Submission No 38

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Name: Ms Vicki Steer

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Submission to the Inquiry into the New South Wales Curriculum by Vicki Steer

Introduction

The terms of reference for The Review of the NSW Curriculum are ambitious and broad in scope and, accordingly, the Masters Review Report provides high level and broad direction toward the development of a new curriculum for NSW schools. This is the major limitation of the Report; a high level focus which ignores the obstacles to the implementation of the recommendations in schools and a lack of consideration of other developments in education that do not fit with the curriculum design paradigm adopted. The Report only considers evidence that confirms their chosen curriculum design and it glosses over the fact that much more intensive work will be required to develop the detail of the recommendations before their feasibility can be considered by schools.

This submission is organised under headings provided in the Terms of Reference of the Committee of Inquiry.

1. (a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

It is difficult to comment on the extent to which the new curriculum proposed in the Review Report will address the central aims of the review - higher attainment for all students in NSW – because there is so little specific detail provided for school leaders and teachers to assess.

The Report enumerates its curriculum design principles, one of which is emotional engagement. Student engagement in school and their learning is well understood as being key to success at school, yet the Report adopts a narrow definition of student engagement, limiting it to finding your passion, or "emotional" engagement. The review proposals are based on the premise that the teaching of core content in depth, explaining relevance, with students progressing according to their attainment of progression points will engage students. This is unfortunate because the extensive and broader research into the subject of student engagement and its relationship to student achievement considers, for example: the learning environment that is created by teacher efficacy in the management of learning in the classroom; the social engagement of students measured by their participation in the life of the school; and academic and intellectual engagement of students in subject content. Passing comments made in the Report about removing unnamed extra-curricular programs to de-clutter schools suggest a failure to understand that simply physically getting some students to school is a major challenge which can be helped by their involvement in activities like a lunchtime club, sport or a drama activity.

The concept of curriculum **flexibility** is limited really to one of timing: less content, more time for deep learning; students working on syllabuses within a subject at their own level and pace. It is surprising that there is no flexibility, other than via the senior years project, for students to work in an interdisciplinary fashion, integrating knowledge beyond the boundaries of one subject. Project based learning organised around deep exploration of a concept calls for the

application of knowledge and skills from a range of disciplines and / or subjects. The grouping of subjects into the nine learning areas for senior years implicitly acknowledges that knowledge and concepts are interrelated, yet this is not acknowledged in the proposed organisation of the curriculum K – 10. The Report does talk of "integrated learning" but this seems to be defined as the application of knowledge through student projects within a subject.

There is limited reference to the three **cross-curricular priorities** of the Australian curriculum. A commendable separate curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures within Humanities and Social Sciences is proposed. There is no mention of Sustainability and the only reference to Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia is in the language recommendation, suggesting Mandarin and Indonesian as appropriate languages for study.

The study of language is such an important inclusion in the curriculum and yet the Report does not serve it well. The proposal to include the **study of a language** from primary years requires a much more detailed explication and rationale if the reviewers are serious about this proposal being taken up. Experience in schools tells us that there is resistance to languages study, even though the benefits of studying a language are well-documented. This is because students and parents do not see the value – and it requires dedicated applied study. This half-hearted inclusion of languages is further evidenced by the proposal that technology will make up for a potential shortage of language teachers. Furthermore, the Report neither states when the mandatory study of a language would cease nor the level of attainment required of a student.

It is astonishing that so little clear guidance on the incorporation into the curriculum of **21st century skills or general capabilities**: e.g., using technologies, critical and creative thinking, problem solving, working with others and communicating. The report casts doubt on the ability to incorporate these in the curriculum and is almost dismissive of these and the ability teach and/or assess them. Yet the evidence from OECD research to the work of The Foundation for Young Australians, shows us just how important and sought after these capabilities are by employers. It is suggested that these capabilities will be developed and emerge when students apply their knowledge and skills as part of their learning but, again, there is little clear guidance about what applied learning could look like and there is uncertainty communicated about how it could be assessed. Some attention to how these skills and capabilities are developed and assessed across the curriculum is needed. In this regard, the work being undertaken in Australia about the use of **micro-credentials** issued by schools provides an obvious solution to the recognition of general capabilities. It is surprising that a major curriculum review of this scale has not discussed this, especially given this potential for acknowledging student general capabilities. The work of Professor Sandra Milligan at Melbourne University in this area is extensive and worthy of consideration. This following article is useful in explaining how micro-credentials work and their application in schools. -https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/future-proofing-australian-students-with-new-credentials
The off hand comment in the Report recognising modules achieved in an HSC subject that are not fully completed by way of a micro-credential is tokenistic.

