

**Submission
No 58**

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW

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Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum

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Introduction

While we question the need for an inquiry into the NSW Curriculum Review, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is nonetheless willing to contribute. P&C Federation supports the position that individual educational and developmental needs should be met by a range of differentiated services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments provided by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents^[1] and families.

Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments are committed to ensuring equitable access to quality schooling for all students, in accordance with Australian legislation, national commitments via the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, and international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It should be noted that P&C Federation is supportive of most aspects of the NSW Curriculum Review as it represents the first chance in decades to substantively address the main issues with the current curriculum and improve the learning outcomes for the future generations of students. We are disappointed that some of the key recommendation within the review were not taken up by the NSW government and that they have adopted a narrower 'back to basics' approach, simply looking at reducing syllabus content and subject removal. Whilst this will have some impact on student learning it will not address many of the key issues raised as part of the review.

It is important to note that the NSW Curriculum Review, in P&C Federation's view, was a review of the current curriculum with a view to suggesting possible changes. This is what the review delivered through extensive public and targeted consultation. The NSW Curriculum Review was not a review of syllabus content, pedagogy or systemic delivery although these were raised as part of the consultation process.

In summary P&C Federation sees the following issues with the current curriculum:

- The curriculum is overcrowded.
- Due to overcrowding there has been progressively less time to teach core concepts in depth.
- There is a proliferation of subjects, specifically in high school that don't have appropriately trained teachers to teach them, have limited candidature and require resourcing and funding to operate.
- The current curriculum is academically focused, specifically to cater for students going to university.
- Non-academic pathways are considered lower priority

¹ "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

- The curriculum is predominantly a one size fits all progression that requires all students to meet particular knowledge points at relatively fixed points in time.
- The curriculum is heavily influenced by the government of the day resulting in a steady growth over time.
- There is often little differentiation between essential (mandatory) and nonessential (optional) material within the curriculum. This often leaves teachers believing they need to teach everything.

The impacts that these issues create:

- Student results have not shown any substantive improvement over the last decade and in some areas have fallen behind.
- There is a significant gap between metropolitan and rural/regional student performance which is steadily growing.
- NAPLAN and PISA results, irrespective of the fact they are both testing regimes that have questionable comparative indicators, nonetheless show a trend with an ever widening gap between high performing students and those with the lowest performance.
- The current structure holds back higher achievers and leaves behind slower learners.
- Large numbers of students simply do not end up with the basic skills required for life. Many end up disengaged, disillusioned or disruptive.

To answer the specific terms of reference of this inquiry we would offer the following comments.

Terms of Reference

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

The two primary aims of the review were to

- Provide an education that engages and challenges every child and young person in learning, rewards them for effort and promotes high standards; and
- Prepare each student with strong foundations of knowledge, capabilities and values to be lifelong learners, and to be flourishing and contributing citizens in a world in which rapid technological advances are contributing to unprecedented economic and social change in unpredictable ways.

The NSW Curriculum Review was an extensive, open and widely consultative review into the current NSW Curriculum. Its brief was not to simply reduce the content of syllabi but to “explain how the curriculum could be redesigned and presented to better support teaching, learning, assessment and reporting “. In the opinion of P&C Federation, the NSW Curriculum Review did in fact largely address the terms of reference given to it.

(a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

We are unaware of any terms of reference in the NSW Curriculum Review which required it to address curriculum content, other than to address the extent to which overcrowding has impacted the current curriculum. Overcrowding is a contentious issue with different groups having differing opinions as to where the curriculum is overcrowded. The NSW Curriculum Review said relatively little about specific curriculum content, as to be expected, but did recommend retaining all existing mandated subjects in the early and middle years of school.

In a similar way, pedagogy was only referenced in terms of the possible impacts any proposed new design might have on pedagogy.

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

The Review's recommendations were based in large part on consultations with many stakeholders. As per the terms of reference:

The Review will undertake a comprehensive community engagement process to seek the diversity of views in the community, including the views of young people, parents, employers and those involved in the delivery of school education.

While some evidence was referenced to support parts of the report, P&C Federation are unaware of any specific requirement under the terms of reference for the NSW Curriculum Review to provide an evidence base to underpin its recommendations and certainly no requirement to compare the recommendation against any CESE findings. Additionally, we are unaware of CESE findings that contradict the findings of the NSW Curriculum Review nor are we aware of any request for CESE to provide modelling to support the recommendations of the report.

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

P&C Federation wholeheartedly supports the concept of disconnecting the current association between time and achievement. The concept of 'attainment levels' was proffered as part of a new curriculum model with 'differentiated learning' being a fundamental part of the model.

