

Submission  
No 57

## INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

**Organisation:** Catholic Education, Diocese of Parramatta

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# REVIEW

## Response to the Inquiry into the NSW School Curriculum

Submission by: *Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta*

9 August 2020

### Preamble

Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta (CEDP) provided submissions to both the NSW Curriculum Review in November 2018, as well as to the Interim Draft of the Review in December 2019. This paper reiterates the intent of those submissions in response to the current call for submissions by the NSW Legislative Council which is inquiring into the content of, and proposed changes to, the NSW Curriculum in the review by Professor Geoff Masters published in June 2020.

### Introduction

Since its establishment in 1986, CEDP has embraced the aspiration of transforming learning at learner, school and system levels – 80+ schools with 4,500 staff and 43,000 students. Catholic education is a vital part of the mission of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Parramatta, which is a pilgrim church, a eucharistic community of diversity and a refuge that is compassionate and inclusive. Our intent is to transform the learning of each student and enrich the professional lives of staff, within a Catholic faith community. In our learning universe, faith formation for mission demands radical inclusivity, learning is negotiated by the learner, equity requires multiple approaches, and leading is everyone’s responsibility.

The current NSW curriculum model was designed in the 20th century for a world that has been consigned to history. Syllabuses are a rigid framework that follow a sequential process and do not allow young people or teachers to solve complex societal problems and collaborate in teams. Learning needs to be driven by deep thought, deep research with an evidence-base, collaboration and cooperation. There is an urgency to liberate thinking away from an industrial model of curriculum that deliberately attempts oversimplification of student and teacher learning, and has an emphasis on discipline-based knowledge acquisition. A mass production model of schooling based on control and replication is a structure that ignores how the world works and how people learn.

Note that while comments are shown below for each of the Terms of Reference, they are cumulatively telling a single narrative of:

1. The need for reform (**why**) – to provide each student with access to a relevant and seamless learning journey
2. Essential knowledge, skills and abilities (**what**) – recognising that “essential” will be different for each student depending on their chosen learning pathway
3. Structure of the curriculum (**how**) – in a collective partnership with teachers, parents and community, students are able to learn, assess, monitor and showcase their knowledge, skills and abilities in ways that are meaningful to all
4. Practicalities of implementing a reformed curriculum (**when**) – change needs to be achievable by systems and schools in relevant timeframes in a culture that supports the mooted change.

### Evidence base for this response

- Online survey
- *Zoom* round-table conferences (5 meetings) with input from 17 primary and 16 secondary school principals
  - A total of 33 school principals and 3 teachers across 35 K-12 schools

- CEDP office staff input – Directors, Learning Leaders, Managers.

#### **TOR 1 (a-d): The extent to which the Masters’ Curriculum Review addresses its 4 Terms of Reference**

1. *Articulate the purposes of the school curriculum, including underpinning philosophies and principles*
  - a. There was Strong-to-Very-Strong agreement that the purpose of school education was articulated clearly ie. strong foundations for meaningful and effective citizenship.
  - b. There was Strong-to-Very-Strong agreement that the Recommendations were supported by quality and relevant evidence
  - c. Points to note:
    - i. The language used to describe the goal and vision is steeped in the existing power-relationships of *doing-to-others* rather than *working-with-others* as partners for learning eg. “...provide students...”, “...deliver **to** students...” and “...**provide** every young person with knowledge...” (p. xi)
      1. Indeed the language of ‘mandate’, ‘specifying’, and ‘providing explicit detail’ is endemic in the Review and mitigates against meeting student need at point of need.
    - ii. There is a continuation of the dominant hegemony of Western philosophies and principles of what constitutes a functioning society evidenced by over-whelming *occupation-focussed* messaging throughout the document with little to no nuance of the current meaning of this for the future (p. xi)
    - iii. The broadness of the stated purpose of school education (*goal for* students, *vision for* teachers) takes little notice of the intent of the *Through Growth to Achievement*<sup>1</sup> report which assigns a much more realistic goal of a collective responsibility in relation to student learning ie. partnerships for learning involving the student, their family/carers, community and industry. Expecting that a single school will enable opportunities with every student without external partnership support is simply perpetuating the isolated compound approach to education currently in common operation. Learning does not only happen during school hours and social and emotional development takes time, maturity and healthy relationships to realise. This might be more purposefully pursued in a skill-building curriculum that invites parents/care-givers and community into the mix in a meaningful partnership for learning.
2. *Identify essential knowledge, skills and attributes as the common entitlement for all learners...*
  - a. There was Strong-to-Very-Strong Agreement that the Report identified essential knowledge, skills and attributes, particularly to prioritise oral language, early reading and maths knowledge and skills over all other curriculum areas especially in the early years (Recommendation 4)
  - b. There was significant Disagreement concerning the maintenance of all existing mandated subjects in the Middle Years (Recommendation 5.1)
    - i. There seems to be an inconsistency here between mandating existing subjects and reducing an overcrowded curriculum
  - c. There was Strong-to-Very-Strong Agreement about reducing the overcrowded content of the syllabuses (Recommendations 1 and 2)
  - d. Points to note – concern was expressed in relation to:
    - i. Who decides the “...essential facts, concepts and principles...” in each subject of the new curriculum? Who decides what is to be cut out?
      1. There was considerable support for teachers-as-curriculum designers to suit the learning needs of the students as they present in the local context. This would clearly support the stated vision “...of a curriculum that supports teachers to nurture wonder, ignite passion...” (p. xi). Backing the professional judgement of teachers with a supported sense of autonomy would be a sound step forward (p. 53).
      2. Is NESA in conflict by being both the sponsor of the Review and also presumably tasked with its implementation and the compliance of systems?
      3. Who decides the removal of extra-curricular activities? (Recommendation 8.1)

