia, such as democracy in Ancient Greece, the Roman legal code, the emergence of individualism in Medieval Europe, *Magna Carta*, the Bill of Rights, and the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1833. But while improving the content of the curriculum will give students more chance of understanding the ideas behind the institutions bequeathed to modern Australia, this would not solve the structural dysfunction of cross-curriculum priorities.

By insisting that these three current themes be embedded into all subjects, relevant or not, the curriculum’s authors were deliberately prioritising ideology over knowledge, and what it is more, they did so with the full understanding that this particular ideology would come to dominate and define Australian education. They were in fact, deliberately imposing a political agenda on generations of impressionable Australian schoolchildren at a time in their lives where they are at their most vulnerable, and when their understanding of society, environment and politics is shaped by what they hear in the classroom.

3 Stephanie Forrest and Aaron Lane, *Submission to Department of Education: Review of the National Curriculum* (Institute of Public Affairs: March 14), accessed 16 July 2020, https://ipa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/archive/IPA_Submission-National_Curriculum_Review-March_2014.pdf, p. 2

4 *ibid.*

Overcrowding

Not only are the cross-curriculum priorities ideologically driven, but they also serve no other purpose than to overcrowd an already crowded curriculum. The syllabus reveals that they are shoe-horned into every learning area with complete disregard for the actual subject matter. In the 'Learning across the curriculum' section, the authors have managed to apply all three priorities to the study of English;

'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures'

In their study of English, students have the opportunity to engage with texts that give them experience of the beliefs and value systems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'

The study of English provides learning opportunities for students to explore and appreciate the rich tradition of texts from and about the peoples and countries of Asia, including texts written by Asian authors.

'Sustainability'

The study of English provides students with the skill required to investigate and understand issues of environmental and social sustainability, to communicate information about sustainability, and to advocate action to improve sustainability⁵

An examination of the Mathematics K-10 course description reveals what can only be described as a tokenistic and artificial shoehorning of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.'

5 NSW Education Standards Authority, 'learning across the curriculum' accessed 18 July 2020, <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/stage-6-english/english-standard-2017/learning-across-the-curriculum>

Mathematics Early Stage 1:

Addition and Subtracting

investigate different methods of adding and subtracting used in various cultures, eg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methods involving spatial patterns and reasoning, Asian counting tools such as the abacus (Communicating, Problem Solving)

To work out Mass

investigate the use of hefting in practical situations, eg the practice used by Aboriginal people of hefting duck eggs to determine whether ducklings will be male or female

Three-dimensional space

describe the features of familiar three-dimensional objects, such as local landmarks including Aboriginal landmarks, using everyday language, eg flat, round, curved

Two-dimensional space

identify circles, triangles, squares and rectangles in pictures and the environment, including in Aboriginal art (Problem Solving)⁶

The addition of an extra element into the lesson detracts from the acquisition of real skills, such as literacy and numeracy, which are the fundamental building blocks of education. This has been proven over the last 18 years, during which time standards in reading, science, and mathematics across every socio-economic quartile—and in government, Catholic and independent schools—have been falling across Australia.

Data compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals that Australia is lagging behind the rest of the world and is performing extremely poorly in world rankings. Since 2015, reading literacy has fallen from fourth to 16th, mathematics has plummeted from seventh to 25th, and science has dropped from fourth to 14th. In all three disciplines, Australia is being outranked by countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Slovenia.

According to the OECD, 14 per cent of 15-year-old Australian students are functionally illiterate and would not understand the instructions on a packet of headache tablets. What is more, 20 per cent of Australian youth lack basic arithmetic skills and would not be able to work out how much petrol is left in a tank by looking at a gauge. In NSW, students have performed particularly badly, with sharp declines in reading, writing, mathematics and scientific literacy.

⁶ Mathematics K-10 Syllabus, NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum, NSW Standards Authority, pp. 46-67

Cross-curriculum priorities are not needed in the classroom, either for content or for teaching. There is absolutely no need for themes to be repeated in every section of the curriculum. Each discipline should have its own 'priorities,' depending on the purpose and intended outcomes of the particular discipline. The most effective and immediate change that the committee could recommend would be to abolish all of the cross-curriculum priorities from the NSW curriculum altogether.

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

The focus on how Australia's history, pre – and post – 1788 as currently taught is both inadequate and lacking in depth in the NSW curriculum. The clue as to how Australia's history is approached perhaps lies in the fact that History as a discipline has been relegated to a learning area entitled 'Human Society and its Environment.'

The study of history is introduced thus:

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. The study of History develops an appreciation for and an understanding of civics and citizenship. It also provides broader insights into the historical experiences of different cultural groups within our society – for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, migrants and women.⁷

A study of the History course description reveals that there is a strong emphasis on such themes as colonisation, migration, identity, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders histories. There is also an emphasis on social history.

The course descriptions are explained thus:

In Years 7–8, students explore the nature of history, how historians investigate the past and the importance of conserving our heritage, including the heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Aspects of the ancient, medieval and early modern world are studied, including daily life, beliefs and values, law and religion. The nature of colonisation and contact history may also be investigated. One ancient Asian society is a mandatory study.