There are several sources cited in the report that are used to support it:

1. A 1989 review of NSW schools by a committee established by the NSW Premier
2. A 2015 review of the Welsh curriculum
3. A review of the benefits of flexible curricula by Dr Jen Jackson at the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER).

In addition, the review cited a host of studies outlining the benefits of progression-based syllabuses in STEM subjects.

Under the current curriculum, students are progressed from year to year regardless of whether or not they have met the outcomes or achieved the required learning foundations. Individual students may vary dramatically in how they perform against the curriculum within a given year group. The curriculum does not in general account for factors such as the large age and capability variation that exists within any year. The current curriculum assumes all students are the same, and there is therefore little scope for students to meet the curriculum outcomes at a pace that allows the time to assimilate core concepts. With the curriculum mandating that required content be met within specific times and with the large amount of content, there is little scope for teachers as to adapt to these differences in one class.

There are several consequences of this:

- It has led to a situation where many students are perpetually underperforming throughout their school lives, as they have little opportunity to catch up or be extended. This may result in or exacerbate disengagement, disillusionment and in some cases disruptive behaviour.
- There is little room under the current fixed structure for schools to implement the curriculum flexibly in ways that suit their local contexts.
- There is little opportunity and support for teachers to adopt alternative strategies that may engage or re-engage a disengaged student.

In P&C Federation's submission to the Masters Review, we provided a framework for how progressions could be disconnected from time, which we reproduce here:

- Progression through school based upon the attainment of successive proficiency levels in individual subjects or key learning areas.
- Each proficiency level contains an essential core knowledge, skills and competencies component with students only being able to progress to the next proficiency level by having demonstrated they have mastered the core elements.
- There would be full funding of supports for teachers and students to move through these core elements.
- Each proficiency level would also carry with it an element of non-core knowledge, skills and competencies that would be developed to maintain engagement and complement the core material while adding depth.

- Proficiency level trajectory based upon the minimum core competency trajectory that a student needs to reach at the end of schooling.
- Students remain in the age cohort to help promote normal emotional and social growth.
- Students that master proficiencies early can traverse a steeper trajectory (within limits) by seeking to obtain higher proficiency levels, while still receiving support for any proficiencies that they are struggling to meet.
- Students that are struggling to meet a proficiency level would be given additional time, support and funding within limits, to acquire the necessary core before moving on.
- Students should be able to attain a particular proficiency at any time.
- Higher proficiency levels shall reinforce and build upon the core knowledge skills and competencies of the lower proficiency levels without rehashing the material of previous levels.
- Proficiency level achievement should indicate to what level the student has achieved (for teaching and learning purposes) e.g. has the student only met the core requirements or have they met the core plus all of the additional material.
- Judgement about readiness for any particular proficiency level should rest primarily with the child's teacher.
- Progression through proficiency levels should normally be one at a time but not limited to this.
- The core should contain skills and competencies that minimise the ability of students to rely on external coaching to game assessment tasks.
- Differentiation in classes will be based on a child's proficiency level.
- A combination of team teaching, cross year class collaboration and trained specialist teachers would help cater for the potentially large diversity of proficiencies in any given year cohort.

- Assessment against a proficiency level should start as formative only testing in the early years of schooling, with the slow introduction of more summative assessment in the later parts of high school.
- Assessment results are cumulative throughout school. This would:
 - Make the transition from primary to high school more continuous
 - remove some of the stress on the HSC as a high-stakes exam
 - add meaning and purpose to other years (i.e. they genuinely count)
 - Allow meaningful information to be conveyed if a student decides to leave prior to year 12. (i.e. an actual proficiency level for all subjects studied including any elective subjects, including VET).
- Senior secondary students that have already reached year 12 proficiency level may be accelerated by NESA approved extension courses in the first instance and then by:
 - Provision of in-school university approved courses taught by suitably qualified secondary teachers, with fully funded resources, which provide credits towards university courses or other pathways.
 - Provided at university or on-line by tertiary staff.

However, this reform direction would only be possible through major changes to the way students are taught and with the need to upskill a large part of the teaching profession. Some of the issues that we see related to this are:

- Lack of qualified and experienced teachers in key subject areas. While this has traditionally been seen as a complaint in secondary schools, we see this as a major issue in primary schools where a single teacher is expected to teach across the whole curriculum when they may not be strong in one or more of the syllabus areas.
- Significant resistance to change within the profession. Historically there is a large amount of inertia within the profession that will need to be overcome to achieve this level of change. As it will fundamentally require teachers to upskill as well as change the way that they teach this change will take up to a decade to phase in.
- Limited ability of teachers to differentiate to more than three or four levels. In our experience the profession will talk to differentiation but anecdotally there is no evidence to support the levels of differentiation occurring or whether it is occurring in

some classrooms at all. Again, it comes down to the quality and competency of the teacher in their ability to understand the needs and progress of their students and having the motivation and the time to do something about it.