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<sup>1</sup> Gonski, D. et al (2018), *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools*. [Online]. Available: <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/through-growth-achievement-report-review-achieve-educational-excellence-australian-0>. Department of Education and Training, Commonwealth of Australia. Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> August, 2020.

- ii. There is a need to address all areas of a balanced curriculum and not try to simplify the teaching-and-learning experience into a back-to-basics emphasis on the 3-Rs. Play, emotional and social wellbeing, diversity, ethics, and social justice are just some of the elements of a well-balanced curriculum to promote "...effective future citizenship" (p. xi)
  - iii. Requiring every student to commence learning a second language (Recommendation 5.2) means that at least some "...essential content..." has already been selected by the Reviewer. Mandating this is fraught with difficulty as has been proven in the past 30 years with Language programs promoted by Federal and State levels of government. Not least of the issues with this mandate is the equity of resourcing across all rural, regional, remote and urban schools in the State.
  - iv. The term "common entitlement" is odd language, unnecessary and inadequately explained. If the curriculum review strays into the area of social contract, then common use terms such as "rights" and "responsibilities" might be better understood by the intended audience.
3. *Explain how the curriculum could be redesigned and presented...*
- a. There was Strong-to-Very-Strong Agreement with each of the following:
    - i. Introduce new syllabuses that prioritise depth of understanding
    - ii. Tighten processes of monitoring attainment levels
    - iii. Develop new assessment and reporting practices that monitor, diagnose and provide feedback for learning progress eg. learning progressions
    - iv. Provide opportunities for the application of knowledge and skills
    - v. Incorporate the General Capabilities into the content of each syllabus
  - b. Points to note:
    - i. The number of learning outcomes is over representative of the specified content
    - ii. The language of the learning outcomes is dense and of limited meaning to target audiences
    - iii. A more harmonious and obvious relationship with the Australian Curriculum would be helpful for a mobile population such as we have in Australia eg. is there really a need for NSW syllabuses at all when the Australian Curriculum can be used by teachers as learning designers?
    - iv. Offering a more integrated approach to include learning pathways at need that are not bound by the language of "academic" or "vocational" will build on the general curriculum approach of knowledge in action through skill
    - v. There is a logical inconsistency in advocating for non-time-bound syllabuses while retaining the HSC
    - vi. Without conceptual understanding as the focus, discipline-based (Key Learning Area – KLA) syllabuses do not support integrated connections of learning. They make it simpler to program (so as to meet current compliance regimes) but leave it to the learner to make cross-discipline connections of knowledge, skills and abilities
    - vii. Identifying progressions of learning developed over time is similar to what current syllabuses advocate and has significant overlap with the Australian Curriculum work on Learning Progressions in Literacy and Numeracy.
      - 1. What will an overlay of "Attainment Levels" on Learning Progressions look like? eg. will students need 80% before they can move along the continuum? Or should it be Mastery of learning (100%)?
      - 2. Will "Attainment Levels" be based on knowledge or skills or understanding or application of understanding or all of these? How will these be described such that understanding is possible for all relevant audiences?
      - 3. How will "Attainment Levels" be described for the Senior Secondary Curriculum?
    - viii. A more flexible curriculum will allow students to access learning regardless of age/stage particularly if the "...newly defined set (of learning areas)..." was across K-12, not just the Later Years (as in Recommendation 6.2)
    - ix. A current pedagogical inconsistency is that teachers are teaching to individual needs but required to report against stage-related syllabus learning outcomes. A more flexible approach will mitigate this incoherence

