

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (NSW
and ACT)

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The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (NSW/ACT Branch) Letter -

NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the NSW Curriculum Review

07 August 2020

Background

We write on behalf of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (NSW/ACT). AHISA (NSW/ACT) is an association of approximately 130 independent schools in NSW and the ACT, with an enrolment in excess of 124,000 students. AHISA is a peak professional education association given that its members lead schools which teach over 20 per cent of Australia's Year 11 and 12 students. AHISA members' schools are very diverse in terms of location, size, age, ethos, faith, Government funding levels, ICSEA and SES status. Some are large, many are small. Some are well-established with long histories, while the majority are relatively young. Some are well-resourced and others not so. The diversity of schools whose principals belong to AHISA (NSW/ACT) is a strength of our association.

Introduction

The Curriculum Review conducted by Professor Geoff Masters has been the subject of numerous discussions within and across our schools. Overall, we found the Review process to be robust with wide and appropriate consultation of stakeholders, both during its initial stage and after the release of the Interim Report. Additionally, the review has as its foundation current and highly regarded international and national educational research.

The review found that the NSW Curriculum in its current form to be no longer fit for the purpose of educating our young people so that they are prepared to live and thrive as strong Australian citizens in our 21st Century world.

We commend the process undertaken and the recommendations of the final review. The report is of a high quality, timely, deeply thoughtful, comprehensive, compelling and articulate. It has our strong support.

Support for Key Recommendations of the Review

We strongly support the establishment of a curriculum that focuses on ensuring students learn with understanding with its associated prioritisation of fundamental concepts and principles. We support the emphasis on depth rather than breadth of learning where knowledge and understanding are developed in an increasingly sophisticated manner and in which skills are more effectively integrated.

To achieve the above, the ‘decluttering’ of the curriculum, that is, a reduction of content within NESA syllabuses, both mandated and non-mandated is essential. Equally essential is the increased focus on key ideas within each syllabus and clarity regarding what is and is not *mandatory* in each syllabus. A reduction in the amount of mandated material would provide the flexibility for students to pursue individual enquiry, for teachers to focus on the specific learning needs of their students, and for schools to cater for the needs of their school communities.

The remit to ensure that every student makes excellent ongoing progress is supported. Mastery of content (understanding, knowledge and skills) is an important component for all students and it is crucial that students do not just ‘fall behind’, but also that they do not become further and further behind so that they become increasingly discouraged and disengaged. Additionally, providing the opportunity for students who master content quickly to move to the next level without having to wait for others is equally endorsed. The ability for teachers to respond to the different learning needs of their students without being tied to specific mandated hours as is currently the case, is supported. The implementation of this, however, will be difficult.

The key components of establishing strong foundations in the early years; mandating subjects that are intended to build students’ understandings of themselves, society and the wider world, and to provide exposure to important bodies of human knowledge in the middle years; and providing every student with the opportunity to pursue personal interests and strengths through rigorous specialised subjects in the senior years, are supported, as is the minimisation of the current academic-vocational dichotomy.

The recommendation of a major research assignment/project in the senior years, though, requires further investigation.

Although it was beyond the remit of the Curriculum Review to investigate the calculation and reporting of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), we strongly endorse Professor Masters’ recommendation that this be investigated. We have often expressed our concerns about the ATAR being the de facto single-figure indicator of a student’s 13 years of schooling. The recently released federal report, *Looking to the Future*, endorses this concern.

Professor Masters’ recommendations for aligning all components of the learning system including assessment and reporting and improvement processes is endorsed.

We also endorse investment in the teaching profession to ensure professional capacity building. Additionally, the pressure of time for teachers is of real concern. As such, we strongly endorse the recommendation that external demands and school leaders’ time, especially in terms of the demands of paperwork and compliance be reviewed.

Implementation

The changes recommended by the Curriculum Review require significant resourcing, stakeholder engagement and time for successful implementation. Professor Masters recommended that the changes be begun as soon as possible and implemented incrementally over a number of years. There are some changes that could be made quite quickly, for example, the removal of the restrictive nature of the current mandated hours of study for Years 7-10, some needed changes within the senior curriculum and the unreasonable dominance of the ATAR. Never-the-less, Professor Masters' timeline seems sensible and we are in agreement with Professor Masters' recommendation that implementation be well-planned, gradual and coherent.

Conclusion

The changes recommended in the Curriculum Review are visionary, bold, wide-ranging and timely. The current curriculum in NSW is no longer fit for the purpose of educating and preparing our young people to live and thrive in the ever-changing world of the 21st Century.

Whilst there are some pedagogical frameworks that will need further teasing out, we strongly support the key recommendations of the review. We urge the NESA Board to move in a quick, yet well-considered and timely fashion, to implement the recommendations made, ensuring that academic rigour is not compromised. These are important changes that need to be made for the students and teachers of NSW.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of AHISA (NSW/ACT) Schools