Teacher efficacy in establishing positive relationships with students, managing the classroom, encouraging student engagement with the syllabus and monitoring and responding to student progress is pivotal to student success. A less crowded curriculum and the flexibility to respond to the learning needs and interests of their students will be highly beneficial. The report, however, is light on for detail in relation to the **pedagogy** that the new curriculum requires. There is no clear statement of what, in practice, learning or the learner is meant to look like. This is a major failing that undercuts claims about student engagement.

1. (c) Recommendations for student-centred "progression points" and "differentiated learning" in schools and whether such initiatives are research-based and proven to be effective
Strategies for a differentiated approach to teaching and learning have been applied in classrooms for many years in a number of educational systems including those in Australia. Understanding where the individual student is at in their learning requires ongoing authentic assessment in order to gauge student learning needs. The introduction of documented progression points will provide an excellent framework for teachers to successfully support differentiated learning.

Teachers need to be skilful practitioners of differentiation however. The Report's emphasis on the need for professional capacity building is welcome and the skills teachers need is well-summarised. If "streaming" is not to occur when students are working through multiple syllabuses within a subject, teachers will need to become experts in managing group and individual learning. It is disappointing therefore, that the report does not spell out the full cost and timescale of the workforce capacity building required. This is a major obstacle to the implementation of the proposed curriculum design but it is not considered. A good curriculum design will not be effective in raising student achievement without effective implementation. If the proposed design is not 'doable' then much money and time will be lost without any improvement in student achievement.

1. (d) Relationship with the national schools curriculum
The Review proposes no change to the mandatory subjects or learning areas for Years K – 10 which are presently consistent with the Australian Curriculum. Given the proposal to reduce the range of content covered, designers of the new syllabuses will need to be aware of the relationship with the Australian curriculum and ensure that students in NSW are developing knowledge and skills consistent with and transferable to other educational settings across Australia.

For the senior years of schooling, the Review's proposal of a new framework of nine "learning areas" differs from the four learning areas described in the Australian Curriculum of English, Mathematics, Science and Humanities and Social Sciences. A conceptual mapping of how these proposed learning areas fit the national curriculum would have been helpful with the detail to be elaborated later. As it stands this recommendation is unconvincing.

Likewise, National Literacy and Numeracy learning progressions have already been adopted to assist teachers' understanding of student literacy and numeracy development but nowhere does the report consider these or comment upon their efficacy. NESA has mapped these progressions to the existing NSW curriculum but the review does not draw upon this experience. A significant oversight that, again, leaves the report somewhat unconvincing.

2. (a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

The Review report clearly argues the need for a less crowded curriculum and recommends a process for new syllabus development that pares subjects back. The report provides no helpful examples of the elements of the curriculum that it promises to remove however. Indeed, the Review report is carefully and quite neutrally worded leading to the conclusion that the authors are themselves unsure about what should be removed and why.

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

The extent to which the new curriculum can support these aims will depend on the quality of the syllabuses yet to be developed and the definition of learning progressions. While much work has already been done in English, Mathematics and Science here in Australia and other educational systems, there is little guidance – drawing upon this work – as to what the proposed progressions will look like so we cannot assess their utility for schools. No examples are given.

The Report rightly recommends a focus on the student, placing much emphasis on setting and monitoring clear standards of achievement but gives no guidance as to how this will be done or the resources required to implement this. Providing schools with the software to store and analyse student achievement data, for example, will be an essential part of implementation but there is no consideration of such supports. The use of NAPLAN data to improve educational outcomes in schools has been problematic on this point with only a few islands of excellence evident in school systems that otherwise fail to use data to improve. Improvement activity cannot be simply left to individual schools if we genuinely seek systemic improvements in student achievement.

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

Each of the three cross-curriculum priorities of the Australian curriculum should guide classroom content and teaching. They are: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; and Sustainability. Sustainability is largely considered in relation to the environment and so emerges in science syllabuses. A broader way of thinking about sustainability that considers: people and wellbeing; societies and cultures; economies and technology; as well as the environment would see thinking about sustainability across the curriculum. The experience of Cornish College and other schools demonstrates that such broader 'integrated' approaches to curriculum can work but none of this experience is reflected in the report. The cross curriculum priorities are sidelined in the Report rather than being used as a positive example of the sort of 'integrated' learning that the report espouses.