- x. It will be crucial to match Recommendation 6 with the work promoted by the *Review of Senior Secondary School Pathways*<sup>2</sup>
  - xi. Inquiry Based approaches already expect senior secondary courses to include a balance of underpinning theory and transfer and application of knowledge
  - xii. In the new subjects and projects of the senior secondary school curriculum, there will be a reliance on schools and staff to develop and deliver “...rigorous, high-quality advanced courses...” with students in such a way as to respond to identified passions, interests and needs. There will be equity issues over how a single school (especially in rural, remote and hard-to-staff) can provide such services.
  - xiii. Single schools cannot offer the learning opportunities being described here without reworking relationships with other schools and sectors, industry and community. Schools will need to generate partnerships for learning with schools as community hubs to mitigate resource duplication cost at every site. Recommendation 7 is a long way short of recognising this.
  - xiv. What will ‘advanced’ learning look like for *each* student? How will we know it is ‘advanced’ if it is pre-set in a syllabus?
4. *Identify the implications of any new approach to curriculum design...*
- a. There was Strong-to-Very Strong Agreement that the ATAR<sup>3</sup> will become redundant as a learning signifier
  - b. It was unclear to principals that the case has been made for the current decade-long timeline to implement the new syllabuses. A shorter timeline or a move away from NSW syllabuses to the existing Australian Curriculum documents would be preferable
  - c. Universal support for the alignment of the learning system components (Recommendation 9)
  - d. There was Some agreement that the proposed curriculum is not different enough from what could be offered from the existing curriculum if it was resourced more strongly.
  - e. Points to note:
    - i. There are significant professional learning implications for teachers to implement advocated changes with requisite resource implications at tertiary (pre-service) and school (in-service) levels (Recommendation 10)
      - 1. There will be consequent Enterprise Agreement implications to this work.
    - ii. Resources can be a challenge to personalising learning—teachers need support, both in the form of intensive and sustained professional development, and in the form of additional para-professional staff, particularly to support students not achieving growth
    - iii. Resourcing needs to reflect equity at local, system and national levels to ensure stated principles are achievable
    - iv. There is scope for in-school acceleration structuring though with significant implications for programming to meet current NESA compliance requirements
      - 1. Current compliance regimes mitigate against schools collaborating with other organisations to offer courses of passion, interest, or integrated knowledge/skill eg. systems with students wishing to study an AQF Diploma course in years 11 and 12 would be penalised by having students recognised as part-time or less unless they study the appropriate number of HSC units *in addition* to the Diploma study
      - 2. Micro-credentials provided at point of attainment would be a welcome addition to the credentialing of the curriculum though the implications for the processes of gaining NESA approval may be significant with issues of *who* does the certifying and *which* organisations will recognise them
      - 3. NESA compliance processes are a barrier to many of the Recommendations and need to be part of the alignment strategy of Recommendation 9
    - v. Ensuring parents and community gain understandings which support the changes will take resources and specific activity. Who does this?
    - vi. A major project is a concept worth exploring **for all** students as an approach across a whole school K-12 to build and demonstrate knowledge, skills and understandings of attainment levels. The project can support engagements with partners for learning

<sup>2</sup> Shergold, P. et al, (2020), *Looking to the Future – Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.pathwaysreview.edu.au/>. Education Services Australia, Council of Australian Governments.

