

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3 – EDUCATION

REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Wednesday 4 November 2020

The Committee met at 9:30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Latham (Chair)

The Hon. Anthony D'Adam

The Hon. Wes Fang

The Hon. Scott Farlow

Mr David Shoebridge

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Courtney Houssos

The Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox (Deputy Chair)

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The CHAIR: I open the inquiry into the review of the New South Wales school curriculum and welcome everyone to the first day of our hearings. The inquiry is looking into the review of the New South Wales school curriculum led by Professor Geoff Masters. Before I commence, it is the custom of this Parliament to acknowledge the traditional inhabitants of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I do so with all due respect as well as acknowledging other important contributors to the history of the site. I acknowledge and thank those who constructed the Parliament, who were very often working in a dangerous industry, and the parliamentary staff who over many decades have supported MPs and made our work and representative role possible.

Today is the first hearing we plan to hold for this inquiry. We will hear today from school principals, representatives from the P&C, government officials and the experts appearing this morning. Before we commence formally, I will make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. The hearing will be conducted in a hybrid format with some Committee members and witnesses participating via videoconferencing due to COVID-19 and other factors. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members and witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I remind media representatives that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings—no fake news.

It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses might say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence as such comments will not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person were to take action. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat. All witnesses in an inquiry have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the Legislative Council in 2018. There may be some questions that a witness could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In those circumstances witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days.

I remind all participants in today's hearing that Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. Therefore, I request that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. Any messages should be delivered to Committee members through the Committee staff. To aid the audibility of the hearing, I remind witnesses to speak into the microphones. The room is fitted with induction loops compatible with hearing-aid systems that have telecoil receivers. In addition, several seats have been reserved near the loudspeakers for persons in the public gallery who have hearing difficulties. I ask that everyone please turn off their mobile phones or set them to silent for the duration of the hearing. Finally, I ask those participating by videoconference to mute their microphones when they are not speaking. I welcome our first witness, Dr Mueller and Mr Ashman, and thank them for the quality of their submissions. Their submissions were outstanding and very useful for the purposes of our inquiry.

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GREG ASHMAN, individual, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

FIONA MUELLER, individual, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Dr Mueller or Mr Ashman, would either of you like to make a short opening statement before we start questioning?

Mr ASHMAN: Yes, please. First of all, thank you for inviting a teacher to talk about these issues. I would like to make two main points about the review on curriculum and differentiation. On the curriculum, cognitive science, which I am happy to explain in more detail, suggests that knowledge in the mind is very different from knowledge in books or on the internet. You cannot just look up things when you need them. Knowledge is actually what you think with. It is that critical. One example is reading comprehension. I think we all would see a goal for education that students can engage with serious sources of news, for instance. In order to be able to do that you need a very broad general knowledge to be able to understand what you read. That is obviously in the opposite direction to the review which is prioritising depth over breadth.

When you look at that knowledge you get a problem. If you look at the sort of knowledge that writers assume on the part of their readers, you get a list that features very heavily dead old white men. And so, one of the things you need to do—and this is a political question—is then balance that knowledge that helps with reading with knowledge relevant to different cultures. That is a political question that has to be addressed but people avoid that. It is much easier to talk about literacy, deeper learning, learning with understanding, critical thinking, because nobody is going to object to those terms, but you miss out that key distinction about what should actually be in the curriculum. If you do that and nobody decides, teachers end up making those decisions and some are great and some are not so good.

What they do not do is reflect a community-based approach to what we have decided as a group should be in the curriculum; we need a curriculum that fully satisfies nobody. And then on differentiation, the review proposals mean that different students in the same class will be learning different things. This is a form of what we call differentiation. There is very little evidence that differentiation works, as you will see from my submission, although it depends on what you mean exactly by it. This is coupled in the review with this concept of learning progressions. They are not a new idea. They have been tried before. They have not been the miracle cure before and they can give an illusion of progress.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Dr Mueller?

Dr MUELLER: Thank you for the invitation to appear today. This is a very important opportunity for many of us to contribute to the work that this Committee is doing at a very important time in the education of children in New South Wales and, I would argue, across the country. As a teacher and policymaker and researcher for over 30 years, I have seen decades of decline in the quality of curriculum teaching and learning in this country. I believe that the approach in that time has been very much to drop a series of untested experiments over the top of School education practices and policies rather than examining the precise nature and purpose of the work that is done in schools by principals and teachers. That is my concern that with particular reference to the latest proposals by Geoff Masters for New South Wales those practices will continue.

It is my view that three things need to happen in order to see significant improvements in New South Wales and for young Australians more broadly. One is that we need a forensic audit; a real analysis of policy failure over the last few decades. The second one is we need to develop a very clear set of goals and aspirations for our students at particular milestones in their 12 or 13 years at school, so at the end of infant school, year two; the end of primary school, year six; and the end of the next four, five or six years of high school. We, thirdly, must ensure alignment across the various operational elements of education. So teacher training, curriculum, all of the organisational aspects including recruitment of teachers, the ways in which students are supported, students with disability, other languages and so on, all of that has to come together in ways that we just do not do at the moment. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Dr Mueller, going to the opening statement in your submission, I think it is a very important point. You seem to be indicating that the Masters review is a vague and general document that, in your words:

... devolves the greatest responsibility and opportunity for change to as yet undetermined decision-makers to identify 'the key intentions, guiding principles and underpinning evidence base for the new curriculum.'

From my perspective, that is a big worry because it means the New South Wales Education Standards Authority [NESA], which is a worry to us all. What would you regard as the best course of action now for the State

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Government in dealing with the development of that detail, given that the Masters document is so general and vague and delegates the implementation of this to NESA?

Dr MUELLER: My suggestion would be that we go to my second proposal, which I mentioned earlier and which I echo, I think, in that document. Before commencing any change to the New South Wales curriculum, there needs to be a very careful audit of policy construction in recent decades, and particularly in terms of proposals implemented that have come from the same people who are proposing changes now. Before we launch into any major shifts in policy and practice, that kind of undertaking would be immensely helpful to NESA if NESA is the delegated authority. We make sure that that process is transparent, so we undertake an analysis of what has not worked, ensuring that we can avoid the same mistakes again in the future. That should be the first step.

The CHAIR: What role would you see for the Minister or some other implementation body at parliamentary level to look at this detail as it unfolds? At the moment it seems like it is a blank cheque for NESA to fill in.

Dr MUELLER: That is a good expression. It is a blank cheque. Typically, that is how it works. Again, I go back to my three major points that are needed, in my view, for any significant improvement in student performance. We need to be absolutely clear about what it is we want our children to achieve at specific points in their school journey. The Minister, in my view, should undertake that task with a fresh set of eyes, with new members of the community—particularly representatives from principal and teacher organisations, who are sick and tired of having change dropped on them without evidence of what works. I think it is time to put a new group together that is not invested in what has happened in the past and that will approach this with completely different mandates.

The CHAIR: Mr Ashman, thank you for your submission and for the powerful critique of differentiation in particular. I will take you to what I found to be a fascinating and credible point about the decluttering argument. You have set out here that in the Australian curriculum—and one expects this is mirrored largely in New South Wales—one-third of the science curriculum is what we might traditionally call science; another third is the scientific method, which you say is important but should not be one-third of the curriculum; and a final third is waffly stuff on "Science as a human endeavour"—wowee, who would have thought? Do you think that these problems and opportunities for decluttering by getting rid of the waffle are reflected in other areas of the curriculum? In my observation, English today is 50 per cent identity politics, 50 per cent text analysis and zero skill development. History seems to be one-third source verification, one-third political content and one-third actual knowledge. Have you noted other problems in the curriculum where there could be easy decluttering, not by eliminating subject areas but by beefing up deep knowledge acquisition by students at the expense of the other stuff that has crept in and that performs no useful function?

Mr ASHMAN: I think that although it is written in curriculum documentation, it is enacted in different ways. When people talk about decluttering, I get very uneasy because I see them taking out knowledge components, which I think are absolutely essential. There is a lot of stuff that you have to wade through in these curriculum documents—the difference between the curriculum as written in something like the Australian curriculum or the New South Wales version of that and what is actually enacted in the classroom. History does do a lot of source analysis; you are right. I would not want to comment on English. I have not had my head in the English curriculum to the same extent. Essentially, we need to make some firm decisions about what content we want in there. We have the cross-curriculum priorities. One of the points I would raise is the extent to which people are actually attempting to teach these cross-curricular things like critical and creative thinking. We cannot be sure. They sit there as general capabilities in the Australian curriculum and they do not really do much.

In terms of cognitive science, critical thinking and creativity are not general capabilities. The review actually recognises that to a certain extent. I think that if you teach a subject in a fairly traditional way where, for instance, you do analytical essays in history, then you actually address a lot of these concerns about critical thinking anyway. So we sort of parachute these additional things in and we get quite a bureaucratic document, whereas if we can focus on what we actually want students to know and be able to do and be very explicit and make sure that everyone buys into that—so we recognise that this is not a technocratic solution that we can just spin out to somebody to solve for us but that we actually all have to input as citizens into what that looks like—then we can be very clear as to whether that is taught and whether students are learning that or not. At the moment, with a lot of what is in the curriculum, it is so vague that it is quite meaningless.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Thank you, Mr Ashman and Dr Mueller, for your submissions and for coming in today. Mr Ashman, I want to pick up a couple of things from your submission and from what you said today—and Dr Mueller might also like to comment on this—in relation to untested experiments in education. That is the learning progression or the individual learning pathways approach, which is advocated by

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Masters. I want to understand this in more detail, particularly what you see as the alternative and what we should be doing in classrooms, rather than going down the individual learning pathway.

Mr ASHMAN: It is not a new idea, actually. My history is that I taught for 13 years in the United Kingdom, from '97 to 2010. In 2010 I moved to Australia. In about 2013 the national curriculum levels that I used to use when teaching in the United Kingdom were abandoned by the Government in the United Kingdom. They look and operate in a very similar way to the learning progressions that are being proposed now. What you often find in education is that things that look like innovations and cutting edge are things that have actually been tried before and abandoned, and we keep going round and round. They are not exactly the same as the national curriculum levels in the United Kingdom, but they suffer from some of the same issues. The major problem with the learning progression is that it looks for confirming evidence. It has a list of criteria: A student can do this; tick that off and we will move on. But in a scientific approach and an approach that actually generates improvement within a school, you look for disconfirming evidence. You look for evidence that students have not learnt something, so that you can then address that.

A learning progression turns our attention in the wrong direction and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. All of a sudden all the students are reaching level 10 or 11 or however far it goes up to, because we have designed the system to do that. A factor that buys into that is with a complex task like writing, for instance—a guy called Royce Sadler up in Queensland has done the maths—there are 50 or 100 different criteria you could analyse a piece of writing on. We select two or three or four to make our rubric to make our learning progression. I forget the name of the law, but when a metric becomes a target it ceases to function well as a measure, because we end up teaching just those features to get kids over the line to demonstrate that they have reached this particular level.

