

**Submission
No 61**

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Steiner Education Australia

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Steiner Education Australia Submission to the Inquiry into the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum

Steiner Education Australia

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Background

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the NSW Parliamentary *Inquiry into the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum*.

SEA is the peak national body comprising 50 Member schools and 16 Associate Members across Australia. We represent nearly 10 000 students and their families, in all States and Territories of Australia. There are 13 Steiner schools in NSW.

Steiner education is an integrated and holistic education designed to provide for the balanced development of human intellectual and cognitive faculties, artistic and imaginative capacities and practical life skills. Parents consciously choose to enrol their children in Steiner schools for the Steiner philosophy and pedagogy underpinning the ACARA recognized Australian Steiner Curriculum (ASCF). Whilst the ASCF is recognized as commensurate with the content descriptors and achievement standards of the Australian Curriculum at key reference points along the K-10 curriculum continuum, our pedagogy and staging of the curriculum differentiates our schools from other types of schooling.

In 2018 SEA undertook an independent national survey of over 3000 members of our community:

- Over 80% of parents said they selected our schools because they are Steiner Schools and as such reflect their values.
- 86% of parents said they strongly agree or agree that with the statement that they are satisfied with their choice.
- More than 92% said they valued an arts-based approach to learning.

- 85% of parents said Steiner schools are preferred to other schools because they offer a well-rounded education, teach to the individual and because of their culture and values.
- Alumni results give insight into the enduring effects of a Steiner education and reinforcement of some of our core educational objectives: an overwhelming 89% agree that 'what I learnt is highly appropriate to later life'. 95% agree that 'attending a Steiner school has been an asset in my life'. 94% of alumni would recommend a Steiner school education.

With all of our schools surveyed, this was an overwhelming level of support and endorsement of our educational philosophy.

Due mainly to specific requirements from the NSW Education Act 1990, NSW is the only state which does not allow use of the Australian Steiner Curriculum (ASCF) for school registration purposes. This is very disappointing to parents who send their children to Steiner schools for its curriculum and ethos underpinning the curriculum, as evidenced in the survey mentioned above. Schools in every other state can use the ASCF for teaching and learning, programming and assessing and for accountabilities to state regulatory authorities. NSW Steiner schools, however, must teach to the NSW syllabus outcomes which are to be achieved at specific stages and report against those outcomes. This compromises the integrity of the Steiner curriculum as it is based on a developmental pedagogy which requires flexible staging, as is globally recognised.

In the NSW Curriculum Review Report , *Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion. Designs for a New Curriculum*¹, it is pleasing that *curriculum flexibility* , by way of 'untimed syllabuses'² was confirmed as a key recommendation.

We therefore reiterate our initial major recommendation to the NSW Curriculum Review³ which is for a NSW Curriculum structure that specifically enables alternate pedagogies to use different progression sequences to achieve broad outcomes at agreed comparison points.

¹ Masters,G.(2020). *Nurturing wonder and igniting passion,designs for a new school curriculum*: NSW Curriculum Review.

² I refer to Recommendation 3 : '*Design new syllabuses that do not specify when every student must commence, or how long they have to learn, the context of each syllabus.*' (Masters, 2020, p. xv)

³ SEA provided 2 submissions to the Review. Please refer to the first submission to the Review: <https://members.steinereducation.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/NSW-Curriculum-review-Submission-2018-final.pdf>

Offering a broad-based curriculum framework provides opportunities for schools to be flexible in the delivery of the kind of programs that would meet the needs and expectations of parents who have reflected deeply and made informed choices about the purposes of education for their children.

Further considerations for the Parliamentary Enquiry

Further considerations specifically address the Parliamentary terms of reference , numbers 1-3. Key points addressed cover the ‘proposed ‘progression points’ or learning progressions; issues of accountability and equity; development of literacy; and cross curriculum priorities. Also addressed in this submission is the core underlying confusion and tensions between the desire to ensure flexibility in implementation and the broader structural and regulatory frameworks that seriously hinder the ‘nurturing of wonder, and igniting of passion’. The burden of compliance requirements, is a pervasive element that takes from teachers’ health, their enthusiasm, the ability to work in depth, and with the creative element of teaching.

In addition, this submission highlights the strong and urgent need for educators to be involved in genuine collaboration and consultation about how these reforms will be implemented. SEA is concerned that the very short time frame for review of the English and Mathematics curriculum for the early and middle years of schooling, for example, will not allow for genuine collaboration. In light of the stresses of Covid 19 on schools , this time frame is even more unrealistic.

