

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: NSW Department of Education

Date Received: 8 August 2020

NSW Department of Education

Submission to the Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum

July 2020

Introduction

The NSW Department of Education (the Department) welcomes the NSW Curriculum Review, independently authored by Professor Geoff Masters (the Review), and, the Government's response.

The Department is committed to providing young people and the broader community with a world-class education system. To deliver on this commitment, the Department recognises that more needs to be done to improve student results, support teachers, and better prepare young people for the future.

The recommendations in the Review and the Government's response seek to lift student outcomes by giving more time to teachers and students to engage deeply with core learning, so that every student develops strong foundations for learning, life and work.

The Department believes that the Review addresses its terms of reference, meets key Government policy objectives, and has potential to enhance the development and delivery of the NSW curriculum.

This submission responds to the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the New South Wales Curriculum.

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

a. Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

The Review's final report and recommendations addresses items related to curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy:

- New syllabuses will be developed describing core learning in each subject area. These syllabuses will clearly identify essential content, concepts and skills for each subject, and remove peripheral or duplicated material. This will significantly help address curriculum overcrowding.
- A decluttered curriculum will give teachers the flexibility they need to teach to a variety of student abilities within the one classroom. Prioritising depth of understanding over undue breadth of coverage will support early identification of learning gaps that could compromise future learning success.
- The Review presents a range of evidence related to how students learn, including evidence on the relationship between engagement and student outcomes and on the development of expertise in subject domains. The Review specifies that the early years syllabuses include detailed, explicit and evidence-based advice on the teaching of reading and foundational mathematical concepts.
- The implementation of the new syllabuses will provide another vehicle for ensuring the curriculum is delivered through teaching practices aligned with the evidence-base of what works best.

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

In presenting its recommendations, the Review has drawn upon a range of national and international research, including research from the department's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). CESE is Australia's first dedicated hub of education data and evaluation.

Many key recommendations in the Review align with CESE's evidence-base, including its What Works Best publication. For example, the Review highlights the importance of high expectations, the use of data to inform practice, the importance of quality assessment practice, and the relationship between student wellbeing and student learning outcomes. The review's focus on the mastery of foundational knowledge and skills, and building the development of deep understanding, also aligns with CESE's research.

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

The Department notes that this recommendation is supported ‘in principle’ by the NSW Government, with further advice to be sought from NESA. This acknowledges the complexity of the recommendation, and that further research specific to NSW is required. While this work is still underway, the Review does contain substantial evidence of the variability in student attainment within school year groups.

d. Relationship with the national schools curriculum

The Review was asked to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the NSW curriculum and its relationship to the Australian Curriculum. The Department in its submission considered the Review an opportunity to more broadly revisit the relationship between the NSW syllabuses and Australian Curriculum.

Since the initiation of the Review, the alignment of intent between the Australian and NSW curriculum has been strengthened. The Review’s focus on decluttering the curriculum to focus on core content and skills development is paralleled in the focus of the current review of the Australian Curriculum. NSW has strong representation on the ACARA working parties, from both the Department and NESA. Strong representation supports alignment and congruence of decision-making with respect to the Australian Curriculum and NSW syllabuses.

The Review recommends that core content be developed with reference to the Australian Curriculum. This is consistent with obligations under the *Australian Education Act* (2013). The work to be undertaken in implementing the Government’s response to the Review presents an opportunity to inform the 2020 review of the Australian Curriculum, to further promote close alignment.

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

a. Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

The Review clearly found many syllabuses are ‘overcrowded’ by content, meaning that teachers do not always have enough time to teach the most important content and concepts in depth. This finding aligns with a consistent concern raised by schools. An overcrowded curriculum means that some students miss opportunities to thoroughly master learning, or to apply their learning, which is an important indicator of depth of understanding.

In response, the Review recommends syllabus reform that will give teachers more time to teach core content in depth and give students the opportunity to build deep knowledge and apply skills. By clearly identifying essential content, concepts and skills, the new syllabuses should give teachers more time and flexibility to teach to a variety of different student abilities within the one classroom, so that all students can meet identified learning outcomes.