That is another problem. And the third problem is that they are often de-contextualised. For instance, say I come up with a criteria about writing that 'evaluates a range of sources' or 'considers different opinions', I can demonstrate that in a simple context like an argument about school uniform or whether people should have pets, and I can demonstrate that criteria much easier than I can with an essay, say about the origins of the First World War. It kind of drives people towards these simpler contexts in order to demonstrate progression on those levels. I am not sure whether I addressed all your question. I cannot remember what the second bit of it was.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: I think you have had a good crack at it. I was interested in how that looks in the classroom when you are talking about rather than individual learning plans just having a one size fits all approach with some flexibility in the frequency. Is that the sort of approach you are advocating?

Mr ASHMAN: Yes. I think you need a whole class explicit teaching approach. I am very sceptical of things that drive you away from that, because you cannot prove anything definitively in education, it is not that sort of area. But the thing that we probably have the strongest evidence for is whole class interactive teaching. People argue against that and they say 'but it is not tailored to the needs of the specific individuals', but it is a cost benefit analysis. The more you tailor it to individuals you then lose other aspects. For instance, the way I learnt maths at primary school was, I go to a box, if I was on the green box I would take a card out of the box, I would complete the card. When I completed the card it goes back to the box. I pick another card out. Different students are on different boxes.

This is not a new idea. This has been tried before, this all students working on different things in the classroom. It was boring. I yearned for my teacher to stand up and explain something interesting to us. You think we have got this big gain because we are personalising the learning, we are moving kids through individual progressions, although actually we are fooling ourselves, we are not really doing that. We are personalising the learning, but actually you have lost an awful lot in the process. You have lost a lot of this whole class, interactive, explicit teaching, which is pretty clear from the evidence is effective.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Do you have a comment on that, Dr Mueller?

Dr MUELLER: Yes, I do. I had firsthand experience of the development of the national literacy and numeracy learning progressions when the New South Wales team joined experts at the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] to do that work a couple of years ago. I was not involved in the micro-work but at the regular meetings it became very, very obvious that there was a dearth of evidence to support most of the levels, that much of that work was dependent on, as Mr Ashman has said, concepts and ideas and structures that really have been abandoned elsewhere where they have been tried. My concern with progressions in the Australian context as proposed is that they will become yet another formula for teachers, very much the tick a box, and they are so constraining and so constrictive, restrictive for teachers, particularly teachers who are not confident. My area is languages, English and foreign languages. That is the gateway to the curriculum. If confidence is not there in teachers and it is not developed in students, of course they will resort, both groups will

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resort to a tick a box, a formula, something that they can hang onto that looks like success, because yes, I have done that, so I can move on to the next point. That is not teaching; that is not learning at a sophisticated level.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: I have one final question, which is about the Masters review itself and how we implement the next stage through, presumably, NESA. In regard to that next level of detail, I think your comments, Dr Mueller, in relation to the Masters review being, if you like, pretty high level. Let us leave it at that. In terms of the next implementation phase, what confidence do you have in NESA to be able to deliver the level of detail and the learning imperatives that the system needs to correct the decline that has been occurring over the last 10 years?

Dr MUELLER: That is the \$64,000 question. The situation is dire and very genuine evidence-based decisions have to be made based on what we know what works and based on international best practice. And we have some excellent models to follow among high performing systems who have all of the evidence of what works and who have implemented changes to curriculum over time that clearly are producing results. I think my concern would be that that is not the way we have approached things. If NESA has people in place who are confident about their capacity to undertake this work, that is great and ultimately that is the decision of the Minister and the Minister's team. I have strong reservations. I will leave it at that.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Do you have a comment, Mr Ashman?

Mr ASHMAN: Let me think about that, sorry.

The CHAIR: You can take it on notice and submit something to the Committee later on.

Mr ASHMAN: Yes, sorry. I just lost the thread of that slightly, apologies.

The CHAIR: You can come back to it and submit on notice.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I want to tease out with you, Mr Ashman, this idea about broad general knowledge. It seems from your comments that you think the notion of crowded curriculum is perhaps not a valid criticism of the current curriculum, that it is not crowded and that is not a problem. I wonder whether you might offer a comment about the tension between trying to declutter the curriculum, which seems to be the feedback from teachers, they do not have enough time to be able to meet the requirements of the current curriculum. The narrative is that it is crowded and that by reducing the amount of content in the curriculum that will free up teachers to be able to adequately meet the curriculum requirements. Obviously, if we accept your argument around a broad knowledge, then you are going to maintain a packed curriculum and perhaps that invalidates that criticism.

Mr ASHMAN: I am sceptical of arguments that we should declutter the curriculum. That does not mean that the curriculum is perfect as it is at the moment. There are a couple of things that impact on this. Firstly, again, I would advocate for this idea that we need a forum where we decide what is important at a community level. Clearly, some things are more important than others and some things are parachuted into the curriculum. As teachers, we often roll our eyes, if there has been a big news story, all of a sudden people argue that it should be on the school curriculum. What we should be focusing on are these concepts that are really critical for engagement in the world, for instance going back to that example of people who can read serious news sources, understand them and contribute to the democratic debate. There will be things in the New South Wales curriculum that do not really support that cause and they should be examined.

I am all for examining the content of the curriculum, I am just cautious about saying we are going to declutter it and we are going to give those decisions over to a body, assuming that that is a technical decision, when essentially, because we are weighing apples and oranges and competing values, to a certain extent, that needs to be a political decision that people need to feed into. The second thing I would say, you can actually teach a lot more content, for want of a better word, if you use explicit teaching methods. And a lot of the feedback basically says things like, there is so much content in the curriculum that we have not got time to do project-based learning, we have not got time to do problem-based learning, we have not got time to do these other things. That is true because those mechanisms are very inefficient ways of teaching content.

We have got a lot of evidence for that. The paper by Kirschner, Sweller and Clark in 2006, "Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work", is basically an explanation why for novices—not for experts, not for PhD students or professional researchers—learning through project work or problem-based learning is just not very efficient. But people believe that they need to do that, just like I used to, because they believe that they are developing some sort of generic skill through doing that. There are two elements to that. One, the curriculum is not perfect, but I am just sceptical of the way that people want to declutter it. Two, some of the reasons people want to declutter it is based on premises that are not very sound.

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The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I would suggest that the primary political driver of the Masters review into the curriculum was to solve the problem of declining performance for the school systems. Masters, in particular, has suggested that Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA], where we know we have performed poorly, actually privileges those kinds of deep analytical skills. There seems to be a tension with what you are suggesting, Mr Ashman, around that idea of a broad knowledge-based curriculum and trying to address that kind of fundamental driver of why we are looking at the review of the curriculum in the first place, which is to try and improve the overall system performance. I might open this up to you, Dr Mueller, as well. I know you have got a view about the evidence base around the suggestions that Masters makes to improve system performance.

Mr ASHMAN: Actually, I have remembered the thread that I lost. Because people were talking about international assessments—first of all, we have to be very careful. You cannot just look at an education system that does really well and say, "Well, they do better than us in PISA; therefore, whatever they are doing we should do." There are a lot of ways that different education systems differ from each other. In Australia, if we did something similar to what they do in China and we just put, say, the ACT in as our PISA results rather than the whole of Australia, we would do better. That has nothing to do with the ACT having a brilliant education system, frankly. It has to do with demographics. We have to be very careful about this. The other thing that people do—and the review does this as well—is look to places like Singapore and say, "Well, they are now doing this. They are decluttering their curriculum." But what they are doing now cannot possibly be the cause of their previous past performance. If they did not do that before, then the fact that they are doing it now is neither here nor there.

People make this mistake a lot with Finland as well. They look at Finland. Finland introduced something equivalent to project-based learning, phenomenon-based learning, in 2017. But Finland's PISA scores have been declining significantly since about 2006. We have to be careful of just looking at these countries and saying, "Oh, well, they are doing this. They are higher up the rankings than us so we should do that." When you do look at the data in a slightly more sophisticated way—and it is only correlation so we cannot be absolutely sure that the factors we are investigating caused the performance. That is always the way with PISA data. A big thing that comes out for me is that, quite amusingly, they decided as a body that student-orientated instruction was a good thing. It was their model for good teaching. Then, every time they collected evidence on that, they actually found that the more student-orientated the instruction is—that includes concepts like differentiation and things like project work—the worse the PISA outcomes are in a country.

Caro et al did an analysis within education systems. So you can rid of some of these factors that vary between education systems and they found in every education system they looked at that there was a negative correlation between student-orientated instruction, differentiation and project-based learning and all that, and performance on PISA scores. The other thing about PISA—one last point, sorry—is that it was designed to essentially favour this student-orientated form of instruction. It is an odd kind of assessment. The science assessment is called "scientific literacy", which I would argue is in odd use of the word "literacy". They are trying to favour what we would call in education constructivist approach.

But still the countries that use a mastery learning, whole-class explicit teaching approach have done well on those assessments: Singapore, countries in East Asia. So it did not quite prove what maybe people wanted it to prove. Also, when they have introduced these additional assessments, things like collaborative problem-solving, which they were expecting—"okay, so students who do well on these traditional subject areas like science and maths are maybe not so good at collaborative problem-solving." That is not true. You basically replicate the same sort of ranking when you look at these other things. That is not a coincidence because the broad background knowledge and the skills you need to do well in a traditional academic curriculum are also the ones you need for collaborative problem-solving, problem-solving more generally, critical thinking and so on.

Dr MUELLER: I am going to be very old-fashioned and traditionalist and say that, with regard to PISA in particular but student performance more broadly, the low levels of competence in English language are what hold our students back. The PISA test items are generally much more sophisticated linguistically. They are longer. They are more rigorous. They do expect a level of—a capacity to wade through a lot of extraneous information in complete contrast to NAPLAN test items, for example. Our students really do not tend to be asked to do that in my experience. Sustained reading, sustained filtering and sorting of written English are absolutely key to success in that test regime. That is where I believe we tend to fall down, regardless of the topic. It does not matter whether it is science or literature or whatever it might be. That is something we have to fix asap.

The CHAIR: That is a very good point.

The Hon. WES FANG: Dr Mueller, in your opening you spoke about how in education we have experiments put over the top layer of the system that are, as you said, brought in and brought out. But before I do that—just on the last point that you made about the PISA testing regime. What improvements do you think the

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curriculum could have in that English teaching area that would see an improvement there? Is it a comprehension or a sustained—you said the long, sophisticated questions were the issue across all the subjects. What would be the way to see an improvement there?

