

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Northern Sydney and Central Coast District Councils of P&C
Associations - Jointly

Date Received: 9 August 2020



The Northern Sydney and Central Coast District Councils of Parents & Citizens Associations

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Joint Submission

Inquiry into the review of the NSW School curriculum

NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No.3

This is a joint submission by our two District Councils of P&C Associations.

We advocate for improve public education from the perspective of the students and the parents.

We do not profess expertise in the technical side of the delivery of school education.

We generally support the recommendations of the Masters Curriculum Review, although we expect that there may be changes as detailed implementation proceeds. The important thing is to begin implementation, rather than navel-gazing or engaging in a ready...aim....aim.... game.

The Northern Sydney District Council of P&Cs made a submission to the Masters Curriculum Review. That submission is an attachment to this submission, and contains detail which, by and large, will not be repeated here.

Our Main Points

- Student outcomes must be put ahead of all other factors, and school education should be student-centred. Our schools still tend to consider the interests of students behind organisational issues.
- A well-rounded education includes acquisition of the basic skills as a basis for the ability to perform higher skills. Higher skills include higher level capabilities in literacy and numeracy; capabilities in subjects that match an individual's special interests and preferences; general qualities such as problem solving, creative thinking and decision making; personal qualities such as self-awareness, empathy, tolerance, assertiveness and resilience, and so on. In other words, a well-rounded confident individual who can interact happily and productively with others and be an independent thinker.
People learn "basic skills" throughout life. An example is a tradesperson or university student starting out on a specialist career, and needing to know the basics.
- Our current school outcomes are deteriorating relative to other leading countries, and a move to a 21st Century approach (see more below and in the attachment) needs to be pursued vigorously now.
The need for progress is urgent. We can do much better.
- There has been a number of serious attempts to move our school education into the 21st Century, but the weight of custom, practice and vested interest has meant that little progress has been achieved since the turn of the century.
- One example of this is a comprehensive study undertaken by the NSW Department of Education in 2005 called "Report of the consultation on future directions for public education and training" and sub-titled "One size doesn't fit all." The report is available at <https://tinyurl.com/nswfutures2005> The report runs to over 300 pages, plus a number of companion reports, and sought to "develop principles and priorities to guide public education and training over the next five to ten years". Sadly, despite the emergence of a number of good initiatives since then, little progress in terms of overall student outcomes has been achieved. Our Australian school education systems have generally been marking time and resting on past



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laurels. In the case of vocational educational, there seemed to be a short-sighted, but successful, movement to reduce its effectiveness.

- Over the last several years, driven by the obvious deterioration of performance relative to some other countries, there has been a number of heartening improvement activities. These have included measures to improve teaching and leadership skills; the introduction of the Australian Curriculum; the creation of the data and information supplier, the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE); and the greater, almost organic, movement in some schools towards 21st century practices. Other submissions will no doubt provide more information on recent progress. See more on the Australian Curriculum below and in the attachment.
- Current outcomes that include wide variations between both “like/like” and “like/unlike” schools are unacceptable. There are too many schools underperforming measured against other similar schools, and sadly, as Masters observes, the status of their parents is the main factor in the considerable gap between schools in high versus low SES areas.
- There is not one “best” way of learning – most people learn through a number of different strategies in a mix which works for them. As an example, debates which pitch “phonics” against “sight-reading” miss the point that good readers need both as a basis for their reading and for their comprehension. Individuals will benefit from an appropriate mix of the two strategies, depending on their own needs.
- There is a crying need to provide more pre-school learning to help those kids who are arriving at Kindy a long way behind their peers.

21st Century Learning, the Australian Curriculum and Accreditation (the HSC, etc)

The key to better overall outcomes for our children is greater student engagement. Most people who have been involved in areas of human endeavour would understand that people who are bored because the pace is too slow, or the pace is too fast, or the activity is just plain boring, will just turn off and perhaps become unruly. Whatever, there is a lot of unnecessarily lost learning time.