The Review also recommends reviewing the coverage of extracurricular topics and compliance requirements to ensure maximum time can be devoted to core learning.

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

Excellence in literacy and numeracy and deep knowledge of key subjects go hand-in-hand, as recognised by the Review. The Review recommends prioritising literacy and numeracy development in the early years of school in order to build strong foundations for future learning success. Literacy and numeracy are critical to unlocking future learning, and to students developing deep knowledge and experiencing learning success across the curriculum.

The Department welcomes the Review recommendation that the new curriculum clearly show how deep learning develops from early through to senior years. One of the key points made in the Department's submission to the Review was the importance of addressing essential knowledge and retaining the subject disciplines. This view reflects the evidence base and is aligned with multiple submissions cited by the Review that reaffirm the importance of deep knowledge and the identification of core concepts.

The Review aligns with the Department's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in focusing on a deep understanding of core concepts and mastery skills in literacy and numeracy.

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

The Review pointed to evidence from PISA and other international assessments that many students in NSW schools currently do not develop deep understandings of what they are taught.

New syllabuses was a key recommendations by the Review which is designed to address this decline. It is very difficult to quantify the impact of any one aspect of education on student learning. The quality of teaching practice, however, is a key lever. Decluttering the curriculum is designed to provide teachers with greater clarity and more time to plan and deliver effective teaching programs that ensure the learning progress of all students. Clearly structured syllabuses which reflect evidence-based knowledge about how students typically learn over time will enable teachers to develop students' deep content knowledge.

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.

The 'cross-curriculum priorities' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia, and Sustainability are focal lenses specified in the Australian Curriculum. They are designed to ensure that the curriculum reflects national, regional and global dimensions of importance to Australia, as determined through the national curriculum.

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

Source verification remains an essential skill for young people to engage fully and confidently as community and global citizens. For many years, syllabus content and teaching has encouraged students to carefully consider and assess sources of information for validity within established subject disciplines. In current times the importance of source verification and information literacy is heightened by the increase in media sources, which can contain material with varying standards of validity.

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

There is a significant link between student wellbeing and student learning, which is supported by research evidence. A literature review by CESE found that students who have higher levels of wellbeing are more likely to have higher achievement outcomes at school and complete Year 12; better mental health; and a more pro-social, responsible lifestyle. The Department’s commitment that every student is known, valued and cared for is a recognition of the importance of wellbeing to student learning outcomes.

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

Effective learning builds and depends upon deep content knowledge in students. Learning Australian history, pre- and post-1788, is an important part of a young person’s understanding of, and connection to, the state and nation’s development. The current teaching of Australian history content is adequate across Years K-10, with substantial opportunity for in-depth study in the secondary years. The Review’s recommendations to declutter the curriculum will allow for a refinement of History K-10 that will further enhance deep knowledge of this subject.

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

As recommended by the Review, the development of new syllabuses, particularly English and Mathematics in the early years, gives NSW an opportunity to be informed by the most recent research. There is strong international evidence to indicate the most effective approaches to teaching reading. Where such evidence is available, the department uses this to inform curriculum development and professional learning for teachers in areas such as reading and writing. Schools are currently supported to use of evidence-based teaching strategies through resources including What Works Best and professional learning.

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

The effectiveness of senior secondary curriculum, including vocational education, in providing strong pathways to post-school education and employment is a current focus at state and national levels. The Review of Senior Secondary Pathways, led by Professor Shergold, together with the Review recommendations related to the senior secondary years and the forthcoming report for the Department on VET delivered to secondary students will provide a strong foundation for future provision.

g. Effectiveness of NESA in curriculum development and supervision

As an independent authority across school sectors, NESA is and the statutory authority who have the responsibility to oversee curriculum development within NSW, as legislated by the Education Standards Authority Act 2013 (NESA Act).

4. Any other related matters.

Conclusion

The NSW Department of Education believes the NSW Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, meets key Government policy objectives, and has the potential to enhance the development and delivery of the NSW curriculum.