

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Independent Education Union NSW and ACT

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SUBMISSION – INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION OF AUSTRALIA NSW/ACT BRANCH

to the

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO.3

REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Response to the Chair's Discussion Paper

The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents teachers from early childhood, primary and secondary settings across the non-government sector.

On 8 August this year the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch provided a submission to the Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No.3 Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum. Following this initial engagement, we note that several comments from the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch were included in the Committee's Discussion Paper that was provided to us on 2 October 2020. While some differences in the submissions from various groups were to be expected, it is evident that there are broad commonalities in the views of the respondents, both in terms of agreement on positive aspects of the proposed reforms and similar areas of concern.

The Chair's Discussion Paper ranges across topics that have been the subject of educational debate for many years. The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch makes the following observations in response to some aspects of the Summary of the Chair's Interim Proposals (1.8) and the Conclusion (2.157):

- It is our firm view that the erosion of respect for professional judgement, together with the exclusion of the voice of practising teachers from major education decision making bodies, correlates precisely with the decline in education standards. When the teaching profession and teacher unions have actively been excluded from major decision making forums, any claims that they are subsequently responsible for the perceived or actual drop in educational standards are both misplaced and inaccurate.
- A continuous churn of educational change without any evidence base and without consultation with teachers, combined with the downward drift of sophisticated curriculum content and the artificial deadline for learning created by NAPLAN, (particularly in Year 3) has had a detrimental effect on learning across all age groups. Concerns raised by teachers about the amount and type of change have been largely ignored. The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch asserts that curriculum reform will not be successful without re-establishing practising teachers at the centre of the process.
- The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch is supportive of an evidence-based approach to curriculum reform and the evaluation of educational initiatives. We have previously expressed our support, in principle, to the establishment of the National Evidence Institute (NEI). This support is qualified by the proviso that the NEI ensures equitable access across all education sectors and seeks genuine consultation with the profession in determining its focus and activities.

- While teachers have always differentiated content for their students in order to meet their needs, our members have concerns about the practical implementation of Progression Points. This concern was raised during the original consultation period of the Curriculum Review. A major concern is the lack of support for students who have difficulty accessing the curriculum and are likely to struggle to meet Progression Points. Adequate proposals to address this ongoing need are not evident.
- There is broad support amongst our members for a focus on literacy and numeracy, particularly in providing the most favourable learning environment for students in the early years. The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch notes that building foundational skills in literacy requires a multi-faceted approach which includes, but is not restricted to, the teaching of phonics.
- While the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch broadly supports a re-assessment of additional content which has crept into the NSW Curriculum (Road Safety, etc) we contend that addressing the wellbeing needs of students is an academic imperative as well as a moral requirement. Assisting students in negotiating wellbeing issues which potentially have a negative impact on their own learning, as well as compromising the learning environment of their peers, is essential for a successful educational outcome. While it may be desirable for these wellbeing needs to be met by medical professionals outside of school hours, as suggested by the Chair, that proposal is not currently a realistic option for the vast majority of school communities.
- Classrooms are complex learning environments. Overly simplistic solutions that do not take classroom reality into account are, in our view, likely to compound the issues. Teachers want the curriculum reform to provide syllabus documents that identify agreed core content and the flexibility to differentiate this content, both for students who are working towards that content and those who require extension beyond it. The current curriculum documents, especially in key subject areas, pressure teachers to move children through content too quickly. This is particularly a problem in Primary classes, resulting in entirely predictable gaps in student knowledge. The curriculum reform process must engage meaningfully and continuously with teachers in order to address these concerns.
- The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch endorses the view that the TAFE system and access to high quality TAFE facilities are essential. We note the decline in funding to this sector has severely limited access in recent years. We further note that the Chair's endorsement of the Hoxton Park school leadership in innovating their curriculum to accommodate the learning needs of the school leaving cohort is an example of the positive impact which can be achieved by empowering the professional judgement of teachers.

Mark Northam
Secretary, IEUA NSW/ACT Branch
30 October 2020