In Years 9–10, students learn of significant developments in the making of the modern world and Australia. Mandatory studies include Australians at War (World Wars I and II) and Rights and Freedoms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Other topics may include the making of the Australian nation, the history of an Asian society, Australian social history, and migration experiences.⁸

7 History K-10 Syllabus, NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum, NSW Standards Authority, p. 9

8 NSW Education Standards Authority, 'course descriptions', accessed 18 July 2020, <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/>

It is clear from the course content that the debt that modern Australia owes to the values and institutions of Western Civilisation is not part of the current NSW syllabus. This means that Australian students will leave school with very little to no knowledge of the social, economic or political conditions which led to the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788.

Themes such as the history of ideas, the development of Liberalism, political history or economic history receive virtually no mention at all. The NSW curriculum fails to treat the rich, complex, and essential legacy of Western Civilisation on which Australia's society and political system, and large swathes of our culture and history, have been built. Children in NSW are simply not being taught the essentials of our free society, such as civil rights, and personal responsibility.

Solution

To that end, the Institute of Public Affairs has produced a new school curriculum entitled *Is Western Civilisation Part of Your Life Today?*

This is a practical classroom resource that seeks to help students understand the nature and origin of the Australia in which they are living, and it will help them understand the nature and influence of Western Civilisation in their lives today.

It has been designed for Years 7-10 History and can be taught with the following modules currently included in the NSW syllabus. These are:

- The Ancient World
- The Ancient to the Modern World
- The Making of the Modern World and
- The Modern World and Australia

The introduction to the curriculum makes what should be an obvious point, that some key and valuable qualities or features of Australia are attributable to us enjoying the heritage of Western Civilisation, and that these qualities can easily be subverted and should not be taken for granted. These include:

- government is democratic, with people having a vote over who makes the laws
- there is a rule of law — all people, regardless of their position in society, are bound by the laws
- all people have access to the law, and courts are fair and impartial
- people have the freedom and personal responsibility to start businesses, and succeed or fail depending on their own abilities, within a set of rules that ensure legality and fairness
- people have individual freedom of thought, religion, movement, speech and association — subject to laws that protect society against criminal uses of these freedoms or one freedom negating another
- the economic system is capitalist and free enterprise — people have freedom to make profit from their economic activities, subject to laws that stop unfair exploitation of workers and consumers
- no religions are given preferential treatment by the government, but all are free and equal, as long as they act within the civil and criminal laws
- the vulnerable people in society are given protection
- education and knowledge are based on reason, scientific evidence and rational thought, not dogma.

This unit provides a resource to help students understand the nature and influence of Western Civilisation in their civic lives today. They will be able to identify key elements of their society, appreciate their values, and understand where these characteristics have come from and how they have developed over time.

The emphasis on Western Culture as the major part of Australia's heritage does not deny that other cultures have influenced Australia, and continue to do so, but their influence has been far less significant than that of the West. By studying this unit, students will be better able to appreciate and critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the society they live in, and that they want to develop in the future.

The curriculum is attached to this letter for the Committee's interest.

This material would be of practical use to teachers who are struggling to find curricula which focus on Australia's debt to Western Civilisation, and students who are being deprived of this knowledge through no fault of their own.

The NSW Education Department on its website provides guidance to teachers and schools for delivery of the curriculum, including particular books, films, and curriculum guides. The IPA would welcome a recommendation from the Committee that *Is Western Civilisation Part of Your Life Today?* be made available in this manner.⁹

⁹ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/key-learning-areas/hsie>

Conclusion

In summary, the IPA proposes that the cross-curriculum priorities be excised from the NSW curriculum altogether, for they are not only ideologically driven but they also overcrowd the curriculum to the detriment of both teachers and students. The IPA also believes that the attached curriculum, *Is Western Civilisation Part of Your Life Today?* should be promoted for use in NSW Secondary Schools to accompany the teaching of History.

Attached: *Is Western Civilisation Part of Your Life Today?*

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES AND THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN NSW

About the Institute of Public Affairs

The Institute of Public Affairs is an independent, non-profit public policy think tank, dedicated to preserving and strengthening the foundations of economic and political freedom.

Since 1943, the IPA has been at the forefront of the political and policy debate, defining the contemporary political landscape.

The IPA is funded by individual memberships and subscriptions, as well as philanthropic and corporate donors.

The IPA supports the free market of ideas, the free flow of capital, a limited and efficient government, evidence-based public policy, the rule of law, and representative democracy. Throughout human history, these ideas have proven themselves to be the most dynamic, liberating and exciting. Our researchers apply these ideas to the public policy questions which matter today.

About the author

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She is the author of a number of academic works and scholarly articles and specialises in education and skills, faith and society and culture, ideas and liberty and Western Civilisation. She appears frequently in the media and is a regular contributor to The Australian, the Daily Telegraph, the Herald Sun and the Spectator Australia. She is the author of 'The Rise of Identity Politics: An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017', 'Australian History's Last Stand: An Audit of Australian History Teaching at Universities' (2018) and 'The Humanities in Crisis: An Audit of Taxpayer-funded ARC Grants' (2019).

