

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Anglican Education Commission (Anglican EdComm)

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Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education

Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the NSW Curriculum Review April 2020 (Review).

The Anglican Education Commission (operating as Anglican EdComm) was established in 2006 by the Anglican Diocese of Sydney to promote and advance education of the highest quality within the framework of the Christian faith as expressed through the Anglican Church. It serves the interest of the 40 Anglican schools associated with the Sydney Diocese, including some of NSW's most prestigious schools. It also supports Christian teachers in other faith-based schools and in NSW government schools. It is a member of ICCOREIS (Inter-Church Commission On Religious Education In Schools) through which it promotes the place and quality of Special Religious Education in NSW Government Schools.

The author of the submission is the Executive Director of Anglican EdComm, Mr Stephen Kinsella. Mr Kinsella has 43 years of experience in school education. He has worked as a teacher and administrator in NSW Government Schools and Independent Schools in NSW and the NT. He has NSW and International experience as an Examiner and has served as Chairman of the Association of Australasian International Baccalaureate Schools (AAIBS). He was CEO of two K-12 schools: Principal of Kormilda College (NT) for 5 years and Headmaster of The Illawarra Grammar School (Wollongong) for 12 years. He took up the position of Executive Director of Anglican EdComm in 2018.

Format of the submission.

This submission follows the following format:

- Identification of key principles in the Review
- Comments for the consideration of the Committee
- Recommendations (if appropriate) on action to be taken in response to the Review

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Submission

A. The Review opens by identifying the “**new and urgent challenge**” for schools in NSW as being precipitated by the changing social and economic context of school education:

- a. *“Broader changes in society and particularly increasing globalisation and advances in technology”*
- b. *“... ensure that all students reach levels of attainment currently achieved by only some” ... with school systems internationally recognising “the risk of growing numbers of students being left unemployable and economically disadvantaged throughout their lives, with likely implications for increasing social inequalities and tensions.” (page xi)*

Comment 1

Globalisation and technological change, particularly the growth of digital technology and related social media, have rapidly and significantly changed the environment in which students live and learn. Pedagogy, systems and structures for learning within a framework that dates back to the industrial revolution are being found wanting in the 21st Century (the digital age is described by some as the biggest paradigm shift since the invention of the printing press). The Review’s endeavour to address these issues is timely and to be commended.

Comment 2

Fundamental changes to school education are difficult from a variety of perspectives. The political, administrative, economic and social challenges are considerable. However, the alternative that students are unable to succeed, excel and therefore flourish in modern Australian society because of the barriers and limitations presented by an archaic curriculum is unacceptable. For the Review to succeed in its ambition it will require the considerable will of our leaders in education, politics and industry to overcome the inertia of both the school system and broader society to changes in education.

Recommended action #1

For the ambitions of the Review to be achieved, community leaders in education, politics and industry must present a united voice in articulating the inadequacies of the current curriculum, the need for change, the beneficial structure of the new curriculum and the outcomes that will flow from the change. There is a risk that, without a united voice, change will be fragmented and partial and the current curriculum (and systems) will prevail, just in a new format. The inertia of the education system to change should not be underestimated.

B. The Review identifies three specific concerns to be addressed:

- B.1** *“First, the **crowded nature of the current curriculum**, including the amount of content some syllabuses expect teachers to cover, is not conducive to teaching in depth or helping students see the relevance of what they are learning.” (page v)*

Comment 3

The “crowded curriculum” can be viewed from the perspective of individual subject curriculum requirements and from the broader perspective of the whole curriculum.

The Review correctly identifies the crowded nature of individual subject requirements. The current centralised approach to content, skills development and assessment in learning constrains the professional judgement of teachers and limits their scope for exploring learning at a deeper level with students. Teachers will eagerly support changes that will liberate them from the constraints of curriculum overcrowding. However, in deepening learning, content and skills essential to the integrity of the subject discipline and foundational to deeper learning should not be sacrificed.

Understanding the crowding of the broader curriculum requires an understanding of the changes in contemporary Australian society since the middle of the 20th Century. Social cohesion and stability in Australia was traditionally provided by the family unit and the church, underpinned by the rule of law. Family structures are now less stable and the security and certainty provided by the institutional church has waned. Families and broader society have increasingly turned to schools to fill the void.

Consequently, the broader curriculum of schools and the limited resources available in schools have been diverted to address these broader social issues with programs as diverse as:

- Breakfast for students
- Morning exercise
- Student wellbeing
- Multi-cultural and other perspectives
- Gender identity
- Counselling (for students and parents)
- Mandatory reporting
- Financial literacy
- Learn to drive
- Community service
- The list is long

The curriculum time and the human resources required to deliver these programs, and to satisfy the regulatory requirements of the authorities that have oversight of schools, are significant and are a distraction from mainstream teaching. This is recognised in the Report:

“Schools’ efforts to address mental health issues, build student resilience, inculcate values and develop character often are described as outside and additional to this formal school curriculum, and sometimes are considered to impinge on the time available for delivering the curriculum.” (page 4)

Good teachers, by nature, are compassionate and caring and act in the best interests of their students. Providing programs such as these takes teaching and preparation time and contributes to the crowding of the curriculum and school timetables.