Dr MUELLER: The English curriculum is where we should start. In fact, I am doing some analysis right at the moment for another project on that. When we talk about decluttering the curriculum, that is absolutely needed in that area. There is way too much waffle and long generic lists of skills that students are supposed to practice and acquire. There is nothing that really reflects a rigorous approach to the acquisition of English language and, of course, encourages reading and all of those things. There are many issues around that, which I think could be addressed very smartly, quite quickly and turn things around quickly. Assessment is absolutely a part of that. When I talk about being clear about what it is we want our students to achieve at particular milestones, we need to have really great common assessment in place that requires them to do exactly what I was just describing: more sophisticated reading, wading through a bit more language—raising our expectations. Our expectations are low.

The Hon. WES FANG: The obvious follow-on question from that to me is whether the teaching regime in other subjects is sufficient for us to see improved PISA outcomes if we had a difference in the English teaching regime to give those students the comprehension and skills to improve their performance on those questions.

Dr MUELLER: Just giving them access to the information that they are meant to be dealing with exactly—yes. The answer is yes. English is the—no, I will go back. There was an idea, once upon a time, that every teacher is a teacher of English. I would say I agree 100 per cent with that. If confident, competent teachers in whatever subject area that they are teaching in can also bring confidence and competence in the English language to bear, we can turn this ship around very quickly.

The Hon. WES FANG: Back to the first point that I talked about, with regard to what you would say are I guess untested experiments over the system: Would you be able to expand on that and maybe cite some examples, and what it is that you see with any future proposals that may create some risk for the system?

Dr MUELLER: There is so much there. Again, I think that is where the audit or the analysis that I have talked about comes in. We need to pinpoint exactly the times when and ways in which we have chosen particular experiments. For example, whole language: everyone is aware of it, and the Chair referred to it. I think our students are paying a very heavy price for that, as have our teachers. Open classrooms would be another one, and that is a structural feature, I suppose. Removing common and formal assessments—I think the way in which achievement standards are written is so vague that the ways in which teachers actually measure student progress are so varied and we cannot have confidence in the outcomes. It is one of the reasons why I am deeply concerned about learning progressions. If we are not all agreed on what it is we actually want to measure and how we are going to go about that then we continue to have a situation where people operate so differently, as they do even within schools but across the country and across systems.

Those would be two of the examples, but there are many. Dropping foreign languages as a requirement, for example, for graduation from school. We know there is decades and decades of evidence and we see it in the high-performing systems: Where foreign languages are compulsory from a young age all the way through students have cognitive benefits that are absolutely demonstrable and their literacy improves significantly. It is incontrovertible. Removal of formal assessments: streaming, or setting, as some people call it, has gone out of fashion and somehow became something that was elitist and would hold students back. The evidence is not in on that. I think that went out far too rapidly. I think mathematics is the one subject where it seems to continue to be used. There are myriad examples of experiments that have been tried—some more successful, some absolutely failures.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I thank both Mr Ashman and Dr Mueller for their time today and for their submissions; they were both very helpful. Mr Ashman, I will say that I am a subscriber to your blog. Thank you for the contribution that you are making to the public debate about education. I think it is really important. Just reflecting on some of the answers that you have given to some of my colleagues, you have said that the best results essentially come from where you have a mastery of learning and you have a whole-class explicit approach. Are we asking the wrong question when we ask what we can do in our curriculum review to improve our student results? Are we actually asking the wrong question at the outset?

Mr ASHMAN: That is a very good question. I think there are two things that go together that are essential. I think we know that explicit teaching is a very effective model. By "explicit teaching", I have a very clear thing in mind. If anyone wants to look it up, Barak Rosenshine wrote *Principles of Instruction: Research-Based Strategies That All Teachers Should Know* a few years ago, which outlines the research base for this model of explicit teaching. That involves whole-class interactive teaching; it is not a teacher standing at the front lecturing. In my place we have the kids with mini-whiteboards. We talk, we teach them, we get them to do things and hold up their mini-whiteboards. We correct things as we go along. It is whole-class explicit teaching.

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I am not necessarily—I think that Dr Mueller's comment about setting is interesting. The evidence is not strong either way on that, but a lot of people are just very ideologically against it. But it is one way of tailoring the teaching to students who are coming in with different levels of achievement without losing that whole-class effectiveness. I think my observation, which I cannot really support with much evidence, is that it is often done very badly. The graduate teacher or the reserve teacher or the casual relief teacher ends up taking the lowest-level group, where it should be the other way around, where the most experienced teacher should do that—but that is an aside. The curriculum goes hand in hand with that.

You can explicitly teach skills; you can implicitly teach skills. You can explicitly teach knowledge and you can implicitly teach knowledge. I would say that you get the biggest effect if you have got a curriculum that explicitly teaches knowledge in a knowledge-rich way. I do not think it is necessarily asking the wrong question. In fact, in many of its recommendations, it pushes us away from whole-class explicit teaching. It was asked to comment on the curriculum and then it has made these recommendations that essentially affect methods of teaching, which I think is a strange facet of the review.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You said that explicit whole-class streaming—there is a role for streaming, but essentially you are teaching the whole class. How do you make sure that those kids who are not keeping up are still not being left behind but equally that you are pushing your best students as well?

Mr ASHMAN: Again, I am not a massive advocate for the setting or streaming model. I think there are problems with it, but there are always compromises with it whichever way you group students. Taking a really ideological approach to it and saying, "This is morally wrong" misses the point of the complexity and the messiness of what we are trying to do. Unless we are going to have class sizes of two or three we are going to have one teacher and we are going to have 25 students. We are going to have to manage that somehow. We need to be practical here. I think too few people in this discussion are often very practical about what this is going to look like. You can use setting to do that. The East Asian model tends to be that the students who are most advanced in the class help the students in the class who are least advanced and help them to move forward, and then they all move forward together in a fairly collective way. There are various models you can follow there.

The model I would use for the students who are least advanced is a research-based model called response to intervention. In something critical like mathematics or literacy you deliver a very high quality—what we call "tier one"—approach to all the students in class using interactive explicit teaching. Then, with the students who are still struggling, you withdraw them for a small group intervention. From those students, with the one or two who are still really struggling you might have an individual intervention. That requires resourcing. If I were allocating resources at a system level, that is what I would prioritise.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is really helpful, thank you. You touched on some research around teaching writing. I know it is not necessarily your direct area of expertise that you are doing, but this is a really complex area. We have had a recent report, at least in New South Wales, that shows three in five teachers—including high school English teachers—do not feel confident in teaching writing. Do you think that is something that we need to be explicitly covering in our new curriculum, and how can we best do that?

Mr ASHMAN: Yes. I think—yes, I am not an expert in English. I put my cards on the table: I am a maths teacher and a science teacher. But I am head of research and I have had to look into these issues. We have tried to improve the teaching of writing at my place. We have had to look at what we can do. The best model around at the moment, I think—and this is just an opinion—is called The Writing Revolution. It was developed by Judith Hochman in the United States. It is basically an explicit model for teaching writing, but it is contextualised to writing. It is like Rosenshine's principles of explicit teaching contextualised to writing, and it starts at the sentence level. I think we have gone down the wrong path of prioritising kids writing whole, complete pieces of writing.

The problem with that is that if there are lots of things wrong with a piece of writing—you get people to write and then at the end you take it all in and then you do your teaching by telling them everything they did wrong in the writing. That is the wrong way around. We need to reverse that process, teach them how to write first at the sentence level and at the paragraph level, get them to put it together in rich context, so not always writing about pets or the weekend but writing about matters from history, ideas, things from science, and that is what The Writing Revolution puts together. We have sort of implemented ideas from that, integrated that with our knowledge-rich curriculum and that is my view, but as I say I cannot point to hard and fast evidence on that and there would be other people who would have different opinions.

The CHAIR: Dr Mueller, given your expertise in English, can you chip in on that?

Dr MUELLER: Just a couple of quick comments, thank you. Reading and writing are inextricably connected. Students who do not read high-quality literature and frequently lack good mentoring and explicit

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teaching from their teachers really do not develop the skills they need to produce any high-quality writing. It is that simple. So, yes, of course we should be looking for solutions and there are some around that seem to offer some good guidance for teachers, but I would go back to my early statement and it was the third recommendation that I made. We need to ensure this alignment between the operational elements across all of what happens in school education and the key point here is equipping our teachers with the skills they need. I was just having a conversation with a principal just now. We know that many beginning teachers simply do not have the skills to model good writing so no amount of formulae or magic tricks will help them to teach children to construct good sentences, put them together in paragraphs and produce a really effective longer piece. We have lost so much ground in this area. I worry that we may not be able to retrieve it, but looking for a quick grab bag solution is not the way to go.

The CHAIR: That is true, you know. If a 15-year-old reads enough Dickens and applies themselves, inevitably they will become a good-quality writer, and we have lost that completely—it is tragic.

Dr MUELLER: We have.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Dr Mueller, the value of learning a second language was obviously one of the recommendations that Masters made that was not taken on by the Government, and it is certainly something that I am passionate about and a big believer in. I understand that there is research that shows that certain parts of the brain will only be turned on by learning a musical instrument or by learning a second language. When we look at people in countries around the world, it is quite common for them to—as you say—learn a language from very early on and throughout their entire schooling. Do you think that this is an opportunity that we have missed in the curriculum review?

Dr MUELLER: Absolutely. I was intrigued. As I said in my first submission, I think, when the Masters review was published I was stunned at the lack of evidence provided in support of that particular proposal and I remain staggered by how little attention is given to that. I would go back to the 1980s and Professor Joe Lo Bianco producing the first national statement on languages and trying so hard to bring this to the attention of policymakers, and it became just another report that was filed somewhere and no one took terribly seriously. I might just add, it is a bizarre situation that we do so poorly in foreign languages and languages generally, including English, given that one of the general capabilities in the Australian curriculum is intercultural understanding. How do you achieve that when you do not expose your students to the sustained learning of other languages? Sorry, now I have just lost my train of thought.

The CHAIR: Could you submit on notice the evidence of the link between mandatory foreign languages and the development of cognitive skills. Foreign language is normally seen within the prism of getting jobs, Asian immigration and so forth, but I have not heard of this development of cognitive skills as an element. So if there is evidence to that effect could you submit it on notice?

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I actually hosted the Federation of Community Language Schools and it did a piece out of Macquarie University recently, I think. I will get you across the report from it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That will be useful to the Committee.

Dr MUELLER: If I may just add: Exactly what you have just pointed out goes to the utilitarian approach we have to language—English and other languages. We see it as something you do because that will get us a job or something that will help us to do business in another country. It is a very base way of looking at things and it just does not go to the intellectual and international aspects of children's development at all. We need to turn that around.