The current one-size-fits-all situation is driven in large part by the curriculum, aided and abetted by both the difficulty of changing the way schools are organised and existing methods of teaching and learning. As in the general world, there are many teachers keen to move forward, but many who do not wish to change. The same can be said for some parents and the general community. For the best outcomes, it is essential that the profession of teaching takes a leading role in change. Although this may not be easy for many teachers who have spent many years in the current system, the current COVID crisis has demonstrated convincingly that teachers are able to move outside the box to good effect.

The vast majority of students still move through their schooling according to age. This was the only way to run a school in the past, but recent technological changes and evolving research allows us to move beyond one-size-fits-all.

With the tools available today there is no excuse for each and every one of our children failing to reach their potential. In particular, there is no excuse for students not being able to read, or attaining other basic skills such as in numeracy.



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21st Century Learning – see the Attachment also

There is no strict definition or approach for **21st Century education**. However, the general principles include:

- Students learning at a rate that keeps them interested (stage of development, not age) – this can be achieved at the same time as keeping kids together within their own age group for social reasons. Some schools are following this approach to various degrees, including new purpose built schools at Lindfield Learning Village and Anzac Park Public School;
- Kids learning from kids – this adds interest to the process of learning and effectively adds to the available teaching resources;
- Team teaching to better use the individual skills of teachers; allow for more attention to students at different levels of attainment in the group of students; and to reduce the administrative overheads on teachers. Not many work places have individuals isolated from fellow workmates as are teachers.
- Use of technology as a teaching tool – already widely used;
- Use of technology to provide tailored revision for students who need it;
- Improved pathways for students who are interested in areas such as TAFE-style education; P-Tech for some STEM areas www.ptech.org.au; and the Arts – sadly, the availability of pathways has been going backwards in Australia for some time now;
- Alternative options for academic students such as the IB;
- More use of teams of students on projects to encourage learning;
- Different approaches to assessments and qualifications, such as NAPLAN and the HSC;
- Use of different strategies such as Flipped Learning, which reverses traditional lecture and homework elements (“lessons” are had at home via technology, school is a place for projects and interaction with the teachers and other students.
www.adelaide.edu.au/flipped-classroom/about
- Keeping second languages alive as a means of harvesting this national asset and benefitting the student. Second language learning should start early in life when the learning is more effective than the present emphasis on learning languages in high school when it is really too late.

21st Century Learning allows teachers to be in more productive roles, leading students in their learning activities so that they become independent learners and productive team performers.

Students will learn more productively if they are working on things that interest them – for example, if a student loves cars, projects involving cars but requiring literacy to write up reports; maths to work out car dimensions and engine performance; history to explore the industrial revolution; the impact of cars on society; presentation skills to report on their project; problem solving skills; and so on.

There are two diagrams on Page 5 of the attachment that illustrate our views on the need to adopt 21st Century learning approaches across all schools in NSW, and Australia.

Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum, along with the subordinate syllabus, is crowded.

The recent work on the Australian curriculum was really about making the curriculum uniform across Australia. The next phase is to rewrite the curriculum to suit 21st Century learning strategies.



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It is said by some that the original documents were meant to be a guide for teachers, rather than being obligatory for all sections of the syllabus to be ticked off as done.

Teachers trying to follow every detailed step are unable to provide the depth which is needed and the system needs to be made easier to use and to match the new 21st Century schooling strategies outlined above.

What can be implemented to improve learning without trying to rewrite the whole curriculum is a “swathe” approach to give teachers permission to do away with the full-blooded tick-a-box approach. The current curriculum could be supplemented by various models which demonstrate how selected parts of the curriculum/syllabus can constitute a learning program, whilst leaving other parts out – effectively cutting a “swathe” through the jungle of the existing documentation.

All curriculum and syllabus documents in use in NSW have been put together over the years by very dedicated subject experts. The documents have been polished within an inch of their life, and are technically perfect. This probably suits the very academic students.