- Teacher judgement requires a suitably qualified and experienced practitioner to exercise such judgement. There need to be checks and balances to counter for poor judgement.

This approach could be realised provided the current model of single teacher per class is replaced by a more flexible multi-teacher approach especially in primary school. This may also go some way towards minimising the differences between primary and secondary. The use of specialist teachers e.g. Maths, Science and English would significantly aid in students getting the knowledge they need in the early years of schooling and being able to differentiate more effectively.

One school that has implemented a system like this is Lindfield Learning Village in Sydney's Northern suburbs, which has abandoned traditional grade levels. The only publicly available measure of this school's achievements is its most recent NAPLAN results, which show its students meeting or exceeding national levels by almost all NAPLAN measures.

(d) Relationship with the national schools curriculum

P&C Federation's view is that NSW should not compromise the quality of its curriculum to a national approach that could possibly impact the rigour and value of the NSW curriculum. While P&C Federation acknowledge the importance of a nationally consistent approach to what is taught in Australia, we also see the benefits of NSW to teach material beyond this.

It is our understanding that a review of the Australian curriculum will be looking at key aspects of the NSW Curriculum Review.

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

(a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

Like most stakeholders, we agree that the curriculum has become overcrowded, and we agree with the NSW Curriculum Review's recommendations to address this as far as they go. However, any reduction in syllabus content should be measured and made based on a solid well thought out methodology that will help remove some of the excessive influence of interest groups. We believe such a methodology would consist of the following:

- Identification of overlap/duplication across syllabuses
- Identification of repetition across the continuum (K-12). Is there material being repeated across stages or between primary and secondary?

- Identification of material that is additional to the core concepts to allow easier identification of material that could possibly be removed.
- Subsequent identification of material that is low priority or actually not required.

We stress, however, that core competencies such as literacy and numeracy must be reinforced across the entire curriculum.

We are also concerned that there are few proposals in the NSW Curriculum Review to prevent future overcrowding of the curriculum. We support the guiding principle of “add something in, take something out”, although there should be some limited flexibility for expansion or contraction. The driving factor is to maintain the core knowledge and skills. Reviews of the curriculum should take place on a more structured cycle. This should be accompanied by a total quality management (TQM) philosophy, whereby the curriculum is constantly being assessed and reviews can still occur between these cyclical reviews if there is a substantive reason for an earlier curriculum update (e.g. if there is a major scientific or educational breakthrough that needs to be addressed).

The reviewing body’s recommendations at each curriculum review should be subject to approval from the NSW Parliament rather than the Minister of the day.

In our response to the Curriculum Review’s Interim Report, we also stressed other significant factors involving overcrowding, and we reiterate those points for this Committee:

The Impact of Compliance and Accountability

To some extent the perception of syllabus overcrowding is the result of systemic and government compliance requirements working its way into day to day teaching. In part teachers are seeing the syllabus as overcrowded because there is less and less time in the day to teach as a result of ever-increasing red tape. This additional burden starts with national bodies and builds as it progresses through systems and down to individual schools who seek to track and quantify an increasing set of parameters in the hope that an ever-greater set of data will generate the answer to better student outcomes or shape better teachers. At the school leadership level, the increasing burden of understanding and then meeting compliance takes away from the role of education leadership and as a consequence has a ripple down effect on teaching and learning. We see an increasing trend in systems and governments treating students like commercial commodities. Continuing this approach will inevitably lead to a major failure of the system.

The introduction of standardised national testing which was originally intended to inform classroom practice is now a mechanism that creates an environment where schools see the need to promote and market themselves using test results. This creates a culture of teaching to the test, stalling the delivery of the curriculum to ensure the school performs well. This is particularly prevalent in primary schools where NAPLAN results are often seen as the only

way to market the school. This is further compounded by systems that place great emphasis on NAPLAN, and by governments and media who simplistically use NAPLAN along with PISA and TIMMS results as the only indicators of performance.

Government and Political Interference

Another significant factor is the rapid introduction of government policy in response to singular issues that are perceived to be quick, simple short-term fixes but are often ill-considered with far reaching consequences for teaching and learning. This has led to pressure to add material to syllabuses that arguably should not be there or could be dealt with in other ways.