It is ironic that this extra load on the curriculum and teachers, without a proportionate increase in resourcing for schools to provide these programs, is occurring at the same time as an apparent decline in educational outcomes.

Recommended action #2

Government recognises the important and growing social function of schools and provide financial and other resources to schools, in addition to those currently provided for teaching and learning outcomes, to ensure that schools are not having to choose between student wellbeing and student learning outcomes in their use of limited resources.

B.2 *“Second, the frequent separation of knowledge and skills, theory and application, and academic and vocational learning in the current curriculum, and the associated undervaluing of skills, (fragmentation of learning) do little to support students’ understandings of how knowledge can be put to use or their development of skills in applying knowledge.” (page v)*

Comment 4

The Review states that *“A fundamental purpose of schooling is to prepare every young person with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will assist them to take their place in adult society as caring, informed and active citizens, to continue learning throughout life, and to engage in fulfilling and productive work.” (page 83)* Learning *“is a significant and important part of every person’s life and should be stimulating and enjoyable in its own right.” (page 84)*

The intrinsic failure of the current curriculum to be “stimulating and enjoyable” is demonstrated most clearly in the entry point and exit point of school education. Visit a Kindergarten class and you immediately notice the excitement and wonder the students’ experience in learning. Visit a Year 12 class and ... content, assessment, scaling, ATAR... joy in learning is hard to find. This need not be the case. Teachers familiar with the International Baccalaureate Organisation programs know of the joy and enthusiasm demonstrated by students when given the opportunity to apply their learning to a topic of their choice (Year 6 Exhibition, Year 10 Personal Project, Year 12 Extended Essay).

Good curriculum design can create an environment where learning is “stimulating and enjoyable in its own right.” The holistic approach to learning recommended by the Review is commended and is consistent with best practice in other educational systems.

Comment 5

The reference to “attitudes and values” that will lead to students being good citizens and leading productive lives raises the obvious question: Which attitudes and values?

Teaching is not ‘values free’. Embedded in the curriculum, teaching programs, teaching strategies and teaching resources are the attitudes and values of the authors and teachers. These values, whether they are consciously or unconsciously held, permeate teaching and learning and influence students in the formation of their own attitudes and values.

As previously discussed, post 1788 Australian society developed values and social structures around the framework provided by the organised church and by extension families and governments. However, in current Australian (post-modern) society it is difficult to define a set of universally held Australian values.

In the early 2000s the Federal Minister for Education led a project team that defined *Nine Values for Australian Schooling* (Simpson and his Donkey was used as the watermark behind the poster supplied to all schools). These values included Care & Compassion; Doing Your Best; Fair Go; Freedom; Honesty and Trustworthiness; Integrity; Respect; Responsibility; Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion.

As there was no national consensus about what these values meant, school communities were asked to define the values in their own social context. Parents defined the attitudes and values framework within which their children learnt, either by contributing to the work of individual school councils, or by choosing a school that had an attitudes and values framework compatible with those they desired for their children.

Defining the attitudes and values framework of the new curriculum is a fundamental challenge for the writers of the new curriculum documents:

- Who will be seconded to the curriculum writing process?
 - What will be the 'attitudes and values' they bring to the process?
 - Will they be representative of the make-up of Australian society?
- Will there be a commonly held definition of the attitudes and values that are embedded in the curriculum?
 - The current NESA values are Excellence; Respect and Responsibility; Equity and Justice; Inclusivity; Environmental Sustainability.
 - Will these remain in the new curriculum?
 - Will they be amended to include other values? If so, which values?
- Will any departure from mainstream attitudes and values in the curriculum be publicly debated?
- Will parents continue to have the choice to:
 - Send their children to a school that reflects their own values, eg a faith-based school?
 - Send their children to Special Religious Education (SRE) classes or Special Education in Ethics (SEE) classes?

If these issues are not discussed and resolved then the attitudes and values that underpin the new curriculum will be defined, by default, by the personnel chosen to write the new curriculum. These attitudes and values may take the curriculum in a direction different to the attitudes and values expected by parents.

Recommended action #3

The personnel chosen to write the curriculum documents emanating from the Review should hold attitudes and values proportionally representative of the attitudes and values of parents that make up the social fabric of mainstream Australia. The attitudes and values of parents should not be usurped by minority interests.

Recommended action #4

The current right of parents to choose the attitude and values framework in which their children learn to be maintained under the new curriculum. This includes:

- choosing the system (government and non-government) and school (faith-based and non-faith-based) in which their children will learn;
- choosing to have their children attend additional instruction in attitudes and values through Special Religious Education (SRE)

B.3 *“Third, the timed nature of syllabuses that specify not only what should be taught, but also when it should be taught and how long should be spent teaching it (**undifferentiated learning**), means some students are being required to move to the next year-level syllabus before mastering the content of the prior syllabus and so are falling increasingly behind in their learning over time. Other students are being required to mark time rather than advance to the more challenging material for which they are ready. Teachers require a more flexible curriculum to ensure every student is provided with well-targeted stretch challenges and so makes excellent ongoing progress.”*

Comment 6

It will not be surprising to learn that Anglican schools believe in the uniqueness and value of each child. Each child, created in the image of God, possess their own set of gifts and talents, strengths and weaknesses. They each learn in different ways and at different rates. Their academic, physical, social, spiritual and emotional development is shaped by family, school and the broader community. Excellence in learning across the whole spectrum of student ability enables each child to flourish as God intended and is of benefit to the whole of society.