There are two problems with this:

- Most students aren't interested or able to keep up the pace involved in knowing everything in the curriculum/syllabus documents. It would be very interesting if it was possible to add up and value the total number of hours wasted through student disengagement (not easy, but a job for CESE, perhaps). Cost would include the students' time, teachers' time, and physical and non-physical infrastructure.
- Many students inevitably get left behind. In some subjects this doesn't have severe effects on their later life. However, having many students entering adulthood barely literate is a national disgrace.

As mentioned above, there are many children starting kindergarten at a big disadvantage and there is a very good benefit-cost outcome for investment in this area. Some funds could be released if a significant number of academic students finished school at Year 11 to start at university.

Accreditation (HSC, etc)

The Higher School Certificate and its predecessor, the NSW Leaving Certificate, are the traditional end of school exams. These qualifications have always been targeted at the more academic students, particularly as a gateway to university. They have also been a significant event marking the coming of age for those students who make it to the end of Year 12.

The HSC is a well-regarded qualification which has benefitted from fine-tuning since it came into being over 50 years ago in 1968. Some private schools in NSW run the International Baccalaureate (IB) which is also a highly regarded qualification, and some say that the IB has a better balance of depth and breadth. The Department of Education does not allow the IB to be offered in NSW public schools.

However, under a 21st Century learning system, neither the HSC nor the IB in their current forms are suitable as they are best suited to a one-size-fits-all system where students move forward through the curriculum at the same rate and little differentiation is made for the variation of student capabilities



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and preference. Continuous assessment similar to the Australian Qualifications Framework used in vocational training would allow students to move through their schooling as their abilities dictate. This could give the students credit for their achievements and provide information for a Record of School Achievement (RoSA) which has been operating in NSW since 2011.

The final two years of high school are more oriented to achieving in the HSC rather than learning at the rate at which each student is capable. Advanced academic students should be extending their learning rather than swatting for the HSC. The top 10% or 15% of students is easily qualified for university, and there just needs to be a way to provide for universities to manage enrolments where demand for courses is too high. These students should be capable of going to university after year 11, offering an opportunity for funds to be reallocated to areas of greater need within education.

Accountability

Schools and schooling systems need to be accountable for their performance, and there is an ongoing need to be able to identify the schools or classrooms where there are problems so that remedial action can be taken. The current methods, such as NAPLAN and the HSC, do show some differences in performance between schools, and are the best we have. There are downsides, such as “teaching to the test” rather than educating, and in not valuing all aspects of student benefits. There is a way to go in this important area.

Terms of Reference – Item 3

Most of these items refer to some areas of the Curriculum which are sometimes controversial – as against how the curriculum and the associated teaching and learning is implemented.

Our parents hold the full spectrum of community views on these matters, so it is not possible to give a single “parent” view. What we can say is that the content should be balanced and objective, and presented in a way that helps students to understand complexity and to make their own decisions.

Some brief comments:

3 (c). English Literacy. We agree that the most effective evidence-based approaches should be adopted. The purpose of reading and writing is to enable communication and understanding. The elements required to read and write well are generally listed as Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, Spelling, Comprehension, Writing (“pen to paper”) and Composition (writing/typing stories).

All of these aspects form the basis for good literacy, but individuals will benefit from their own variety of mixes and timings to be accomplished. The idea that teaching reading can be accomplished by just concentrating on one of these elements is simply not sound.

3(f) It is not so much the vocational education syllabuses that is the question – it is more the availability of the courses for students. There has been a regrettable reduction in access to this pathway compared to the turn of the century, which has an impact not only on students but the economy.

3(g) NESA and its forebears have been active, systematic, consistent and diligent in the development and supervision of the curriculum. However, the curriculum needs change now, and this is the challenge for NESA. NESA is showing willingness to change, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.



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Implementation

An overall strategy and associated implementation plans needs to be developed and enacted across all components of our school education system, not just the curriculum component. All components need to work together to get the best overall outcome.

Change of the scale needed has to be driven using a professional program/project management process. Leaving change almost to chance as has been a feature in the past will just see more of the same – little change and further slippage in performance.

There has been progress in this area in recent times. The Committee should explore this with the educational leaders who will no doubt provide information on their plans and how implementation will be managed.