NSW Curriculum Review Report in a broader context

Student engagement, creativity, student agency and well-being are seen globally as the new priorities for education. Steiner Education Australia made two submissions to the *NSW Curriculum Review* as mentioned above. In the submissions I made clear connections

between the very tenets of Steiner education⁴ - and these new OECD⁵ priorities for an education to prepare young people for the future. The *NSW Curriculum Review Report* recommendations have however missed a wonderful opportunity to embed these priorities into a radical new way of approaching the education of our children.

SEA believes this missed opportunity arises due to competing discourses and tensions within the NSW Curriculum Review Report. On the one hand there is the recognition for increased flexibility and more focus on not only knowledge but the practical application of knowledge⁶, increased student agency⁷ and engagement in learning. On the other hand there is a competing state and national narrative which continues to drive educational reforms. This is characterised by state and national imperatives of closing the achievement gap and raising test scores in international assessments reform by standardisation, and test-driven accountability⁸, with little overt acknowledgement of the broader influences on student learning such as equity issues, family background, etc. These considerations are expanded upon in the next section. The fact is that there is no improvement in 'closing the gap' or raising educational quality as measured by high stakes testing such as NAPLAN⁹.

⁴ Key Steiner principles which cohere with core OECD Learning Framework Principles (OECD 2018) :

- Foster deep conceptual understanding and creativity through taking time for deep engagement and love of learning. This is achieved through giving equal time to academics, arts and practical activities as cognitive capacities strengthened by a more explicit focus on complementing and entwining with the practical, emotional and aesthetic dimensions of learning. Further Arts integration into the academic curriculum enhances student learning outcomes as a large body of research confirms (Ewing 2018; Ewing & Saunders 2017)
- Develop imaginative thinking as a core focus in the primary years. This is a key foundation for development of higher order conceptual thinking in high school.
- Give time in the early years for creative play, engagement in practical activities and environmental/nature/physical activities.
- Engender in young people a sense of social responsibility for the future.

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

⁶ I refer to Recommendation 2: 'Make explicit in new syllabuses for every subject that skills in applying knowledge are part of the extended learningthese skills include subject specific skills but also skills in ...critical and creative thinking, collaboration and communicating' (Masters, 2020, p. xv).

⁷ I refer to recommendation 6: 'In the later years of schooling give priority to provide every student with opportunities to pursue personal interests and strengths.....' (Masters, 2020, p. xviii)

⁸ Watterson, J. & Zhao, Y. (2020). A catalyst for change [Issues paper]. Retrieved from https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_OSOF/Catalyst_for_change_2020.pdf

⁹ See for example:

Competing tensions : equity and accountability

In the *NSW Curriculum Review Report* there is mention of the importance of equity, but still an almost singular focus on school and teacher accountability for student outcomes, when it is clear from research¹⁰ that 60% of student achievement is attributable to factors outside of school, such as socio-economic status, family supports, income etc. Equity is thus central to school improvement. To increase equity of educational outcomes in Australia: we need to *avoid* early tracking of children based on academic ability alone. We need to give equal focus to well-being and academic achievement, the arts, inclusiveness, strong family support in the years before schooling, government safety nets, intervention and preventative care at the local school level within a whole systems approach. There needs to be *less* focus on narrowly measured academic test scores as the key indicators of educational success.

As Sahlberg states in the recently published *Equity Paper*¹¹ 'Believing that back to basics, that means giving priority to literacy and numeracy in school, would make Australia's education system the best in the world, is a poor strategy. Australia should flip the system by empowering schools to lead the way towards more equitable education.' However, these considerations remain on the margins of a dominant educational discourse with persistent focus on improving literacy and numeracy in isolation from our complex societal, environmental, technological context.

To nurture wonder and ignite passion in our teachers and young people alike, we must also work towards a more intelligent approach to accountability systems. Schools and teachers must have agency at the school level to ensure creativity, risk-taking and time for deep learning. Equal time must be given for the academic, creative and practical arts and social-emotional education to foster this deep learning and enhance student well-being. It is these measures as well as a government that is truly accountable to schools for providing the

Ewing, R. (2020). *NAPLAN 'totally incongruent' with curriculum aims: years of evidence show it must be axed*. Retrieved from <https://protectau.mimecast.com/s/0N69CMwGxOtDAX0BFwUh1Y?domain=educationhq.com/>

Wyatt-Smith, C. & Jackson, C. (2016). NAPLAN data on writing: A picture of accelerating negative change [online]. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 39 (3) Oct 2016: 233-244.

¹⁰ See, for example: Sahlberg, P. (2020). Will the pandemic change schools? *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*.

