

Submission
No 72

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Professional Teachers' Council (PTC) NSW

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Legislative Council Portfolio Committee NO>3 – Education
Inquiry into the review of the New South Wales school curriculum

RESPONSE

The Professional Teachers' Council of New South Wales (PTC NSW), incorporating The Institute for Educational Leadership in Australia, is a unique body that represents all classroom teachers, across all jurisdictions and all stages K-12, and beyond, in New South Wales.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

That NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education inquire into and report on the contents of and proposed changes to the NSW school curriculum, and in particular:

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

(a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

We have heard for some time that the NSW curriculum requires significant de-cluttering however the current over-crowded curriculum remains an issue despite being raised well before the Professor Masters' review.

This issue was emphasised strongly during the initial consultation period for the Master's Review. PTC NSW fully appreciate that the issues related to curriculum content requires substantial time and consultation to get it right. We further recognise that the debate regarding curriculum content in NSW has been ongoing over the years. Perhaps now is the time for genuine change and reform processes are identified and implemented to ensure the issues are effectively and appropriately addressed. The review must ensure that new curriculum developments have a mapped overview of core content that acts as a framework and is fundamental to all future syllabus and curriculum changes.

We recommend that the review process ensures that the expertise of classroom teachers is exploited from the outset in the framing and implementation of any review process that eventuates from this inquiry. The classroom is the place where curriculum is implemented, where education happens. Without the involvement of

classroom practitioners and the sense of a prominent teacher 'voice', implementation of change, of improvement is unlikely to be successful. All the available research makes it clear that change cannot be imposed from above. The implementation of change of any nature requires sound leadership and the commitment of those being led.

We support the inclusion of guidelines, frameworks and samples of good pedagogy imbedded in new syllabus to act as a guide for all teachers but especially for less experienced teachers and those teaching outside their initial training. The essential issue here is that experience classroom practitioners, those who know and understand the realities of the classroom ecology, not academic 'experts' who are likely to be well-meaning but far distant from the realities of schooling, should be the involved in the design of any advice on practical in-school or classroom implementation.

Following the release of the Final Report there remains uncertainty as to the future of particular subjects and subject content. Clarity is essential here given the potential impact on students, teachers and schools. It must be recognised by those who have no experience of the realities of school, other than their childhood experience as a student, that even minor changes to the curriculum, to the subjects available have major implications for school organisation, staffing and individual teacher workload.

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

Differentiated learning principles are sound in theory as supported extensively in literature to address the learning needs of students. Professor Masters has responded appropriately in addressing at a conceptual level progression points and differentiated learning in the review.

There are many schools that have implemented an array of differentiated programs, based on research, successfully to the most part. However they have supported the implementation of these programs as priorities within their student body and have allocated significant resources. This is not possible in most schools.

The challenge with differentiated learning comes with the implementation. The review fell short of thinking through the implications of introducing these concepts to all classrooms. The ability to differentiate successfully varies across subjects, school contexts and teacher capacity. At the very least this raises the question of what resources are needed to support teachers in creating and implementing individualised plans for students; working in a classroom that is highly differentiated; and how to allocate resources to enable access for all students. There will need to be a substantial investment in the schooling sector to support all teachers to access the

professional learning that such a sea-change in practice would require and a major shift in staffing ratios and school organisation, including a significant reduction of face-to-face teaching, in order to implement this reform.

(d) Relationship with the national schools curriculum

Professor Masters drew a direct link between NSW syllabuses and the Australia Curriculum; however, we now have an ACARA review of the Australian Curriculum, which will obviously infringe on the Final Report of the NSW curriculum. The Masters' Review was prefaced by a recognition that New South Wales has a world class and highly successful curriculum. It is crucial that any further influence on the current NSW curriculum is neither compromised nor diluted as a consequence of satisfying the quest for uniformity in the Australian Curriculum recommendations.

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

(a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

There is much work to be done to unclutter a crowded curriculum. It is significant to note that the Masters' Review regularly refers to the importance of teacher voice and the capacity of teachers to assist in the review – not just as the key implementers but as key early engaged change agents. The most obvious element in assisting change in decluttering the NSW curriculum would be the teacher voice. Teachers are subject professionals who work with the NSW curriculum daily. They manipulate, cajole, design and redesign quality teaching practices on a daily basis to make the curriculum work – yet they are usually overlooked and sidelined until the 'review' stage. Yet another curriculum review lands in schools and teachers are expected to make it work. To ignore the role of practitioners as the key to implementation will almost certainly diminish the impact of any attempt at change.