This view of a child is not unique to Anglican schools. Parents understand that their child is unique and special and wish for them a pathway through the years of schooling that will unleash their potential, allowing them to become fulfilled adults able to live in and contribute to society.

How absurd it is then that children, exhibiting this diversity, learn in a system that structurally assumes that they will learn in the same way and at the same rate. The current curriculum (and system):

- Locks students in at Kindergarten with chronological age differences of typically 12 to 18 months
- Progresses students each year in all subjects regardless of whether students have mastered the curriculum requirements or not. (It is equally unsatisfactory for academically gifted and hard-working students to be delayed in their progression in learning. This is not conducive to achieving excellence in education and improving student outcomes.)
- Has a bias toward students who have mastery of linguistic-verbal and mathematical-logical attributes over equally valid but more difficult to measure attributes such as bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, visual-spatial, interpersonal and naturalistic. (Howard Gardner)
- Concludes 13 years of learning with a high stakes assessment system (HSC) that itself has been gazumped by an even higher-stakes ranking system (ATAR). It should be noted that the universities themselves are not confident that an ATAR is a good predictor of success in university courses – currently, only about 30% of university placements are made on ATAR alone.

The end result is a focus on winners and losers (What was your ATAR?) rather than a celebration of what has been learned and what will be achieved in the future.

It should be noted that the knowledge base of the teaching profession has long since moved on from archaic assumptions about how students learn. A system in which learning takes place in a lock-step framework does not reflect current educational theory and pedagogy. Teachers understand this and implement differentiated teaching strategies that consider student differences despite the lock-step framework in which they teach. However, come Term 1, students move to the next year group whether they have mastered the learning or not. Lock step progression is also a problem for students that progress in their learning at a faster rate - giftedness and hard work is not rewarded with quicker and deeper learning when progression is locked in to a student's birth date.

The Review is commended for identifying and seeking to address these issues in the new curriculum:

“Central to this new curriculum is a set of new syllabuses that are:

- *leaner in content;*
- *are more focused on developing deep understandings of disciplinary concepts and principles;*
- *provide better integration of theory and the application of theory;*
- *build students' skills in applying knowledge;*
- *and are more flexible in relation to the timing of teaching and learning to accommodate students' widely varying levels of attainment and learning needs. (page Xiii)*

“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).” (page xviii)

When achieved, these changes will be liberating for students whose learning is suppressed by the current lock-step curriculum. Students that are engaged in their learning are more likely to succeed. The desired change for reporting ATAR will shift the emphasis on school education from the 'ranking' of students to the learning outcomes of students. This alone will have a considerable benefit for student wellbeing and make schooling *“stimulating and enjoyable in its own right.”*

The changes to curriculum described in the Review will be less likely to succeed if delivered in isolation from the input of other stakeholders in school education. School educational outcomes are not just determined by the curriculum. They will be shaped by a number of factors beyond the new curriculum, such as:

- the configuration of school campuses – schools are designed on the assumption that all the students in a cohort progress to the next level in Term 1 each year.
- the funding formulas used to determine staffing levels

- Professional Learning provided for teachers to understand and participate in a flexible learning environment that emphasises depth of learning rather than extensive content
- community and especially parental expectations – for example, a student being retained at a level in a subject due to delayed mastery may wrongly be interpreted as the student being ‘slow’ or have learning difficulties. The expectations of parents and significant others have a profound effect on student performance and sense of wellbeing. Delaying a student’s progression in their learning may be right from an educational perspective but without the support of their social network (explicit and implicit) the wellbeing of students could be significantly harmed. Redefining community expectations about what ‘normal progression’ is will be a critical determinant of success.
- Political support – it would be an impediment to the achievement of improved learning outcomes desired by the Review to have parental and community support confused or diminished by statements calling for ‘a return to basics’ or the championing the ‘3 Rs’ for political reasons – these are relics of a previous era.

Recommended action #5

The new curriculum be supported with the provision of appropriate funding to all schools that will allow them to reconfigure school infrastructure and practices to enable student progression on the basis of mastery of learning and readiness rather than birthdate.

Recommended action #6

Resources be provided for the professional learning of teachers in preparing them for a curriculum based on student mastery of the curriculum and associated flexible progression.

Recommended action #7

All steps be taken to remove the ATAR as the focal point of school education.

Concluding Remarks

The reforms embedded in the Review have the potential to bring learning in NSW schools into the 21st Century, improve student learning outcomes and the overall state of student wellbeing. These outcomes will not be achieved without sufficient enabling resources and the united support of community leaders.

Anglican EdComm is willing to expand on this advice and contribute to the implementation of the recommendations of the Review as required.

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