This is why in our original submission, to protect against overcrowding due to this factor, we recommended that a permanent framework for making any changes to the curriculum falls to an independent, non-political body consisting of professional educators, parent and community representatives, and other relevant stakeholders and specialists. The appointment of members of this approving body should not be subject to Ministerial approval and may be by the peak organisations that the representatives come from. This could perhaps be under the auspices of NESAs, following an amendment to the NESAs Act.

The rules governing any body charged with curriculum change and endorsement must ensure that any proposed changes be supported with:

1. clear explanations of the educational benefits of the proposed changes;
2. detailed breakdowns of the resources (human and physical) and the approved budgeted funding that will be required to implement the proposed changes;
3. clear estimates of how much time it will take for teachers to implement the proposed changes in their classrooms, based on the time it takes for them to cover what is already in the curriculum; and
4. supported by robust data

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

P&C Federation supports any move towards deeper understanding particularly in core material. However, we need to stress that deeper understanding depends on two essential elements:

- More material in the syllabus including the time to teach it
- Appropriately qualified (specialist) teachers to teach it

When asked about reducing syllabus content parents will often state that we need to make room for the teaching of deeper content. This is both necessary but also a potential issue. Care should be taken that this reform direction does not undermine the reform direction to declutter the curriculum.

While we agree with promoting deeper understanding of subjects, it is difficult to discern how the NSW Curriculum Review's proposals differ significantly from current intentions of the curriculum. The Review states envisages a curriculum where *"Teaching and learning are focused on developing students' deep understandings of important concepts, principles and methods in each subject"*, and syllabuses that *"focus on a smaller set of core factual knowledge, concepts and principles and are designed to develop increasingly deep understandings of these over time."*

This is already the stated intention of many syllabuses, and if these stated principles are not being implemented in practice adequately or consistently, then how these principles are implemented should be the primary focus of reform rather than the principles themselves.

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

The explanation offered in the Review's final report for NSW declining results in PISA and other tests is that overcrowded syllabuses *"make it difficult to teach important content in depth"*, and that many students consequently *"lack the depth of understanding required to apply subject learning in new and unfamiliar contexts."* This criticism of the current system is certainly in line with our feedback and the feedback of many other stakeholders to the NSW Curriculum Review. However, this is only one of several potential influences in declining results with Professor Masters stressing that factors outside of curriculum such as the training and availability of suitably qualified teachers and systemic practices have additional impact. These factors were identified but largely outside the terms of reference of the review.

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

In terms of the established 'Cross Curriculum Priorities' such as Aboriginal Cultures, Engagement with Asia and Sustainability it is the P&C Federations belief that whilst these priorities reflect important areas to be addressed, these areas should only be incorporated where it is relevant within the curriculum.

There are some skills which P&C Federation feels should be embedded across the curriculum. P&C Federation supports the concept of embedding not just numeracy and literacy, but also (to the extent that these skills can be taught) critical and creative thinking, collaboration and communication.. In terms of the importance of these skills, we see a continuum of learning

starting from Kindergarten to Year 12. We see these skills as being embedded across the entire curriculum as seamlessly as possible.

(b) To what extent, if any, knowledge and the curriculum are ‘socially constructed’, requiring the teaching of source verification and fluidity principles

It is an unfortunate fact that we now live in a world in which there is considerable distortion and misrepresentation of facts to suit the political or social agendas of specific groups. This is being amplified by the ready ability for anyone to publish to a wide audience without any form of fact checking or review, something that was much harder to do before social media. Challenges to previously accepted knowledge occur constantly with social media spreading misinformation like wildfire slowly but surely undermining accepted knowledge. It is therefore important for students to be made aware that what is taught in the curriculum is substantive and accepted knowledge. Anything outside of the curriculum needs to be critically analysed.

Changes to syllabi that may be considered by some to contain ‘fluidity principles’ are by and large changes that reflect the changing world and values in which we live.

(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

Schools have always been involved in the social and emotional development of children in one way or another, with the values of the school generally reflecting the values of the communities and times in which they operate. In previous decades the social and emotional development was narrowly confined, but it was still there.

Times have changed and as far as P&C Federation are aware the majority of NSW Curriculum Review stakeholders wanted to have a greater focus on social and emotional learning in the curriculum, most seeing this as a more holistic approach to a child’s overall education. In fact, the majority of parents P&C Federation spoke to as part of the consultation process were very much in favour of this being included.

It is now well recognised that student wellbeing is a major factor in a child’s ability to learn. Mental health is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. Early intervention is the key to avoiding a child establishing the habits of withdrawal, disruption or refusal to attend school. In the experience of P&C Federation the introduction of ‘wellbeing’ programs into NSW schools has had a positive impact on many children that may otherwise have fallen through the cracks.