The CHAIR: I know, but in the mid-90s, say, Indonesia was going to be the next big thing—as big as China. Twenty-five years later, did it create a hundred jobs? Probably not, but a lot of schools jumped in to do Indonesian as their language preference. When things are hyped up and it does not deliver obviously there has got to be some political accountability on that front, but if it has got another useful role in developing cognitive skills the same way mathematics does, then that is evidence—

Dr MUELLER: It is how you make the case.

The CHAIR: Yes. I do not doubt the evidence is there, but it is really useful for the Committee to have a look at it in that context.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: One of the points in your submission was that the curriculum review lacked a distinct Australian perspective. What do you think the importance of that is and how do you see that being embedded in the curriculum?

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Dr MUELLER: This, again, goes to the way we teach English and to an equal extent the way we teach history. A high-quality curriculum should be looking at the particular context in which students are learning. What we have are curriculum documents that could almost be implemented in any other part of the world because they are so generic in nature. There is nothing recognising the distinctive literary heritage and linguistic heritage of Australia. We do some good work in incorporating a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures—no question about that and rightly so—but little or no attention is paid to—and I say this being so aware of sitting in this particular building—the great ideas and the great thinking that underpin this great democracy. We do not write our curriculum to reflect that and to give students a really clear sense of why they are learning what they are learning and how it will shape them as Australian citizens going out to engage in the world after they leave school.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: So how do you think that should be embedded in the curriculum? Should that be embedded in terms of the texts that people read? Should it be embedded in terms of Australian history and the exploration of Australian history? How should it actually present itself in the curriculum?

Dr MUELLER: Well those are the two areas in particular, so when you look at the suggested texts in English there is almost nothing there to help a student understand the origins of modern Australia. Given that history is an amorphous subject and the lack of alignment between subject English and subject history, there is, again, no way that you could say a student will pop out at the end of their schooling with a really sound understanding and appreciation of the social and political and historic and literary origins of this country. That is a real difficulty. I think that is a real deficit because along with that kind of commitment—and that is where I believe some of the vision should come from—from that would flow then a really good selection of texts and a really high expectation of the use of language; reading, writing and so on. So all of that would merge and mesh to lift the standard and lift the expectations we have of our students' intellectual progress.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: You also make criticism of using United States and United Kingdom examples in your submission. Where should we be looking? Where is the best authority in terms of curriculum development globally? Where should we be looking?

Dr MUELLER: I should just say that one of the reasons I am critical of referring to the United States and the UK is because so much of what we have adopted has come from them. I think it has been like a security blanket for us—if another English-speaking country does it, then we should probably try that too. I would point, as far as language acquisition and English is concerned, to Singapore. I would point to history subjects and the focus on history in western Europe in particular. We know that the teaching of mathematics is particularly successful in east Asia, and Hong Kong is probably at the head of the line there, Shanghai, China. And this is not at all to say that we should be carving a chunk out of their curriculum or their teaching and learning practices, their pedagogy and saying, "Right, we will just drop that on top here."

That is not at all how we should approach things, but we need to be looking much more carefully at where things work well and where students clearly are graduating from school with high levels of confidence. I have seen it as a university lecturer, the difference between graduates from certain countries and our own domestic students coming into first year university with so little confidence as against those who really that is not a worry; they understand, they have got the mechanics under control; now they can get off and running with the academic focus of whatever it is—engineering or the arts or whatever. We can see those differences very clearly; we can achieve that too.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That has been a wonderfully useful and informative session for the Committee. I thank you both for your time and expertise, which has been tremendous. Those questions on notice, there is normally a practice of returning them within 21 calendar days, and there could also be some supplementary questions that come from Committee members arising from your evidence today and also from the excellent submissions that were lodged. So thanks again and we will move onto our next session.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

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FRAN BONANNO, Vice President, Association of Catholic School Principals, and Principal, St Felix Primary School, Bankstown, sworn and examined

MICHAEL EGAN, President, Association of Catholic School Principals, and Principal, La Salle College, Bankstown, sworn and examined

BOB WILLETTS, Principal, Berry Public School, affirmed and examined

NORMA PETROCCO, Vice President, NSW Primary Principals' Association, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank the witnesses for appearing. Would any of you or all of you like to make a short statement at the commencement of your evidence?

Mr EGAN: Thank you, Chair. The Association of Catholic School Principals is an umbrella organisation for all the Catholic school principals from K to 12 in New South Wales and it represents just over 600 principals. The main purpose is to promote the overall aims of Catholic education and promote personal, pastoral and professional development as principals as leaders in Catholic schools. As the peak body for Catholic principals, we have been engaged in the review of the New South Wales curriculum, primarily through the opportunity provided so far by NESA. Our representatives have attended a variety of roundtable discussions and consultations and continue to do so.

Our submission to the inquiry was generated from discussions at a recent meeting of representatives from each of our diocesan subgroups. Our association strongly agrees with a number of the recommendations of the Masters review around the curriculum being overcrowded and we eagerly await the next steps to producing the new curriculum. We characterise the review so far as being very broad in reach, with the reference to a multitude of competing ideas. We understand that the development of curriculum is best done when it is a contested task and we expect to be able to contribute further, particularly when drafts begin to be produced.

Mr WILLETTS: Good morning, Mr Chair, and Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to this inquiry on behalf of the NSW Primary Principals' Association [NSWPPA]. We appreciate the opportunity to elaborate on our submission. The New South Wales curriculum review fulfils the terms of reference and there was extensive consultation throughout the process with the NSWPPA. We acknowledge and thank Professor Geoff Masters for his consultation throughout the review. The NSWPPA particularly supports the broad areas of reforming content and structure of the curriculum as key priorities and commits to ongoing consultation with NESA and the New South Wales Department of Education during the reform process.

We strongly support a key finding of the review, which is the need for a reduction in content to address overcrowding of the curriculum. We support the notion of a focus on literacy and numeracy through evidence-based programs and practices whilst also maintaining a holistic education that promotes deep learning of core disciplinary knowledge in each subject area. The NSWPPA strongly supports the aspirations, vision and goals of the Melbourne and Alice Springs declaration in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion, and in doing so we strongly reiterate our position calling for a greater focus on general capabilities, citing the critical importance across all subject areas and fields of endeavour.

With regard to the Chair's discussion paper, we also note that the teaching of source verification is a critical skill in the era of internet and social media, to ensure students can take their place in a functional and successful democratic society. The NSWPPA strongly supports the concept of an increased focus on social and emotional learning and wellbeing across all stages as a core function of schools. Social and emotional development and health and wellbeing are not supplementary to academic performance; they are, in fact, prerequisites to academic performance. As the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation [CESE] School Excellence Framework outlines, they are best when explicitly taught embedded in the culture of the school, resulting in a measurable improvement in student wellbeing and engagement.

We strongly support a more flexible and integrated curriculum in order to enhance the opportunities for teachers to effectively differentiate to meet the personalised learning needs of all students. We note the importance of effective assessment strategies and reporting to parents as a key aspect of the review. A focus on assessing and reporting growth and attainment over time will support a more student-centred approach. We also note the Chair's comments about the need for a type of progression code for tracking student progress within this model and agree this would support high expectations and continuous improvement at every level, as outlined in our submission and the curriculum review. The final point we would like to make is that principals and teachers in New South Wales engage in wideranging professional learning and seek to contribute to the global research evidence base in the interests of continuously improving educational outcomes for all students in New South Wales.

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The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Willetts. In fairness to the Committee members we might reverse the batting order for questions, starting with the Hon. Courtney Houssos and then go to the Hon. Scott Farlow.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much, Mr Chair. Can I say thank you very much to all the witnesses who have come in today and for your submissions, which were really helpful. I want to start with the Primary Principals' Association. I thank you and your members for the input of work that you do in our schools each and every day. I want to reflect on part of your submission where you talk about the renewed cycle of syllabuses that has resulted in a significant workload issue for New South Wales public schools. This is something that the Committee has heard is a common thread through your submission and from information provided to the Committee and the idea of this constant cycling through different syllabuses and constantly changing and the workload that that imposes on teachers. What is it that we can ensure that we do not have to do that going forward? How can we ensure that this curriculum review can be a more lasting change and reduce that burden on our teachers?

Ms PETROCCO: Thank you for your question. I think the way to ensure that that occurs is to provide teachers who are professionals and very committed to student learning with the adequate time and resources to do so effectively. Quality professional learning is about providing teachers with expert leaders in curriculum to assist them to implement curriculum in a cohesive manner, ensuring that everyone gets the same message and that the curriculum is delivered to its full extent. It is also about providing adequate time for teachers to do that and staggering curriculum provision and development so that teachers actually have the time to gain a professional understanding of what is required and how that looks as in teaching and learning in their classroom.

Mr WILLETTTS: I can probably add to that. It is a great question. Just how that plays out in a school, in every school in New South Wales, is that a change in any syllabus results in a complete overhaul of all of the school's programs, the school assessment tasks and what is reported to parents. So there is a significant workload every time there is a change to a syllabus. I suppose to answer the follow-up question, that is, how might we ensure that we do not have that is, exactly as our colleague Michael mentioned, to undertake a very robust syllabus development in consultation with teachers to ensure that what lands as the next iteration of the syllabus is the most effective fit-for-purpose syllabus for the long term implementation in schools.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How much time are we actually talking about in terms of the production of new materials and resources? How much time does it take? What are we talking about in terms of the resource demands?

Mr WILLETTTS: That is a really good question. It would vary. It would start at the level at the NESA office obviously and then to the Department of Education, Teaching and Learning Directorate, say, even literacy and numeracy. Anything that is changed they develop professional learning so there is time involved in development of the professional learning that would be associated with the implementation of every syllabus. Then every teacher in the school has to through the process of that professional learning to understand what is the same in the syllabus, what has changed, how that impacts on their teaching and learning programs, how and what is delivered and taught, what is assessed and then reported to parents. It is a very, very significant amount of time when you extrapolate it across the State.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: The Government is suggesting a truncated timetable for roll-out of the new syllabus. Does that present major problems in terms of the resource issues that you have identified?

Mr WILLETTTS: I think it is framed by the New South Wales Government as an ambitious timeline and we acknowledge that it is an ambitious timeline to do it well. But all of the stakeholders are really committed to supporting that to occur because we see the curriculum review as something that we have asked for and is required in New South Wales to enhance teaching and learning and student learning outcomes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: What can the Government do to reduce this burden on teachers or on schools themselves?

Mr WILLETTTS: Is that question directed to New South Wales Primary Principal's Association again?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Either of the groups.

Mrs BONANNO: I suppose from someone who has just over 49 years' experience in education I would say that the review of the curriculum is really for most schools and most teachers about decluttering and getting rid of superfluous content and embellishments which just deter people from being able to focus on what is core. Some of the conversation which needs to occur when we are looking at developing, in particular the K to 2 syllabus which is more going to focus on acquisition of English and mathematics, hopefully, as a core that needs to be

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quite directed. I think it needs to be quite explicit to enable teachers to focus and to develop the skills that they require in order to do their job effectively.