3. (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
It is disappointing that there is no emphasis on supporting the development of literacy across the curriculum. Experience shows that assessments of students work conducted in subjects other than English may ignore errors of spelling and the poor construction of clear sentences. Students are simply rewarded for identifying content dot points, regardless of expression. The relevance of literacy and the correct use of linguistic structures and features requires reinforcement across the curriculum but integrating literacy in this way is not considered in the Report.

3. (f) Role and effectiveness of vocational education syllabuses in NSW schools
The Review favours a comprehensive and general education over specialisation and implies that this is key to achieving better labour market outcomes for students. The goal of removing "the bifurcation of vocational and academic learning" reiterated throughout the Report certainly has the aim of setting high expectations and providing better learning opportunities for all students. The case for this change relies in part on the assertion that low skill occupations in Australia are being replaced by machines or are being "lost to low wage economies." The Report has not adequately grappled with the fact that low skilled work persists in Australia; it has shifted from manufacturing into services, such as security and personal care which cannot be sent off shore; and it persists in seasonal agricultural work, fishing, forestry, meat processing and packaging to name a few. It is a conceit to suggest that a curriculum will solve the problems of low-skilled, low paid and insecure work for Australian students. These are problems that belong in the industrial relations system. The question to be asked is how well the new curriculum will serve the learning and progression of all students, regardless of their post school destination.

The proposal that each senior learning area be promoted as a focal point for schools' relationship with relevant industries and post-school providers lacks the detail necessary to understand how this "focal point" will work in practice and what the subjects replacing VET in schools might be. At present in NSW there is a range of specialist schools such as selective, performing arts and sports high schools. Would relationships with industry be best served through the creation of further industry specialist schools? Models for this do exist. Cornish College has a relationship with the main high school in Oyonnax, France, the Lycée Arbez Carme. The Jura region is the centre of the plastics industry in France and industry works together with the Lycée Arbez Carme to provide advanced manufacturing technology in the school's workshops. Students at the school learn design practice to create new plastic artefacts, they learn tooling and engineering and manufacturing fabrication to make plastic goods. This is integrated learning in depth, combining literacy, numeracy, science, technology, art and design to make innovative products. The maker movement shows schools how to achieve similar results in many fields but nowhere in the report is any of this current practice in schools referenced.

High Tech High schools in California provide another well-known example of integrated learning in depth. Meaningful relationships could be established between industries and schools located in or near the industry hubs in fields such as such as medical devices and IT; warehousing, logistics and transport. This is a level of detail not reached by the Report but it is important to consider in relation to the development of HSC subjects. Establishing connections with local enterprises for meaningful learning experiences is hard work and thinking about how this might work in advance is important and yet this is overlooked in the report.

4. Any other related matters
There are a number of other brief observations to conclude this submission:

The Report lists many of the concerns raised about the dominance of **the ATAR** and its impact on teaching and learning, student subject choices, student self-esteem and so on. The roughly worked proposal to do away with the ATAR but retain scoring and ranking with HSC subjects is just that, a throw away proposal that passes off problems of implementation to others. The ranking of students in a class cohort is at odds with the approach to assessment of learning in K-10. Removing the ATAR but retaining ranking changes little in the assessment practice for the final years indeed it maintains in-class competition and mitigates against collaborative learning. In this respect the recommendation of the report creates no change for the final years of school.

An alternative approach would be to use criterion-referenced assessment. This is well defined thus:

> the process of evaluating (and grading) the learning of students against a set of pre-specified qualities or criteria, without reference to the achievement of others (Brown, 1998; Harvey, 2004). The pre-specified qualities or criteria are what students have to do during assessment in order to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcomes. How well they do this is described at different levels - these are standards (or performance descriptors) often presented in a rubric.

Source: https://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au/assessment/criterion-referenced-assessment

This is used within the International Baccalaureate Diploma program and provides no obstacle to university or TAFE entry. The lack of attention to questions of student assessment here reflects the fact that there is no concept of the kind of learner envisioned in NSW. The Learner Profile developed by the International Baccalaureate Organisation provides an invaluable tool for helping students to understand themselves as learners and the habits, practices and attributes that will support their learning. In this Report, teaching takes place but less is said about the identity of the learner and learning dispositions.

Conclusion
The NSW Curriculum Review Final Report is often incomplete and unconvincing. It assumes that a change in curriculum design alone can solve a number of problems in NSW schools without providing the requisite detail about the proposed design. The Report ignores many of the

implementation issues that may derail the implementation of the design and it passes off the issues that it does identify for others to solve. This approach is unconvincing to the professional educator. The overly narrow focus of the report does not create confidence that the proposed design will be effective in lifting student achievement. Much time and money may be spent by schools on implementation to little or no effect.

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