UNICEF (2018), *An Unfair Start, Inequality in children's education in rich countries*, UNICEF, Paris

¹¹ Gonski Institute for Education (2020). *Achieving a bright future for all young Australians. Policy Brief 1*. Kensington: UNSW

means to ensure equity of educational outcomes, which will help ensure an excellent education. Such an excellent education successfully forms young people so they can sustain wonder and ignite passion to 'live well in a world worth living in.'¹²

It is also recommended that more recognition and attention be given to accountabilities which are more coherent with what we know about the importance of **teacher led** formative assessment and **school-based** curriculum development.

Financial resourcing from government is needed to ensure high quality school-based curriculum development within an overarching framework, and the use of **small data** to drive school improvement at the local level. Through the responsive and collective use of small data, focussing on smart use of formative assessment, schools are empowered and accountable for evaluating practice and student 'growth over time' progress. To really understand what makes students learn well and under what conditions, it is responsive school-based curriculum development and small data collected and analysed at the local level which will lead to improved outcomes. Genuine critical reflection, professional dialogue and school-based teacher research will do this, but it takes time, and funding needs to reflect this.

It seems, however, we are chained to the idea of placing responsibility on education systems to come up with solutions to meet changing needs of the job market¹³. The NSW *Curriculum Review Report* recommendations are trying to break free of this but are still stuck there. This results in lost opportunities for real reform.

Competing tensions : curriculum overload and need for depth

Consideration needs to be given to the question of the 'crowded' curriculum'. Yes, the curriculum is crowded but decluttering the curriculum is not as easy as reducing number of subjects. We want breadth and depth. In primary school in particular, we need to provide a balanced curriculum, foster development of imagination and creativity, mobile thinking and

¹² Kemmis, S. (2018). *Educational research and the good for humankind: Changing education to secure a sustainable world*. Paper presented at the Education, Fatherland and Humanity, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

¹³ Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2018). Why context matters: A comparative perspective on education reform and policy implementation. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 17(3), 195-207.

sense of wonder and provide foundations for later development of higher order skills. We want children to enjoy their learning.

Developing an integrated approach which still maintains integrity of subject disciplines is more than possible, as the Australian Steiner Curriculum, for example, demonstrates. SEA is concerned that there is no detail about what the intentions to reduce extra-curricula actually means. For Steiner education, it is crucial that the rich, integrated curriculum with its focus on the arts, music, movement and performance is not compromised.

Competing tensions : learning progressions

The NSW Curriculum Review Report recommends an 'untimed syllabus' with students progressing to the next syllabus once they have mastered the prior syllabus. Whilst this represents a welcomed and major shift in curriculum design, it will probably involve creation of detailed learning progressions. If teachers have learning progressions many pages long in several subjects against which 26 or 28 students have to be assessed - with individual learning plans and starting points created and monitored - asking these same teachers for innovative, joyful and emotionally engaging teaching in which each student's agency, interests and sense of wonder are promoted will be problematic.

Further , there is, in our view, a need to understand the process of learning more deeply. Progressions are helpful in that they clearly show snapshots of points that can be identified, they do not show the actual process or the pathway of the learning. The pathways of student learning also include spiral movements interspersed between times of rest.

Steiner pedagogy perceives the process of student learning to have aspects of a spiral in which there are times of deepening when the external learning process is at rest and then times of lifting to a new level of understanding as study resumes.

There are, for example, benefits to resting a subject after a month of strong focus. Renewed immersion some weeks later can reveal new insight in students.

The changing modes of learning throughout schooling are not included within linear progressions. The gift of learning progressions is in pinpointing skills and knowledge acquired along the pathway, but they do not show how the pathway is traversed and how the learning occurs. Of course, divisions of learning into stages such as preschool or primary education will only be useful when based upon actual identified changing modes of learning within a clearly articulated theory of child development. The experience of teacher action research in Steiner education supports this picture. Steiner schools in which teachers stay with their class

for a cycle of around 6 years are well-placed to give evidence to observable changing modes of learning.

The danger of the progressions may be the top-down reduction of complex conceptual models into small steps of decreasing complexity, which do not consider, for example, that sometimes the learning at a much younger age is essentially quite different. Not only do capacities such as imitation, play-based learning and narrative learning work deeply into the young child's ability to learn, they allow development of future capacities which if not addressed in the younger years will not naturally emerge as strongly.

Further, the example of the English textual models on page 68 of the NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report¹⁴ is nuanced, comprehensive and detailed at the higher stage expressions. To ask what allows this to develop is a deep question beyond analysis of the pre-requisite skills. Phrases in the stage 6 example, such as *appreciate the elegance and act of creativity*, are not scaffolded in the Early stage 1 to stage 6 sequence provided, which is wholly conceptual.