One of the issues over time has been that with some syllabus documents the extras become the syllabus. We lose sight of what the main outcome was. So one experience might be, and I think it was mentioned earlier, is with regards to writing. The new syllabus focuses on sentence level to start. However, it is hard to find it in the way that the syllabus has been designed. So being able to strip away a lot of the clutter, make it more explicit, will enable teachers and I think schools and systems to develop and design professional learning for teachers that will better enable them to deliver content that is more focussed on a narrower, neater curriculum.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I just have one more question specifically to the Catholic Schools Principals' Association. In your submission you talk about compliance being a major burden on schools and that means that we are taking time away from teachers from engaging with their learning process. Can you tell me some of the compliance measures that you could reduce? I think you talk about doing it in a twenty-first century way.

Mr EGAN: There are a number of compliance requirements, both Federal and State and they impact on us in different ways. One of the things we are seeing is we are required to provide pretty well census information, testing every child or gathering data on every person who might be affected by a particular policy or regulation. When we are doing it in that manner it is very time consuming and the feeling on the ground would be that it detracts from the actual help that we are often trying to give. I point specifically to things around the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data processes that are quite onerous for those professionals who are high skilled in working with children with disabilities, in particular, but are spending up to—they would anecdotally say—about a third of their time doing the paperwork that is only, in educational terms, very recently been required of them.

If they are not actually working with the children who need the help, and they are doing the paperwork then that sort of collection process is not fit-for-purpose I would see there would be a number of other things where we have been asked to collect broad-ranging evidence of assessment tasks and the trade-off has been the reduction in the number of tasks where we are actually assessing things, we are now garnering more information about that. Teachers are spending a lot more time with scanners and photocopiers to stockpile data that, effectively, no-one will ever look at. If we are putting all our time into that, it could be much better spent in actual engagement with students in the learning process.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: The curriculum review has been sold on the basis that it is back to basics and it simplifies the curriculum. You have all complained about the overcrowded curriculum. I just wanted to see from both of your perspectives whether you actually think it meets those goals or at least the marketing around the curriculum review?

Mrs BONANNO: I do not think we know yet. We have to wait and see. I would hesitate to use the word simplify. I actually think that we can have a leaner, much more well-structured curriculum for people to follow that could be in some ways more sophisticated. We need to have faith in our educators that we can actually deliver and that we can teach. I suppose we need something that gives us the time and the opportunity to delve deeper with children. I was interested in the previous speaker who spoke about the complexity of writing. Children learn how to write by writing. They need time to write and they need time to speak.

If we have too many competing agendas, there is not the time within the classroom context to do those things every day, which is basically what needs to happen. We need to create space so that there is time for those things. Many of us work in schools where we have huge numbers of children who come who are acquiring English as a second language. They need to develop their language skills. They are not coming the way I came to school, where I was already reading and I had a high level of English competency. I also had parents who spoke well and I had an extremely broad vocabulary.

Many of our children are coming with little or no English and have parents, even though they may be second generation, who also have limited language. There is not the opportunity at home to read widely and broadly and to engage in increasingly sophisticated text. We need to create time for that. We cannot do that if there are so many competing agendas that teachers are run off their feet trying to fulfil requirements around how many hours per week they need to teach particular key learning areas [KLAs] to meet outcomes. If you look across, say, a year 4 class generally, or stage two, three and four, and you look at the number of outcomes, if you curriculum map what is to be covered, it is extraordinary in 25 hours a week.

I suspect that is really about creating time, minimising the content and enabling teachers to focus on the things that they know are the most important for students. If they cannot read, if they cannot write, if they cannot communicate and if they cannot do maths—let us face it, maths is actually like another language—if you cannot do that, then in pretty much everything else you learn your contribution could be limited. I really think we need

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to sit down and think what it is we want our children to leave school with, to make them good citizens and to be able to engage in the world.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I will jump in on that. Is the problem of creating a curriculum across all KLAs, or is it specific KLAs where the curriculum is overburdened? So is the English curriculum overburdened or the Human Society and Its Environment curriculum overburdened?

Mrs BONANNO: I suppose it is not one; it is all. One of the issues is, if I am an expert in a particular area, and I am speaking from a primary perspective, we are expert generalists and we teach across six key learning areas. The input that is being given into each syllabus is generally by people who are generalist but also experts. In order to teach subject specific across six broad syllabus documents requires an enormous amount of knowledge and skill. It is not necessarily about one syllabus in particular; it is about all of them. But if you ask me what is the most problematic syllabus at the moment, I would possibly say the English syllabus.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Are you suggesting that we should get rid of the time mandates in terms of KLAs?

Mrs BONANNO: I think the time mandates are not mandates. My understanding is that they are indicative hours. There is an expectation that we would have those. I am probably being provocative at this point. I think that if you are looking at timetabling, as part of a compliance where you have a weekly timetable, if I am really honest it does not work. If I want to teach deep and meaningfully in science over a term, I am not going to teach it in perhaps 45 minutes a week. I am going to do maybe an hour and a half for three weeks and do two half days. Giving the flexibility to teachers to be able to change the timetable around is important, but that is a personal view, not an association point of view.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Just getting back to the original question, I am interested in the Primary Principals' Association view on that as well in terms of both the simplification and also getting back to basics?

Mr WILLETTTS: We agree with the statement that it is not necessarily simplifying. We think that it has met the objective in terms of the core priority of reducing the content to address the overcrowding in the curriculum. With that focus, we are very optimistic that it will meet its brief. Consultations are already underway along with those really important conversations with educators about what is important and how they spend their time. Just picking up on that last point as well, teachers are incredibly skilled at integrating the curriculum. It is more about the cumulative impact of all of the syllabuses combined. One of the things teachers do incredibly well is integrate. If they are doing a unit on science, they build very rich lessons around literacy lessons that engage students as well. That is a way that they manage it at the moment.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: One of the issues we have grappled with as a Committee—and I know everybody in the education system is grappling with this as well—is in terms of how you get to these progression points and the differentiated learning in a practical sense in the classroom. We can all agree that the system as it works at the moment does not work for everybody, but how do you actually implement it in the classroom? Have you got any ideas as to how you would actually extrapolate the recommendations to the Masters review into the classroom?

Ms PETROCCO: Our syllabuses are currently a learning progression anyway, really. That is what they are. The way that teachers do it very well is differentiating for student need and what the students need in a particular area. Primary teachers are very good, as Mr Willetts said, at integrating literacy and numeracy within a KLA to teach a unit of work. That is what we are good at. The way that teachers do that is by then differentiating activities to suit the learners' needs in the classroom. What we are finding as a profession, and I am sure the Catholic sector would be finding this too, is more and more kids are coming into the system with very complex needs, and needs that we have not previously seen in primary schools, especially around mental health issues and trauma.

That impacts on our teaching and learning, because we need to deal with that and address that before we can get kids to learn. It is providing teachers with support and time, not only to deal with how to teach the curriculum effectively, but also to deal with the complexities that are now coming to us, so that kids are ready to learn. I think that is a really important focus of this review, and it needs to be a focus of this review, about how to support kids to be ready to learn, because if kids are not ready to learn, then that makes the teaching of our syllabuses in the curriculum much more difficult.

Mr WILLETTTS: I suppose on top of that would be that with the syllabuses already created as a progression, teachers are incredibly skilled at identifying a full range of strategies that are available in order to meet the individual needs of students. Schools and teachers are making decisions based on what works for certain students. For example, in terms of acceleration, for some students it comes back to the assessment and knowing your students, knowing where they are at the moment and having quality assessments to support your

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understanding that they are actually performing—say, if gifted and high-potential students are performing well beyond where their peers are. So, for example, in mathematics there are students who are working on advanced stages of the mathematics curriculum because the teachers have an understanding of that, communicate that with the parents and find ways to extend those students, meet their learning needs and keep them progressing. That happens now and that would continue on in a learning progressions model.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How do you then report for kids who are—say, someone who is only achieving stage one outcomes but is in stage two? How does a teacher report on that if they are not even close to achieving stage two outcomes?

Ms PETROCCO: What we report on is we work on a stage-based—at my school we work on a stage-based model. We run a stage-based school based on how the syllabuses are currently set out. If a child is in a stage-based class, for example, they are in stage one, they are exposed to the stage one outcomes. However, the teacher would then differentiate for the students around the outcomes to ensure that they have access to the outcomes. But when we report to parents we would make that very clear to parents that they have not reached the stage outcomes. A lot of those students are on individual programs for their learning and parents would be made aware of that—that they are being catered for differently, that they may be getting learning support from a learning support teacher, that they are working on a modified curriculum to build their capacities and skills within a particular area of learning. That is then communicated to the parents via our reporting system.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: In the current system there is accommodation for this non-time based progression.

Mr WILLETTTS: Yes.

Ms PETROCCO: Yes.

Mr WILLETTTS: We also have individual learning programs or individual education programs that engage the parents in the process as well. Those are generally reported on to parents more regularly. So they are invited in to provide feedback at more regular intervals. On the current reporting system, students in those cases are removed. They do not report on the A to E scales for those students. It goes back to their individual education plan. We have a student, for example, who is autistic, on the spectrum, and he is very gifted in specific areas of number—amazing. And in his individual education plan it reflects the fact that he is extended well beyond the stage curriculum that he is operating in but for other areas of his social development, emotional development and areas of literacy he is also receiving learning and support interventions, significantly to improve his literacy outcomes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Petrocco, you were talking about the more complex needs that you find in the classroom.

Ms PETROCCO: Yes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: And I think that is probably reflected across both systems—is that right?

Ms PETROCCO: Yes.

Mrs BONANNO: Absolutely.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: You can have the world's best curriculum but if the child you are trying to teach has a middle ear infection that has been chronically untreated and cannot hear you, you are never going to get through. Or if a child is on an autism spectrum and you do not have those learning and support services in place to allow them to thrive across the whole of their school environment, the best curriculum in the world is not going to get us anywhere, is it?

Ms PETROCCO: I totally agree with you. We really need to have the support there for those students. As I have said, we are getting more and more children coming in with significant mental health trauma issues, issues around home life and, as you said, kids who come in to school that have not had breakfast. Lots of schools provide breakfast programs for children now. We have provided kids with uniforms, all sorts of things because parents, for whatever reason, are not able to provide that and it is our job to support the kids as much as we can. But you are right: If they come in to school traumatised, they have not been fed, issues have happened at home overnight, they have not been medicated, all sorts of things—exactly right.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: And the same in the Catholic system?

Mrs BONANNO: Most definitely and particularly more so perhaps in the past 10 years we have seen quite an incredible increase, actually, in the number of children who are coming with—not children specifically with one disability but quite complex multi-disability. So we have children—trauma is a huge issue and anxiety.

