

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: NSW Primary Principal's Association

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NSW Primary Principals' Association

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NSWPPA Submission to:

That NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education inquire into and report on the contents of and proposed changes to the NSW school curriculum.

The NSW Primary Principals' Association (NSWPPA) represents students in over 1,800 public primary education environments (primary schools, central schools, community schools, special schools, hospital schools, and environmental education centres) providing an education to approximately 486,000 students.

The Association welcomes the opportunity to put forward this submission,

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President NSWPPA

1. The extent to which the Masters Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, including:

a. Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

Evidence based teaching is important but we need to be careful here as the “Evidence” suggests the need for a range of pedagogies. A further point, the focus on “Evidence” base may hamper research and development of new evidence, particularly in relation to technology for learning.

CONTENT

- The NSWPPA strongly supports the reduction in the amount of content across all syllabuses by whatever amount is required to achieve the intended purpose of ensuring our education system is preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.
- Syllabuses need to be streamlined to avoid repetition and clearly identify the common entitlement.
- Stronger clarity is required regarding what is mandatory in each syllabus to ensure teachers have an in-depth understanding of requirements.
- A single syllabus document that includes what is mandatory and the common entitlement that is accessible and easy to use and understand by newly appointed teachers to experienced teachers is required.
- The layout of future syllabuses must clearly describe the learning progression in each discipline/subject area.
- The General capabilities and literacy and numeracy skills required to engage with the content need to be built into subject/discipline progressions.
- The syllabus construct needs to take into account the social/emotional development and wellbeing of students.
- Curriculum content must ensure that teachers are given the time to teach concepts in depth. Students must be given the appropriate time and support to develop thorough understanding.
- The core content of the curriculum needs to include topics such as student health, wellbeing and safety outcomes (eg road safety, cyber safety, sun safety, obesity, mindfulness) as a focus in the PDHPE syllabus, not as add-ons.
- A revision of the requirements for assessment and reporting to parents is an integral component of the review.

FLEXIBILITY.

- The NSWPPA strongly supports the creation of a more flexible curriculum that is less prescriptive, and more learner focused. It however also needs to clearly set out the expected standards of attainment for each year
- A flexible curriculum gives teachers a chance to respond to their own contexts, student’s abilities, interests, and passions
- There is a need to upskill teachers on how to use revised curriculum documents to be responsive to and differentiate for learner needs.
- With a more flexible curriculum, teachers will still require support, scaffolding and resources based on their level of experience and expertise to ensure we can cater for the range of abilities in our classrooms. Quality professional learning needs to be provided by NESA on an ongoing basis based on teacher’s needs and level of teaching experience. This professional learning needs to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their skills and understanding, collaboratively share practice and build capacity via various delivery modes

- There are significant implications for resourcing and professional learning to support teachers to understand and harness the flexibility of curriculum what to teach and when to teach it.
- Implications for accountability should be addressed with clear advice and tracking student progress and learning through the common entitlement
- NESA must provide direction and support about the development and use of integrated curriculum units (COGS).
- Workload issues related to tracking: educational sector, government and parental expectations need to be taken into consideration. Need to manage the expectation that every student has a flexible Individual Education Plan (IEP) which is not realistic nor workable.

PEDAGOGY

- The NSWPPA strongly supports the notion of applying knowledge (such as critical and creative thinking, collaborating, interpreting information/data, communicating and using technologies) be included as learning priorities for all syllabuses for all stages.
- Significant investment is required in professional learning and resources to support teaching, assessing and reporting to parents in order to achieve this outcome.
- Clear direction must be given regarding effective teaching and learning strategies (pedagogies) to promote the application of knowledge in each Key Learning Area.
- There is no one pedagogy that is suitable for all students. Teachers utilise a variety of methods to engage our students.

b. Quality and relevance of the evidence-base underpinning the recommendations (compared to CESE findings)

- The evidence base utilised in this Review was strong and included extensive, repeated consultation with key stakeholders

c. Recommendations for student-centred 'progression points' and 'differentiated learning' in schools and whether such initiatives are research-based and proven to be effective

- Syllabuses have technically always been organised as a learning progression. The spiral nature of the syllabuses is based on building knowledge & skills developmentally.
- The NSWPPA strongly supports the concept of a student being at least 'on track' through their school years as a useful idea for the majority of students.
- The standard level of attainment needs to apply to the mandatory common entitlement of the knowledge, skills and conceptual understandings of all Key Learning Areas.
- The syllabus structure should still indicate stage levels to allow teachers to describe attainment of the expected standard.
- Information on the progress/growth that students have made over time in each key learning area should become a greater focus for assessment and reporting.
- It allows for all students to be tracked/monitored on their learning progress and define their learning progression. It allows teachers to determine where their students are and where to go to next.
- In principle, it allows for teachers to meet all students at their point of need as their common entitlement in literacy and numeracy, general capabilities and social/emotional learning.