Competing tensions : the purposes of education

To nurture wonder and ignite passion, you need to value these as part of a key purpose of education and prioritise. Purposes of education cannot be *reduced* to gaining knowledge, skills and dispositions to go on to do something, even though this is a crucial element. Yes, young people becoming socialised into society, its traditions and culture is important, and schooling has a part to play in this. We also surely want our young people to develop agency to create a future they believe they themselves can create. This involves valuing uncertainty of outcomes, risk, becoming autonomous and independent in thinking and acting –possibly the opposite of socialisation - all developed through an integrated, innovative curriculum and pedagogy. How to hold these in creative tension in the interests of developing a young person's sense of moral purpose and social consciousness is an educator's true task.

Educational researchers and educators increasingly recognise deep learning and engagement are fostered by development of imagination through the arts and through play¹⁵.

¹⁴ <https://nswcurriculumreview.nesa.nsw.edu.au/pdfs/interimreport/chapters/NSW-Curriculum-Review-Interim-Report.pdf>

¹⁵ See, for example, Ewing, R. (2020). The Australian Curriculum: The Arts. A critical opportunity. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 1-7.

If this is significantly reduced in the early years – as indicated in the *NSW Curriculum Review Report* in order to focus on the ‘basics’- this will not only inhibit academic achievement, but the very development of the sense of wonder which is supposedly at the core of the NSW redesign. As educational researcher David Roy¹⁶ points out, if teachers’ current ‘isolated’ literacy and numeracy foci is not delivering the results, will more of the same really have that much of an impact?

To nurture wonder and ignite passion we also need imaginative assessment as a way into building imaginative capacity in teachers and students. If we value young people developing capacities to take risks and make mistakes, then we need new methods of assessment and development of an assessment culture that prioritise and acknowledge these capacities. Especially in high school senior years, our learners need to be an integral part of the assessment process through self-assessment using rigorous methodologies. They are already in existence¹⁷, but there is reluctance to use due to the strong pull of ATAR. The NSW Curriculum Review Report recommends a review of ATAR and the requirement of a major student-led investigative project as part of an HSC, as there is overwhelming evidence that the current ATAR based assessment narrows preparation and options for future study, constrains innovation, and constrains development of continuing passion in learning¹⁸. This, however, has only been ‘noted’ by the NSW government in response to the review recommendations and unlikely come to fruition.

Conclusion

The NSW Curriculum Review brings 21st century perspectives into the conversation around curriculum design. There are, however, several tensions that need to be addressed for these to be able to come into expression together without cancelling each other out or giving teachers a task over- filled with new paradigms to read, implement, gather evidence for and report on.

¹⁶ Roy, David (2020). The NSW Curriculum Review is vague and lacks any radical ideas. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342408218> *The NSW curriculum review is vague and lacks any radical ideas*

¹⁷ See, for example: Thompson, D. G. (2016). Marks should not be the focus of assessment—but how can change be achieved? *Journal of Learning Analytics*, 3(2), 193-212.

¹⁸ Sheargo d (2020) REPORT OF THE REVIEW OF SENIOR SECONDARY PATHWAYS INTO WORK FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING Educat on Counc

The many perspectives such as a greater focus on application of knowledge, emotional engagement and student agency are worthy forward-looking design principles. How these will be given their due when very detailed assessment of learning progressions needs to be done for each child, monitored regularly and reported on by teachers, is a question. Further, the *NSW Curriculum Review Report* needs to be framed within the broad regulatory and compliance architecture that constrains the very flexibility and innovation recommended in the report itself. The need for structural change in this regulatory framework is urgent. In addition, teachers, students and other relevant stakeholders should be involved early in the processes of implementation to ensure ownership of the curriculum. It is also recommended that more recognition and attention be given to accountabilities which are more coherent with what we know about the importance of teacher led formative assessment and school-based curriculum development. As Mockler (2017) states:

...where teachers understand curriculum work as a complex process involving prioritisation, translation, and transformation of knowledge into appropriate conditions for learning. It is about understanding curriculum work as a deeply creative and productive process that relies on confidence with and command of content; deep pedagogical expertise; and a good understanding of the learners in question. It is understanding teaching as scholarly work, as intellectual work, as knowledge work.

Finally, SEA is hopeful that the flexibility embedded into the recommendations of the NSW Curriculum Review Report will ensure NSW Steiner schools are able to deliver the ACARA recognised Australian Steiner Curriculum with integrity. The devil is in the detail, however, with many questions remaining unanswered as highlighted in the submission.

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