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It is extraordinary to see. One child who has an anxiety disorder can take an enormous amount of resourcing and I am talking perhaps 20 hours of learning support, teacher's aide support, per week, much of which is unfunded—I just throw that at you.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: We sometimes hear calls that schools need to get back to basics and stop providing all these social supports to their kids and just be about teaching, that parents and society otherwise should do all these social supports. How realistic is that in practice?

Ms PETROCCO: Totally unrealistic, can I say. That is great if that was the case but that is not the reality we are facing. As was said, the last 10 years the complexity that we are getting in children is unbelievable. I will give you an example. I have been doing this for over 35 years and in the last five years we have had children in primary schools who are suicidal, who have threatened to cut themselves, who have cut themselves, the counselling services that we need have increased significantly and that is the reality. That is the reality of being, teaching and leading a school in this society in this day and age. Until as a society we look at all those issues and grapple with those issues, the teaching of the curriculum will be secondary, unfortunately.

Mr EGAN: One of the biggest issues for our most vulnerable students is the gaps that multiply what is going on. If whatever is going on in their life causes them to miss school then they cannot proceed lock step with other kids and it means then teachers are literally trying to do two or three sets of the same thing one after the other or revisiting things in a way that is incredibly difficult to resource. We probably had a greater exposure to that too during the recent COVID experience where kids who normally would not have had a gap in their learning have been exposed to one. Now they are suffering in the same sort of way and the teaching process means we are going back to things that have already been covered and need to do that again and again and again.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Sorry, Mr Willetts.

Mr WILLETTS: I was going to say that is an excellent question. That is a really excellent question. We agree. We would love to focus on that academic progress but it is not reality. Teachers and principals have to play the cards that we are dealt. What we are dealt on a day-to-day basis is students presenting, as Pasi Sahlberg outlined in his latest research to the PPA conference last week, an ever-increasing number of students experiencing anxiety, depression, mental health issues—and I am going to call it out that it is correlating with a significant increase in mobile technology and social media. Some students are arriving at school without food, as has been mentioned. Some students are experiencing significant trauma. And even just things like the wide-ranging impact of the bushfires in New South Wales this year. There is a saying in education: Maslow's before Bloom's—looking after Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We need to make sure that these students feel safe, secure and cared for before it opens up the opportunity to enhance their cognitive development and learning.

The CHAIR: Just on that point, if a child is suicidal, how many teachers have mental health training, expertise or medical training to deal with that? And are we really saying that a student who is suicidal should be in the school system instead of in contact with the mental health unit of their closest hospital, dealing with those experts?

Mrs BONANNO: Can I respond to that to say—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What mental health unit?

The CHAIR: Well, there are no mental health units in New South Wales. The point is not about ignoring the wellbeing of children but are schools the best places to handle this with the expertise of teachers with education degrees?

Mrs BONANNO: In many cases we are the only place. We are fortunate at our school that we have a counsellor but I know from experience how difficult it is to get children referred to the adolescent mental health unit, because they are full, to get children in contact—

The Hon. WES FANG: Sorry, when you say "referred to", what pathway are you talking about?

Mrs BONANNO: If we have a child who is showing beyond normal anxiety, who has suicidal ideation so is quite concerning, we refer to a counsellor we have—and I am sure the State system also has a mental health unit within the school or a counselling unit that we refer to. We put in a risk-of-harm report. In one instance we sent the parent to the hospital with the child. The child was released and arrived back at school the next day. We would then put in a risk-of-harm report and we would also do a risk assessment, which we have done, and then the child is sent to their doctor. They fill in a mental health plan and they are referred to either a psychologist or a psychiatrist, some of which is funded. I think it is eight sessions. However, for some children they then need to be moved onto the community adolescent mental health units, who are underfunded and overstretched. Those children then are supported as best they can, but the safest place for many of them is school because it is the

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normalising place. We put things in place. We put in risk assessment to support them while they are at school, while they are well.

The Hon. WES FANG: The only reason I raise that is I fear that some of those comments might have been generalisations. Also, there was quite a big jump there from referring to adolescent mental health units. There is actually a pathway and a structure with which the system operates in. It is not the school just referring straight—

Mrs BONANNO: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: Which is the way the evidence came across.

Mrs BONANNO: No. There are structures and places. What I am trying to get to is that these are situations where there is not an easy fix where there can be a referral and we can be assured that—

The Hon. WES FANG: But it is also not an easy problem.

Mrs BONANNO: No, it is not.

The Hon. WES FANG: It is a complex problem and to say that the patient gets referred there and they get turned away because they are full is very much a generalisation.

Mrs BONANNO: It is my experience in two cases.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, a lot of those students do actually receive treatment through the adolescent mental health system.

Mrs BONANNO: They do.

The Hon. WES FANG: I just wanted to make that clear. It is very easy to make generalisations in these hearings but we need to—

Mrs BONANNO: I am certainly not criticising them. They do a marvellous job. But what I am saying is that from a schools perspective it can be quite frustrating and it can be worrying. The question was asked, "Are our teachers able to deal with those circumstances?" Not always.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: But it is not just mental health though. It is other chronic health conditions.

Mrs BONANNO: Yes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: The obvious case would be ear infections in Aboriginal kids with the lack of audiologists and referral support services available. When I talk to principals and teachers about this they say that the reasons schools deal with it is because they see the kids five days a week almost every week of the year.

Mrs BONANNO: That is right.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Whereas if you put in a risk of serious harm report, two-thirds of those are not even followed up.

Mrs BONANNO: That is right.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: The mental health services are full. It might take two months to get an appointment with a specialist, but meanwhile you are dealing with this child every school day.

Ms PETROCCO: That is right.

Mr WILLETTS: That is right, Mr Shoebridge.

Ms PETROCCO: Years ago we used to have clinical nurses that used to come into schools in kindergarten and check kids' ears, their eyesight and their teeth. That is all gone now.

Mrs BONANNO: That is right. That is all gone now.

Ms PETROCCO: Also, the assumption is that parents can afford to then send their children to psychologists and get the help required. In many cases that is not the case and the only place they can get any support is the school counsellor, who may be there one day a week if you are lucky. These families need significant support and, you are right, most times the only place they can come is the school. That is where the kids feel safe and we will do something to help the family, to support the family and look after the kids' wellbeing.

Mr WILLETTS: Mr Latham, going back to your original question, I do not know the numbers of the teachers in New South Wales who have mental health training but I am happy to take that as a question on notice.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: Yes, if you could. I suppose the other issue was the utility of the consultants coming into schools. Some 60 schools in New South Wales have the Grow Your Mind program with its worksheet on shark versus dolphin thinking, gratitude meditation and animal yoga. That might be well-intentioned but I do not think it is going to help anyone. Is there not a lot of fleecing of the system here? These consultants come in promising a wellbeing program and any program will supposedly serve the purpose. But unless there is an evidence base that that sort of stuff actually gets a result, are we not wasting our money that really should go into professional services, in hearing assistance, in suicide prevention, in genuine mental health?

Mr WILLETTTS: I would say there are schools that would say that they have evidence for the effectiveness of some of those.

The CHAIR: Shark versus dolphin thinking?

Mr WILLETTTS: Any of their wellbeing programs that are having an impact, but I suppose we are talking about different levels of intervention for different levels of mental health issues specifically. We agree that the schools are managing that at the front and when the students present. I will call out that the New South Wales PPA position has been that we really do feel at the moment that there is a significant need in New South Wales for additional counsellors and wellbeing officers in schools to help us to address this again so teachers can focus on teaching and learning. To Mr Shoebridge's point, the issues with access to medical services or any health services from my experience in far western New South Wales and the Riverina is that the problem is exacerbated in isolated rural communities as well.

The CHAIR: That will have to draw the session to a close because we are out of time. We really appreciate the discussion, the contribution and the sincerity of wanting to solve these problems which are very complex and difficult.

Mr WILLETTTS: They are.

The CHAIR: There are different ways of approaching them and we are all after the best outcome based on the evidence. Thank you for your time today. I advise that if anything was taken on notice or you want to add the sort of evidence that you just mentioned, Mr Willetts, that you have 21 days to submit that. There could also be supplementary questions from Committee members to follow-up the discussion. We just do not have enough time to deal with all of these things in the way they should be dealt with.

Mr WILLETTTS: We will certainly take that opportunity. We really appreciate this opportunity. We are very grateful.

The CHAIR: We appreciate the time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

CORRECTED

DAVID HOPE, President, Northern Sydney District Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, affirmed and examined

SHARRYN BROWNLEE, President, Central Coast Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome David Hope, president of the Northern Sydney District Council P&C, and Sharryn Brownlee, who has been a great contributor over many years and is now president of the Central Coast Council P&C. Would either of you like to make an opening statement?

Mrs BROWNLEE: Mr Hope will start, thank you.

Mr HOPE: We represent around about 200 schools in the area of Northern Sydney out to about Ryde and the lower Hills, and also the Central Coast. We are independent bodies. We are not part of the New South Wales P&C Federation although both Mrs Brownlee and I have been involved in the New South Wales P&C Federation, me as a senior vice president and Mrs Brownlee as the president, in the past. We are not the experts in education so we will not have that flavour in our presentation. We see the curriculum as an integrated part of a whole and all of these individual parts have got to work together, so it is not just the curriculum.

It follows that our submission is going to be on matters outside the curriculum. A common everyday example of a system that is a whole is the motor car: it has a motor; it has individual parts that work together; it has a body; it has doors, windows, steering wheels, licensed drivers—there is a whole lot of things. That is one of the things that make up the complexity of the provision of school education. What we have observed over many years is that the system that we have now is one size fits all. In fact, that was the title or a subtitle of a paper done in 2005 by the Department of Education that was supposed to introduce any new era. However, the whole thing got bogged down by vested interest, by custom and practice—it just died. That is 2005, now we are 2020. It was 15 years ago. Imagine where we would be now if that had actually taken off. We have separately provided you with a couple of diagrams which demonstrate what we think one size fits all was all about. I would like to table those, thanks.

We will talk to those in more detail when we get to them, but I will just go through a little bit of your terms of reference. We think the work of Masters is quite good. We were quite involved with the consultation; we put in a long report. We understand that the Masters review was just the start. It was not meant to solve all the problems; it was to point in the direction. The curriculum, by the way, in New South Wales is accompanied by a syllabus which is very long and very detailed and which teachers feel they have to tick a box on. That syllabus probably needs to be translated into English.

