

## **INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

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## A SUBMISSION BY DR KEVIN DONNELLY AM

A Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education inquiry into and report on the contents of and proposed changes to the NSW school curriculum on behalf of Dr Kevin Donnelly AM Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Catholic University.

**Note:** Instead of responding to the dot points suggested by the terms of reference I will restrict myself to making a number of comments and observations about the curriculum review chaired by Geoff Masters.

1. The NSW Curriculum Review report fails to adequately address the reasons why despite the additional millions invested in education over the last 10 to 15 years standards as measured by national and international science, mathematics and literacy tests have either flatlined or gone backwards. Too many students are leaving school illiterate and innumerate and culturally impoverished and the report manifestly fails to explain why, who is responsible and what must be done to rectify the situation.
2. As a result of failing to identify and critique the approaches to teaching and learning that have led to the current malaise the NSW curriculum review is guilty of repeating the mistakes of the past.

- 2.1 One example relates to the approach to teaching and learning dominant in Australian classrooms known as 'constructivism'. The Australian Commonwealth's report *Teaching Reading* defines constructivism as a theory of learning that views students:

“...as inherently active, self-regulating learners who construct knowledge cooperatively with other learners in developmentally appropriate ways... Adoption of a constructivist approach in the classroom involves a shift from predominantly teacher-directed methods to student-centred, active discovery learning and immersion approaches via cooperative group work, discussion focused on investigations and problem solving” (p.50).

In the jargon much loved by new-age and progressive academics and bureaucrats teachers no longer teach as they are 'guides by the side' and students become 'knowledge navigators'. This approach helps explain why Australian classrooms are among the most disruptive with badly behaved students across the OECD countries.

The NSW cognitive psychologist John Sweller argues that even though this progressive approach to learning has dominated Australian education since the late 60s it is ineffective and responsible for falling standards. Sweller argues schools and teachers must adopt explicit teaching where students are expected to master what is essential until it can be re-called automatically. Instead of teachers being 'facilitators' and 'guides by the side' they actually need to take control of the classroom and teach.

- 2.2 A second example of repeating past mistakes is the report's statement that any new curriculum should keep "rote learning to a minimum" (p.82) based on the belief that learning must promote "engagement and enjoyment". Cognitive psychology is clear that rote learning is an essential aspect of learning especially in the early years when memorising times-tables, ballads, poems and key information is critically important. What students learn must be committed to their long term memory (that relies on

memorisation) before they can be creative and undertake more conceptually complex and difficult tasks.

3. In addition to ignoring past mistakes the curriculum report recommends an untested, untried, expensive and debilitating assessment and reporting system guaranteed to overwhelm teachers and further reduce standards. Geoff Masters has long argued in favour of individualised, diagnostic, formative assessment and replacing summative assessment and year level standards with what he calls “untimed” syllabuses and “progression” points – a recipe for disaster.

Summative assessment involves testing and ranking students by giving them a letter or numerical grade where some do well and some less well. The assumption is there is a year level set body of knowledge, understanding and skills that students need to master before moving on to the next year. Formative assessment is the opposite where students are not ranked, standards are not based on year levels and each student develops and grows at their own rate.

The recommendation to move away from summative assessment to formative involves the adoption of individualised, developmental progression points. The report recommends a curriculum “based on specified sets of outcomes that all teachers must teach and all students must learn in each year of school, a curriculum built around the concept of progression” (p.72).

Such an experimental approach has not been tried anywhere else in the world and the reality is high performing countries as measured by international tests favour summative assessment. The fact that it’s physically impossible for teachers to set work for every student individually and to monitor, evaluate and respond according to progression points proves why such an approach is destined to fail.

4. Overseas education systems, especially in Europe, in the senior school years have a number of pathways as students have different abilities and interests and not all want to follow the same occupation or career. Generally speaking, such pathways are either academic or vocational as while some students want a university education other students are more interested in an apprenticeship or trade. While in many ways unsatisfactory the current situation where senior school students undertake an academically based Higher School Certificate (HSC) or one focusing on vocational education and training (VET) reflects such a reality.

The recommendation to abolish the distinction between academic and vocational learning at Years 11 and 12 is a mistake that will further dumb down the curriculum and guarantee students will not be properly prepared for either university or vocational studies. By trying to serve the needs of all students with a common certificate, regardless of ability, interest and post-school destination, all will be reduced to the same level of mediocrity.

The argument that each new senior school subject “integrates theory and the application of theory” is also misplaced and reflects a superficial understanding of what the American academic Jerome Bruner describes as the structure of each of the disciplines and areas of knowledge. Studying poetry, learning about the past or mastering complex algorithms often has no immediate practical utility or application but such studies are still inherently beneficial and worthwhile. The recommendation that senior school students “undertake a major investigative project” is flawed and impossible to properly implement as proven by events in Victoria and South Australia where such an approach was implemented with disastrous results.

5. Many of the curriculum report’s flaws and failures can be explained by the fact Masters makes no mention of the ‘Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report’ (which I co-wrote). The 2014 report details and evaluates the history of curriculum development in Australia over the

last 40 to 50 years and offers an evaluation and critique of the various approaches and their educational rationale and underlying philosophy. An approach the Masters' report fails to adopt.

The Masters' report failure to acknowledge the significance of ACARA's contemporaneous review of the national curriculum is also a concern as there is every chance the curriculum model implemented in NSW will be different to the revised national curriculum which takes precedence.

It also should be noted there is nothing new or surprising about the Masters' report arguing the curriculum should be de-cluttered and that students need to develop "deep understandings of important concepts, principles and methods in each subject" (p. xiii). Such concerns have been raised again and again over the last 20 to 30 years with those responsible for the curriculum, including BOSTES and NESA, failing to act. Nothing will change and students will continue to be given a substandard and superficial education if those responsible are given the task of designing and implementing the new curriculum. Those responsible for a disaster are rarely, if ever, capable of rectifying the situation.

6. The NSW curriculum report makes the statement in relation to what students must study during the Middle Years of schooling:

"The curriculum also expects every student during the middle years of school to develop a common understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal cultures and histories. These are seen as essential foundations for informed adult citizenship in Australia" (p. xvi).

As argued by the 2014 Review of the Australian National Curriculum report more important, if students are to critically informed and knowledgeable citizens, is the need to have a rigorous and extensive knowledge of Australia's evolution as a liberal, democratic society and the on-going debt owed to Western civilisation.

### **Qualifications and Experience.**

Unlike Geoff Masters who is a measurement expert and has no formal qualifications in curriculum and school education I taught for 18 years in secondary schools, was a member of the Victorian Board of Studies and the English Year 12 Panel of Examiners and co-chaired the 2014 review of the Australian National Curriculum commissioned by the Commonwealth Government. I also have completed 4 international curriculum benchmarking projects for state and commonwealth governments and my doctoral thesis offers a critique of curriculum developments over the last 40 years both in Australia and overseas. I've published numerous books and articles on education and in 2016 was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to school education. I'm currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Catholic University in the Faculty of Education and the Arts.