<sup>3</sup> ATAR = Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank and is currently used by all Australian Universities to determine less than one-third of tertiary admissions.

including industry, community and other tertiary providers to ensure equity across schools

1. Equity in assessment remains a question, particularly at the HSC level when major works are a dominant factor. Demographic, geographic and socio-economic background are factors here where a school's postcode might determine advantage
  2. There will be implications for structuring interdisciplinary teacher collaborative time into workload.
- vii. The development of a "...detailed and **explicit** curriculum for the teaching of reading..." (Recommendation 4.2) will be re-igniting the 'reading wars' and consequently fraught with difficulty to implement. Backing teacher autonomy as designers of learning would be a Recommendation that has greater potential for student learning success.
- viii. Similarly, (Recommendation 5.3) "...develop a curriculum that **specifies** what every student should know and understand about Aboriginal culture and histories..." is fraught with the difficulty of who decides the specification? What is the process for consensus to be gained with stakeholders? (Recommendation 7)
- ix. With advocated reductions in subject offerings in the Later Years (Recommendation 6) and reductions in extracurricular activity (Recommendation 8), how will the curriculum "...give priority to providing every student with opportunities to pursue personal interests and strengths..." (Recommendation 6)?
- x. Student voice in the new curriculum? "...Stakeholder groups, particularly teachers, should be closely involved...to ensure new arrangements...best **support the work of teachers...**" (p. xviii). The new curriculum may have a higher potential for "...nurturing wonder and igniting passion..." if the new arrangement best supported the work of all those with a collective responsibility for student learning, including the students.

#### **TOR 2 (a-c): The extent to which the Masters' Review meets key Government policy objectives**

- a) Overcrowded curriculum – see sections 2b) and c) above in TOR 1
- b) Literacy and numeracy and deep knowledge – see sections 3bvii) (Literacy and Numeracy) and Introduction above
- c) Declining school results – There was concern expressed that this Government policy aspiration is reflective of misguided understandings of learning and is sensibly not a large part of the Review discussion.

#### **TOR 3 (a-g): Other matters of public concern and interest in the development of the NSW curriculum**

- a) *The use of cross-curriculum priorities to guide content and teaching*
  - a. There was Agreement that the application of the priorities/capabilities was the key to their greater use and understanding to benefit learner and society
- b) *The extent to which knowledge and the curriculum are socially constructed*
  - a. There was Agreement that knowledge and the curriculum are socially constructed artefacts that do not exist without human intervention. Student learning comes from building skills to discern how knowledge came to be – Who are the actors? Why now? Who benefits? Who doesn't? What does the knowledge mean when acted upon?
  - b. All curricula are ideologically bound in this way.
- c) *The extent to which schools should be involved in the 'social and emotional development' of students*
  - a. Humans do not learn without engagement which comes from "...nurturing wonder and igniting passion..." – this is at the social/emotional level of development and engagement
  - b. There is a need for schools to engage as a collective to:
    - i. focus on social skills, personal and societal values, honesty, justice and respect for others
    - ii. promote engagement with key social equity issues of the day as valued dimensions of learning eg. environment.
  - c. Challenge definitions of success with regards to equity and excellence so that learning is not limited to structured benchmarks such as NAPLAN, HSC, PISA etc

- d. Name goals of education and learning that promote equity and excellence and focused on student wellbeing, human flourishing and care for the common good.
- d) *Adequacy of the content and depth of teaching of Australian history, pre- and post- 1788*
  - a. See b) above in TOR 3
- e) *...adopting the most effective evidence-based approaches to language acquisition especially for reading and writing*
  - a. There is no definitive answer to deciding the "...most effective evidence-based approaches...". This has been shown clearly by the plethora of programs advocated by various literacy experts over many years.
  - b. The learning for the profession has been that a 'program' is perhaps necessary, but not sufficient, for all students. Success will be more assured by quality teachers implementing a synthesis of approaches that meet student needs as they present.
- f) *Role and effectiveness of vocational education syllabuses*
  - a. See section 3bx) above in TOR 1 re: *Review of Senior Secondary School Pathways*
  - b. Vocational education syllabuses will cease to be relevant as entities on their own. The new framework proposed for the Later Years will negate the need and integrate learning.
- g) *Effectiveness of NESA in curriculum development and supervision*
  - a. See sections above – 2di2), 4e) in TOR 1
  - b. There was agreement that NESA seems to be an organisation that self-perpetuates ie. it creates compliance measures to ensure its continued existence eg. the writing of NSW syllabuses when Australian Curriculum documents already exist.

### **Concluding remarks**

- Ten years is a long time for a reform and the pace of societal and technological change may overtake the original intent and process, further frustrating schools and staff
- Without equitable reform, inequality will continue
- Pathway opportunities for students need to broaden with any reform
- Delays in reform may encourage systems to pursue unsustainable and irrelevant work practices.