- It allows for the identification and support for students who are “on track” and “off track”. This identification then allows for adjustments for high performing and gifted students as well as for students with a disability and/or learning needs
- The early experience of using Learning Progressions in NSW schools highlighted that there must be significant time and resourcing given for teachers to successfully embed a monitoring system such as Learning Progressions and that they should be mandatory in English and mathematics K-10.

d. Relationship with the National schools’ curriculum

- We have a Federal Government agency ACARA that has provided a rich set of syllabus documents utilised in a variety of ways by jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions have “light” syllabus documents and have fully absorbed the National Curriculum as their own, whereas in NSW, NESA has the mandate to provide our syllabuses and does so with a NSW “bent” on the National curriculum.

2. The extent to which the Masters Review meets key Government policy objectives, including:

a. Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

- It addresses this issue to a large extent, it is core goal of the review and manages the issue with clear advice including a what is mandatory and optional, and “Common Core”
- The recommendation of the Review is to retain all existing mandated subjects in the early and middle years of school. In other words, the process of reducing content should occur within learning areas and subjects where this is judged appropriate, and through a reconsideration of extra-curricular topics and issues that schools have been asked to address, but not by eliminating entire subjects.
- In the primary years, the Review recommends adding language learning to the curriculum for all students which is some ways is impractical.
- In the senior years, reducing the number of subjects over time by combining and consolidating some subjects to produce a new set of subjects, each of which integrates theory and the application of theory in an area of learning. The intention is not so much to remove content from the curriculum as to repackage it as part of new, rigorous HSC subjects.
- The Review is also clear about how the content of subjects should be reduced where this is judged necessary. The process should be to identify knowledge, skills and understandings that are central to the subject and upon which further learning in the subject depends i.e. developing the foundations. These should provide the core focus of learning. If content is to be removed, it should be more peripheral content not central to the development of deep understandings of key disciplinary concepts, principles and methods. This consideration should take precedence over all other considerations in reducing content.”

b. Ensuring students’ acquisition of excellence in literacy and numeracy, as well as deep knowledge of key subjects

- Reform Direction 2: Promoting Deep Understanding. “Learning with understanding” is the focus on fundamental concepts and principles in each subject, and opportunities to apply in meaningful contexts (Page: xiv)
- This is Managed through reduction in content, a mix of theory and application, and skill development. This is not about back to the basics.
- The NSWPPA strongly supports the notion of promoting deep understanding as described in the review.
- We strongly support the notion that mandatory syllabus content should focus on core knowledge, skills and key conceptual understandings.
- The promotion of deep understanding must extend to the general capabilities which must be brought to the forefront of each syllabus.
- The mandatory ‘core’ content should be clearly described and structured as a learning progression in each syllabus. How core concepts, knowledge, understandings and skills weave through each syllabus must be clearly described to allow effective integration.
- Literacy and Numeracy must be the prerequisite core content that allows the knowledge, skills and conceptual understandings to be accessed in all subject areas.
- There must be significant time given and resourcing for teachers to successfully understand and implement any changes.
- There must be significant investment in professional learning, curriculum resources and the building of expert knowledge by NESA to support reforming the content of the curriculum.
- The NSWPPA strongly supports the notion that “Those responsible for implementing the new curriculum will need to make clear that rigorous, high-quality learning involves more than being able to reproduce knowledge in an examination or to demonstrate a checklist of skills in a

workplace. Deep disciplinary learning is reflected in the ability to transfer and apply knowledge to practical real-world settings, and the expert execution of skills depends on a sound understanding of the theory that underpins them.” (page 105)

c. Professor Masters’ explanation for NSW declining school results and the role a revised curriculum can play in reversing this decline

- The NSW PPA accepts the explanation as a significant reason for declining results as the explanation has been reported by educators in schools across a range of contexts.
- “The Review heard widespread concerns about the volume of content in most NSW syllabuses. A consistent comment in consultation meetings and submissions was that syllabus documents expect teachers to cover an unreasonable amount of material. Syllabuses were regularly described as ‘overcrowded’, ‘overly prescriptive’, ‘too content heavy’, ‘overly content driven’, ‘cluttered’ and promoting a ‘tick-box’ approach to teaching” (Page 24) (See page 24-26)
- A revised curriculum will play a significant role in allowing schools to focus on knowledge, skills and progress in a refined manner.
- Additionally NAPLAN assesses only a narrow band of the syllabuses and the Writing assessment tool is highly discredited as a test of Writing performance.
- PISA assesses processes & application of knowledge & skills whereas we teach content, so PISA is not testing what we teach.