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

This is a question that normally goes to specific syllabus content rather than the curriculum specifically. The P&C Federation will say that it is not possible to have a full understanding of

Australia, its history or its culture, without some understanding of Australia's indigenous cultures, and P&C Federation therefore supports the inclusion of knowledge and appreciation of Aboriginal language, culture and history as part of the curriculum. Equally it is important to have a knowledge and appreciation of the ideals and philosophies that have shaped our society and institutions since 1788. We see no reason why both cannot be embedded in the curriculum in a balanced way. There are widely varying views in regards to what this balance looks like but in general it tends to sit with the majority view at the time of syllabus development.

(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

Developing literacy in English not only includes reading and writing but comprehension and composition, is an essential skill for communicating with others throughout life. There are many claims from different interest groups regarding the best methodology for teaching literacy none of which provide perfect solutions by themselves. This has often been an ideological battleground where the only losers are the students.

Public schools in NSW contain students from widely varying backgrounds including other language backgrounds and from our experience there is no one size fits all approach that works. Our position is that teachers must be trained in multiple strategies and approaches to the teaching of literacy and be supported with resources to effectively deliver them to suit the needs of individual students within the context of the school.

(f) Role and effectiveness of vocational education syllabuses in NSW schools

As part of P&C Federation's submission to the Masters Review, we noted that despite a large portion of Year 12 completers not entering university after school, there is an implicit assumption throughout the existing curriculum that all students will go to university immediately upon finishing school. This assumption is apparent in the curriculum's disproportionate focus on academic achievement and on preparation for university study through high stakes examinations. In contrast vocational options receive considerably less focus and are thus implicitly treated as inferior to academic pursuits. This means that teaching is primarily focused on pushing students to obtain an ATAR specifically for the purpose of university entry. Students who prefer to undertake vocational study, start apprenticeships or enter into the workforce after school are to some extent ignored. With high schools using HSC and or ATAR results as their promotional driver, it is little wonder that some of them give little attention to non-academic pursuits to the detriment of those students wishing to pursue this pathway.

While it may not have been the original intent, this emphasis on academic options has rendered the curriculum elitist, and fails to adequately acknowledge the value of non-

academic pursuits. In previous times, students wishing to pursue more vocational pathways had the option of leaving school after Year 10 to study at TAFE, enter apprenticeships or enter the workforce directly. This was changed a decade ago to raise the leaving age to 17 to encourage more students to finish school. As part of the process, the School Certificate was abolished and replaced with a questionable credential the Record of School Achievement (RoSA), which in practise is simply a confirmation that a person has attended school and carries little weight among employers. Thus, for most practical purposes, remaining in school and completing the Higher School Certificate (HSC) is the only viable option for students. Consequently, there are many students in Years 11 and 12 who do not want to be there and who would prefer other pathways, and this may exacerbate disengagement and other behavioural challenges. Their interests could be better served by having more viable vocational options.

P&C Federation proposes the introduction of vocational and academic pathway options for students, which students could choose while still having the chance to change pathways throughout their education. This would have the following characteristics:

- Primary school should focus on the development of students' core basic skills and competencies. Throughout primary years, teachers should continually monitor students' aptitudes and inclinations in these formative years.
- Starting at approximately Stage 4, students will have the option of entering pathways which will serve as preparation for life after school: the university pathway(s) will prepare students for university entry, and the vocational pathway(s) will prepare students for vocational courses, apprenticeships or entry directly into the workforce after school.
- After students enter a pathway, they must have the opportunities to change pathways at any point in their education if they feel another pathway would be more appropriate for them. This would avoid pressuring students from deciding at a young age what they wish to do after school and avoid locking students into a particular pathway from a young age for the rest of their school lives.

(g) Effectiveness of NESAs in curriculum development and supervision

While P&C Federation has a strong working relationship with NESAs, one limitation is that it is heavily susceptible to political pressure. A key factor here is that while NESAs describe themselves as "an independent statutory authority", section 5 of the *Education Standards Authority Act 2013* (NESAs Act) states that NESAs are subject to the control and direction of the Minister, and there are no checks to ensure changes made by the Minister or the government of the day are educationally valid.

P&C Federation also believes that NESAs effectiveness is considerably undermined by recent changes to structure and significant underfunding. The new Board and committee structure has, in our opinion, weakened the efficacy of NESAs and reduced the representation for key

groups that existed under the former Board of Studies (BOSTES). The current Board largely consists of systemic heads, education unions and academics, and has no voice for parents nor representation from the vocational education sector. We see this as a major step backwards.