We are quite happy with the CESE and we are quite happy with the recommendations the student-centred progression points. We will talk more about that later. Ask us about Lindfield learning Village and Anzac Park Public School and we will talk more about that then. The extent to which the Masters review meets the key Government objectives we think it does at least initially. As I said before, it needs to be the first part of the step. Some of the things that we would like to see happen, you know when you build a building? I am sure you have all built a multistorey building. You need a program plan; you need a strategy and a plan. In the case of education, you need a strategy and a plan as to what to do. Then you need a separate strategy and a plan of how to do it. That is the implementation. You cannot possibly build a multistorey building unless you have those plans in place; otherwise, nothing would happen. That is what happened after the 2005 review.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Much of the Sydney construction sector might disagree with you on that, but that is a separate inquiry.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Exactly.

Mr HOPE: I am sure they might. The thing is, they did have the plans but you might not think that they worked very well. Basically, we think the current curriculum as it is can be used straightaway, provided the guidelines are better. At the moment, teachers think it has to be tick a box of everything. We are saying you can have a swathe that runs through that but that is suited to individual schools or individual kids. You do not have to do every single thing in there. That seems to me to be one of the mistakes that were made that results in the lack of depth. We are also pleased that the Department of Education, TAFE and the NESA are starting to hunt as a pack, but it is the first stages. Whether that can overcome the vested interests in the education community, who knows? I have talked about the who, what and why and how we might implement project management principles. What is needed is probably a board sitting under the Minister to advise on this and to direct the implementation, because this is not just the Department of Education and the Board of Studies; it is the private sector as well. There needs to be a driver for this. While ever there is not a driver, nothing will happen. Thanks.

CORRECTED

Mrs BROWNLEE: Thanks, Mr Hope. We concur. I would like to say thank you again. We appreciated the time that Geoff Masters gave to us. We note his earlier work—and the Primary Principals' Association are going to forward it to the Committee—that was very much about student-centred learning and focusing on the student. I think that enhances our view and thoughts about where this review will go, but it is not as clear to the Committee members who have not seen that earlier work. I will touch on our previous roles very briefly—not as a life story, but to give you an understanding of what brings us to the table today. Having been involved with the State P&C Federation for 25 years, done literally hundreds and hundreds of panels for the department and been involved at a school level, a regional level and a State level around the restructuring of the senior officers positions, the people who are speaking this afternoon are well known to us. They have been with the department for some time and should be able to give you a really good strategy and view of a way forward.

My role at the University of Newcastle as a pro-chancellor for 13 years gave me a deep insight into teacher quality, teacher learning, the gaps that still exist for young teachers coming into the workforce and the way the systems themselves comply with the teacher accreditation. I spent six years at the inaugural Institute of Teachers when it was first set up in New South Wales, working with the then Ministers and Premiers, teachers and the unions and cross-sectorally with the parents as well. To be able to have a voice at that table and talk from a student-centred point of view was a privilege and I repay that by continuing to do a lot of work in the community now. The role of the P&C has changed and varied over time, but as it sits in the New South Wales Education Act it has a framework, and that is where district councils come into view. We use that framework and we take that responsibility seriously, those who are elected to the roles. The Department of Education regional and Department of Educational leadership roles confer with us and we work really closely with schools, but we do not work for the department and we are not aligned in any way.

We have worked at the national level and we were privileged to work with Dan Tehan. Indeed, I was at his table when we talked about the national goals of schooling and the changes in the curriculum. I think there is a lot of opportunity for the Federal Government—be it in boys' education or values in education—to be influencers in different jurisdictions. They carry the purse strings in lots of ways and they invest a lot of funds. I think it is a shame, in many ways, that we do not see more national consistency. There seems to be an "us and them" flavour, often with vested interests in the systems so that every jurisdiction then turns around and does what it likes. I think New South Wales has a bit to learn and it has been very slow in making the changes. From 2005 to 2020 is really not acceptable when you think that is a whole generation of children who have not had the changes needed in schools.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Thank you for your opening statement and submission. I suppose one of the issues is the crowded curriculum. Is that right?

Mrs BROWNLEE: I think that is true. The solution to every problem in the community over time has been to teach it in schools—remembering that, by law, in Australia children have to go to school so they are captured at schools, as are their families. Often that is a good thing because it is about learning. It is how we create a civil society. It is about making sure we have equity of education. But it also means that everyone believes that anything that is happening within the community can be delivered by schools. Whether it is bike riding or whether it is hygiene, whether it is learning or whether it is breakfast—all of the things that society deems to be needed for families and children falls to a school. I think that is when they lose track of the curriculum and the teaching and learning because their welfare needs have become very high.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I suppose your position is you would like the time at school, which is compulsory, to be devoted to actual learning.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Exactly.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Could I ask you about the hour or 45 minutes that is set aside every week for every child not to learn at school but to either go to Special Religious Education [SRE] or just sit in the library or do recycling? How does that fit in with that position you put?

Mrs BROWNLEE: We can talk to that quite well, because we were involved with the St James Ethics Centre in setting up the first ethics in schools programs because for the children who do not undertake Special Religious Education—and remember that in New South Wales it is compulsory, but it is not compulsory in other States and Territories—those children were in the library and the time was not being spent productively. Now we have 10 years of ethics classes in schools that give them an opportunity and a place to be. I think the small number of problems that we see with the religious classes get a lot of media attention and a lot of promotion. Really, what you see across the State is a decline in children going to Special Religious Education and a decline in volunteers coming into schools to deliver it, and so ethics has really created a framework. They have a curriculum. It is publicly available and endorsed and often the religious educators are using the ethics framework and the ethics curriculum to deliver their Special Religious Education. That, combined with the chaplains in schools, has

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frightened many people and they are concerned that there is a very strong religious overlay in education in New South Wales. Taking the welfare and the compassion component, they are worried about people proselytising and induction or trying to influence around Scripture. I think we need to be careful, though, that we do not see that as being the problem that is sometimes portrayed in the media.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: If you do not think bike riding should be taught at school—and we may be on a unity ticket on that—and you want the precious time that we have at school to be devoted to teaching actual lessons about important content, how does anyone justify having this constant time taken out for religious instruction of one form or another or for the very small minority who have access to ethics or, for a very substantial bunch of kids, just nothing? How do we justify that?

Mr HOPE: I do not think you can justify a system whereby a large number of children are just sitting there in school time doing nothing. You cannot justify it.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What about getting instruction from an external religious provider? How does that advance English or maths or anything?

Mr HOPE: We have a wide spectrum of parents who have different views on this, so it is difficult for us to talk about what is the best outcome. Certainly, Scripture or Special Religious Education is not part of the school curriculum. It only "benefits" some kids, while the others are disadvantaged. The alternative would be to move that out of the school day as an extracurricular activity that was run after school or in lunchtime.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: That is what happens in Victoria, if parents want to do it out of the core school hours.

Mr HOPE: That would overcome the problem. The people who wanted their kids to go to SRE could still have it, but it would not be impinging on the rights of the kids who do not go to SRE.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Nor would it be taking precious time that should be devoted to actual learning in classrooms. Surely that is one of your considerations, is it not?

Mrs BROWNLEE: It is, and I think that this is where the tensions play in individual schools when you look at what is happening. We have over the years seen a number of significant problems with SRE and those who come into schools delivering the courses, and yet we see other areas where these schools appreciate them coming in and they do some welfare and almost counselling work for them. There is a very blurred role. I think compliance, transparency and accountability really are lacking in this space. If you wanted to do a survey and have some genuine research on what is happening in schools, it would be helpful because anecdotal and media attention and things that come to us are usually problematic. I think that that highlights for us the concerns around children doing nothing and time wasted and teacher time supervising children to do nothing. Many high schools do not even do their SRE at all now. So, the facts about who is really undertaking SRE I think might surprise people.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: At a minimum we should be insisting that there be data gathered about it?

Mrs BROWNLEE: Absolutely.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Do you find it surprising that the State Government has no statewide call for data?

Mrs BROWNLEE: It is a very sensitive issue and there is very strong religious support for the Parliament and influence in New South Wales, and I think that it is a very sensitive subject and people have shied away and focused their attention elsewhere and they would like to see it go on. I think even when we got ethics up in schools it was a compromise to try to deal with the issue, literally thousands of children who were doing nothing for a period of time every week, and the compromise was, "Well, if you want to run some ethics, then do it." As you say, that is not available in every school for every child, and certainly some schools do not do it at all, regardless of what is says in the curriculum.

Mr HOPE: It is probably the number one most difficult issue to deal with because of the varying views in the community. If you take the view that the school time should be just for curriculum-based activities, well then SRE should be classified as an extracurricular activity like sport and dancing that goes on outside the school day.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Sport does not go on outside the school day.

The CHAIR: But sports during the school day, and dancing and music, art—

Mr HOPE: Some does.

CORRECTED

Mrs BROWNLEE: Sport is a compulsory part of the curriculum.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Sport is a compulsory part of the curriculum.

Mr HOPE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you actually get complaints from parents who object to their children learning the history of the *Bible*?

Mrs BROWNLEE: We do sometimes.

The CHAIR: Do those parents have an opt-out option where the children can do a different lesson?

Mrs BROWNLEE: They do, but in the enrolment form, Chair, it is often not clear. And we have had a number of revisions of that enrolment form so people can opt-in or opt-out. I think it is also, to be frank, it is actually the quality of the individual coming into the school and what is offering. We do not often have the spread of religions anyway. There is perhaps just one or two or one only on offer, so other children are disadvantaged in not attending anyway. By pretending that we deliver it, or it is available, it is not available for every child anywhere. Even if you were a supporter, it is not being delivered. And if you have got concerns about it, you still would not have all the facts about what is happening and who is there. We have seen church newsletters where they have talked about it—and I have got examples of this—where they have talked about they are in a certain high school, they have got a number of children who are coming to SRE, and this is great because they are now going to be coming to church. So that positive component is being demonstrated.

Those letters have been given to us, so we have taken them to the directors, we have talked to the school principal, who has had a conversation then with the SRE teacher and the newsletters no longer name the children and they do not talk. But they were church newsletters for their parish, but they were talking about what had been happening in the school and naming the children. That is just one negative example, but we do know positive examples where we see that teachers say, the children are happy to go over there and they sing songs and they do Easter craft, or they learn some things over there that we do not do. Again, that comes back often to the individual teacher and the principal and their own view on SRE.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Some teachers support it because they get an hour off where they can do lesson prep. As opposed to it being good for the students, it is often seen as good for the teachers because they get an hour off to do lesson prep.

Mr HOPE: The Chair asked a question about whether we get push back on SRE. The answer to that is that we get a lot of our parents do not like SRE being during the day and a lot of parents do, and that is the problem. You can see from the questions that you people are asking around the table, there are a lot of different views on this. That is what makes it a hard issue and that is why the changes in SRE, because SRE goes back to the days when schools were run by religious organisations and it is just an issue that is really difficult because people have got such different views, and we as representatives of those people have got to try to—we do not advocate for one side over the other, irrespective of what our personal views are. That is what it is.