3. **Other matters of public concern and interest in the development of the NSW curriculum:**

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

- General capabilities and 'soft skills' need to be at the forefront of all syllabuses, with the core being literacy and numeracy. Specific, clear advice about effective pedagogical models that support the development of students' knowledge, skills and understanding and applying them in context is imperative.
- Design new syllabuses to not only to develop increasingly sophisticated knowledge and deeper understandings of a subject, but also skills in applying that knowledge. 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.
- A third feature of the new curriculum is its design to give greater attention, in every learning area, to skills in using knowledge. This feature applies both to learning areas of the common curriculum that all students undertake, usually for the first ten or eleven years of school, and also to more specialised subjects that extend and build on subjects of the common curriculum in the later years of school.
- New syllabuses are designed not only to develop increasingly sophisticated knowledge and deeper understanding of an area of learning, but also skills in applying that knowledge. No subject is focused solely on developing knowledge or solely on developing skills; theory and the application of theory are seen as intertwined and essential features of every subject.
- The new curriculum specifies how students' skills in applying knowledge are to be developed in parallel with their advancing knowledge and understanding of each subject. Rather than being taught or assessed separately from subjects, such skills are incorporated into new syllabuses and are an integral part of developing competence in each subject.
- The development and demonstration of these skills depends on opportunities for students to put their subject knowledge and understandings to work, for example, through practical applications, problem solving activities or investigative projects. In these ways, students build and extend their subject knowledge, and also develop an important range of skills in using that knowledge."
- The cross curricular areas of ATSI histories and culture, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and Sustainability are woven through teaching and learning where relevant.

b. To what extent, if any, knowledge and the curriculum are 'socially constructed', requiring the teaching of source verification and fluidity principles

- Primary schools teach the whole child and we provide students with the opportunity "to enhance and develop resilience and connectedness and learn to interact respectfully with others. Through PDHPE students develop the skills to research, apply, appraise and critically analyse health and movement concepts in order to maintain and improve their health, safety, wellbeing and participation in physical activity". (PDHPE syllabus)
- Students are provided with opportunities to learn to critique and challenge assumptions, attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes and evaluate a range of health-related sources, services and organisations. They develop a commitment to the qualities and characteristics that promote and develop empathy, resilience, respectful relationships, inclusivity and social justice. Students practise, develop and refine the physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills that are important for engaging in movement and leading a healthy, safe and physically active life.

c. Whether and to what extent schools should be involved in the ‘social and emotional development’ of students, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, and growing popularity of ‘wellbeing programs’ in NSW schools

- There is a strong correlation between student wellbeing, social / emotional learning and student academic outcomes.
- Our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds across the State. The family life of all of our students impacts on the growth, development and achievements of our students. Jointly with parents/carers we support their social and emotional development and sometimes even their physical needs. The extent of our involvement varies with the various contexts we are situated in. Our mantra in NSW government schools is that we “know, value & care for” each of our students to help them reach their potential.
- The syllabus construct needs to take into account the social and emotional development and wellbeing of students and teachers to ensure that teachers are given the time to teach concepts or big ideas deeply, and students are able to develop deep understanding of what is being taught and the capacity to apply their knowledge.
- The curriculum review does NOT address this to any extent.

d. Adequacy of the content and depth of teaching of Australian history, pre- and post-1788

- Australian history pre- and post 1788 is explicitly covered in the NESA History syllabus. The content and depth is adequately covered in NSW primary schools.

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

- DoE literacy resources and support have a strong evidence base.
- An “evidence base” is developed through the research into the impact of programs and pedagogy, it is important to retain the flexibility to adjust to the context of the school and individual needs of students.
- School based action research also forms an important part of an evidence based approach.

f. Role and effectiveness of vocational education syllabuses in NSW schools

- Vocational education syllabuses are not covered in NSW Primary schools.

g. Effectiveness of NESA in curriculum development and supervision

- NESA effectively develops the curriculum in terms of the syllabus development. The review cycle of the syllabuses has resulted in a significant workload issue in NSW public schools.

- The implementation of the syllabuses in terms of the curriculum support and professional learning rests with the employer, NSW Department of Education
- The supervision of the curriculum is effectively managed through the registration processes. NESA implements two processes for the purposes of system monitoring:
 - System monitoring – cyclical
 - System monitoring – random selection

Within this legislative framework, the Department is responsible for:

- ensuring that NSW government schools comply with the Department's system processes, policies and procedures including compliance with the requirements
- providing NESA with information on its system processes, policies and procedures to ensure the compliance of its schools, including data and information relating to the implementation of its processes and policies.(Registration Process for the NSW government schooling system: <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/a3b1090d-2bcb-44bb-850b-5eba1f8ce45d/registration-process-for-the-nsw-government-schooling-system-manual.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>)

The NSW Department of Education also supervises curriculum through the School Excellence Policy.