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

The Review addressed the needs to improve literacy and numeracy, effectively taking into consideration the individual needs and contexts of our student population. The Review did not emphasise the very important understanding that literacy and numeracy are integral to all subjects as key requirements. To begin to provide authentic deep knowledge of key subjects the decluttering of the curriculum is required as well as moderating the overpowering influence of the HSC in all High Schools. Deep learning requires time. Many current syllabuses are overly content heavy. Compliance regimes impact on classroom practice to the extent that in many cases the Year 11-12 courses are a quick trip through the syllabus ticking off 'dot-points' as you go!

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

This a complex issue and Professor Masters explanation sits within the narrow scope of this review. A direct comparison with PISA test scores globally is a inappropriate! To directly infer that the decline in NSW school results based on comparing PISA results, measuring NSW students' performance against international results, ignores global variability in schooling, syllabuses and the life circumstances of students from different countries, including those countries that remove large percentage of candidates to attend vocational pathways outside the testing parameters prior to the test, is totally flawed. We challenge the notion of using PISA as an international benchmark at all. Such apple and orange comparisons are usually described by statisticians as 'cheap and nasty'!

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

We believe for this review, the consultation process attempted to provided a more effective opportunity for the sector to provide commentary on cross curriculum priorities. There is great value in cross-curriculum priorities however capacity to support this initiative across all schools requires great planning, sensitivity to all sectors and systems operating across regional and remote, cultural and socio-economic imperatives.

We believe that this must be included as a *Common Entitlement* in order to support deep learning of First Nations histories, and cultures and support true ongoing reconciliation. Within most subjects there are many opportunities to embed both historical and current scientific knowledge of First Australians. This significant focus will require provision of appropriate professional learning for all current teachers in NSW and reviewing and over-hauling tertiary pre-service teacher courses. Like most of the recommendations in any curriculum review this will require long term planning and substantial investment by all jurisdictions. Shoe-string budgets will not get the job done!

(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

We believe that the Review appropriately places in context the social and emotional wellbeing of students. Professor Masters rightly identifies the link between emotional engagement with learning and the capacity to learn. This cannot be overstated. The Review does not prescribe what this could look like in schools, other

than to note the requirement of it as a Core Design Principle. Schools do not teach subjects they teach students. Pastoral care and well-being are an inescapable integral element of every classroom teachers' day.

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

See separate submission provided by History Teachers' Association of New South Wales.

(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.

All teachers are very aware of the importance of English literacy regardless of the subject or stage. Professor Masters appropriately highlighted English literacy in the Review, noting it as a priority during the early years alongside numeracy in his recommendations. Evidence based professional intervention is an obvious requirement to ensure the best support is provided for all students across all socio-economic backgrounds and particularly our regional remote communities. This is a difficult and often misunderstood and misreported 'problem' in our society. The nature of our language and its history, from Beowulf to Chaucer and Shakespeare, and now 'SMSing', and the on-going incorporation of borrowed words and usages from a multitude of other languages, makes a quick and easy 'back to basics' or 'phonics' fix nonsensical. There is significant requirement for changes to preservice teacher education and to school organisation to provide ongoing professional learning for classroom teachers to equip them with a range of strategies to address the development of literacy and numeracy in the early education stages and beyond.

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

The proposal to integrate vocational applications is cautiously supported. Our concerns are for any move away from providing appropriate foundational knowledge and skills that prepare more able students for tertiary study. We welcome further rigorous debate and consultation. We note however that the high achievers in the PISA testing arena, against whom NSW is often unfavourably compared, do not integrate vocational education with mainstream schooling.

(g) Effectiveness of NESAs in curriculum development and supervision

NESA is a statutory body that implements educational policy as prescribed by the incumbent government of NSW.

As the peak body representing professional teacher associations PTC NSW has had a long and varied relationship with successive administrations of BOS, BOSTES and now NESA. PTC NSW is keen to maintain a professional partnership with NESA and

looks forward to a more mutual working relationship into the future. Many of the frustrations around relationships with NESA has been consultation where timelines for the release of a consultation document and the date for submissions have been less than accommodating. This has been particularly difficult when responses from the key audience, professional teacher associations and their working members, rely on collating responses from full-time working classroom teachers.

Our other concern stems from Government implemented timelines which further frustrate and de value the consultation value of teachers. Professor Masters' review suggests a 10-year timetable which would give NESA adequate time to plan and implement a sound reform however, the Government's response has truncated this timeframe to four-years.

Rushed educational reform is unlikely to produce effective change at any time.

4. Any other related matters.

PTC NSW as a major stakeholder, representing the vast body of teachers, across professional teacher associations, across all sectors and systems in partnership with NESA requires greater financial support and more autonomy to support classroom teachers in the professional learning necessary to fully and decisively implement the Review recommendations and to support all schools in providing the best education possible for all students across NSW.

Prepared by The Professional Teachers' Council NSW August 2020