Mrs BROWNLEE: That is right. That is why with ethics we tried really hard when talking to the Parliament and getting the changes there, that it was not about removing SRE, because there was no need to have a fight or an argument with those who were passionate about it, but we could absolutely demonstrate, because we had done a survey then. This is 12 years ago, Chair, we did a survey but there has been nothing since.

The CHAIR: We need to move on. SRE is not actually mentioned in the Masters review.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I want to ask about reporting. I think, Mr Hope, you mentioned in your opening about the syllabus being incomprehensible for parents. I know from my own kids' reports that often what gets reported is a straight cut and paste of the syllabus outcomes, which to most parents make absolutely no sense. I suppose the other thing with the suggestion around untimed syllabuses that the whole question of reporting becomes much more complicated, and for parents who are trying to get a handle on where their kids are, how they are progressing—and that is a relative thing often and that is why there has been an inclination towards rankings, so the parents get a sense of where the kids are tracking positionally because that is all they have got in terms of understanding what is happening for that child in their education. Can you perhaps offer some comments around how we might be able to improve the reporting around a changed curriculum?

Mr HOPE: At Anzac Park Public School, which is a public school built, it was the first new public school built after we in northern Sydney rolled the department on whether we needed new schools or not—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Which is now full, by the way, so well done.

Mr HOPE: Yes, chockers.

CORRECTED

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Which suburb is that, sorry?

Mrs BROWNLEE: But it was not needed, just ask the dodgy demographics.

Mr HOPE: It is in Cammeray. It is 300 metres from Cammeray Public School and 500 metres from Neutral Bay, but both those schools were chock-a-block.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: And it is bursting at the seams. It is full already.

Mr HOPE: That is not chock-a-block. What they do is, there are four classrooms together with walls that you can put up, and there are two on each side facing each other, there are four teachers and 80 kids. What happens is they have got stuff on the wall that shows the progression of each child on specific tasks. It is a sort of a summary thing. But the parents can come in and look at it, or the teacher can report on it to the parents. So each child knows where they are, the four teachers know where they are, where each kid is. It is a really good system and it is easy to sort of follow. It might not be perfect, but it is better than the cut and paste that you were just talking about. It is one of the many issues that we have got to get around and make progress on.

Lindfield Learning Village does not have the same system but it has not been going as long and it is a pre-K to 12. It used to be Ku-ring-gai, or the University of Technology Sydney campus at Ku-ring-gai and we rescued that because of what we—we did not rescue it but the department did after we demonstrated they needed to spend \$6.2 billion on new schools. It is the same. It is this age-based—sorry, it is not age-based learning, it is based on what the kids can do. So you have to have a flexible arrangement with kids being able to go up to higher, older-age classes to do maths if they can, or to stay back if they have fallen behind. Now, theoretically there should not be any kids falling behind by the time they get to high school, they should be able to do whatever. But they are never going to be as good as the really highly academic kids.

This system, despite the fact that people say it is too hard to do, one of the reasons is that the structure of the department is such, the structure of the schools is such that you cannot, teachers are unwilling to break this—when they talk about differentiating, they are differentiating within one band, they are not differentiating over the full skills of the kids, which with modern technology and new teaching knowledge is able to be done. The idea of having team teaching is not very popular with teachers. What needs to happen is the department needs to have a strategy to make that happen. It is happening in some schools that are not part of the new—because all the new schools are built like this now and it is happening in some schools where they have got the old, brick classroom for the teacher out the front writing on the board and 48 kids, which is what happened in my day. Teachers can do it but I think one of the teachers who was here before said that it was hard to do because a lot of teachers just cannot do stuff.

Mrs BROWNLEE: They are not skilled and trained enough to differentiate. It does come back to the conversation about university and teacher training. It talks about the skills and aptitude. A pure ranking or a pure mark does not necessarily make a good teacher. Sometimes that just makes a good learner. You do have to love kids and want to make a difference in their lives. There are all the ethical, moral and values components to teaching, but they have got to have the skills and the ability and be well supported for the variety of children and the school that they end up in. That is where the system fails them. It really does. It is a big complex system. They are allowed their own accreditation, but they simply do not deliver and support teachers. You see it time and time again unfortunately.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: We run on this assumption that there is this whole bunch of normal kids and then there are a couple on either side that might have special learning needs or are particularly gifted. I recall doing an inquiry into kids with special needs. My take away from that inquiry—and I am interested in your reflection on it—is that that traditional concept of a bunch of normal kids, so to speak, and a couple on either side is totally wrong. It is a spectrum. It is a spectrum of academic capacity, learning needs and emotional needs, and teaching to the spectrum should be one of the core skills.

Mr HOPE: That is what twenty-first century learning is all about. It is about teaching and meeting kids in the spectrum. You see, if you go to the Department of Education's website or the Minister's website going way back, it says, "We put the student at the centre of all decision-making." Well, that's bull. What happens is the system is there and then the kids get considered after the system. What we want to see is that flipped so that each child can be met at their level of attainment. It does not mean to say that every single child is a discrete entity. A class might have, say, five different categories of kids. There are some that are left behind and cannot learn quickly. Up the top there might be some brainstorms that are five or six years ahead. Then there are a few—and then there is the majority in the middle. If you want to look at this diagram—has a diagram gone around?

The CHAIR: Yes, it has, with a quote from Einstein.

Mr HOPE: That is right.

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Mrs BROWNLEE: We love that.

Mr HOPE: We think that Einstein is a good person to say this.

The CHAIR: He is not a bad role model. We'll pay you that.

Mr HOPE: We do not think he did it. But, anyway, it points out that bit about not only academic learning but the way children learn. Everybody is different. If you are trying to judge them all on one standard, that is why you get these silly reports that parents cannot understand. They are being judged against some esoteric stuff that is in the syllabus. That is the top diagram. But the bottom diagram is—there are two normal distribution or bell curves there. The first curve is with twentieth century methods. What happens with a bell curve is most of the population is in the middle. Then you get bits on either side. The really smart kids are on the right hand side of that—if you are thinking about kids.

The kids that are slow learners are on the left side and the majority are in the middle. It is the same with teachers—their ability to get results for the kids varies widely. It is the same with schools. With the twentieth century methods there is too much gap between schools and between classrooms within schools. There is too much. It really is dependent on one single teacher. If you compare like schools, you should have virtually no gap, but there is a gap. With twenty-first century methods, we reckon that you can have a much steeper bell curve and that the variation between schools is much less. The risk is managed by having groups of teachers teaching. That is what is behind it. I would be happy to talk about this for—

The CHAIR: Where is the evidence for that? Where does the graph come from?

Mr HOPE: We made it up, but it is based on our reading of the situation, our interaction with parents and our own experiences. It is based on the data that is published. If you look at the HSC results, you see two like schools and you wonder why one school is number 50 and one is 273. We have also looked at NAPLAN results and we see similar things. The same thing pops up there. When I say that we made it up, we have based it on—

Mrs BROWNLEE: Factual data that is publicly available.

Mr HOPE: —that publicly available information. Again, we are not saying that those diagrams are a correct representation, but I think everybody that reads those results that are publicly available will say, "Well, why is that school doing better than the other?" Why does a parent want to send their kid to the school 10 kilometres away when there is one three kilometres away?

The CHAIR: It is a better school.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Yes. Why is there a better school and why should we allow it to be better school? And for the children who cannot make choices and should not make choices, it is a failure of the system.

The CHAIR: Why should we allow it be a better school?

Mr HOPE: No. Why should we allow it to be a worse school? What we are trying to do is say—we are trying to talk to the Board of Studies and the department and the teaching profession—

Mrs BROWNLEE: Or NESAs, as they are now.

Mr HOPE: —about these diagrams. They can come to us and say, "That's all bull", or not, but what we need is the profession to grab the changes needed and move forward. That has not been happening by and large. It has happened a bit. I mean there are some really good teachers out there.

Mrs BROWNLEE: There is awesome—great leaders, great principals, schools like Wadalba Community School where there is absolute student focus, vocation and training. Teachers who do not want to engage with the school's direction move on and drift to other schools and other places. So you do see best practice. You know it can be done. But we do not want to see a defensive system either and, while we are being a little bit historical in some of the information that we have brought to you, it is because we have been on Board of Studies curriculum review committees.

The CHAIR: That is our conclusion. There is best practice. It is just that it is all too rare.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I wanted to ask you about something that you raised in your submission. It might be slightly outside of our terms of reference, but some other submissions have also raised it. It is the question of the need for preschool when kids actually arrive at school and for quality universal access to preschool to allow kids to start learning once they actually do get school. Can you just explain a little bit more about why that is so important? Certainly, it is something that I am quite passionate about.

Mr HOPE: Our view is that the years between, say, two and five are the times when kids' minds are most open to new subjects. They learn very quickly. If they are learning a second language, then they learn it.

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They do not know it is a different language, but they understand the context. If the father is speaking Swahili and the mother is speaking upper Ukrainian, they will speak those languages to their parents and know that a table is something in one language and something in another. They just see it as a table. The same thing goes for maths. The kids that do not come from families that have got parents who are basically educating them during that period are behind. They come to school behind and frequently stay behind for the rest of their lives. It is very important that we have a good preschool system available not only for their learning but also for their social side of things. We are very much in support of that. We lobby for that.

Mrs BROWNLEE: That is right.

Mr HOPE: At the moment we have got 100 or so preschools in public schools. They are in areas of greatest need, but there are some 1,500 primary schools. There is a huge gap there and for parents who send—you probably understand this—their kids to day care, it is costing them a fortune. Therefore, a lot of them do not and particularly do not if they are disadvantaged. Yes, we are 120 per cent behind that. We think that is the most important part of a kid's life.

Mrs BROWNLEE: It is the foundation for everything. That's right. The mandatory hours and the access—we were part of the 21 new preschools for public schools initiative from the previous Government and—a long time now—a previous Premier. It is timely for the Parliament and for the Minister to look closely at preschools in public schools. There really is a need. Preschool to year 6 transition in other States in Australia is there. It is not in New South Wales. Only in the early years—they put not just literacy, maths and English, as they put forward to you in the department's submission, but they have totally ignored the really strong recommendations about language. We see that as a failure and a great disappointment.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What do you think of the ACT model in terms of a starting point?

Mrs BROWNLEE: I think it is a great starting point. I think we can learn a lot there. It is a shame that in New South Wales they have chosen to segregate themselves as often as possible when we know the importance of the early years and what they bring to school for foundation. That starting point and an equity point for all children starts in those early years.

The CHAIR: There is some co-location in New South Wales but it is very limited, is it not? It has never taken on the momentum that was promised.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Nowhere near the momentum, Chair—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Nor gone anywhere close to what they have in the ACT, where it is universal.

Mrs BROWNLEE: That is right.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Hope, do you have a view about the ACT model as a starting point?

Mr HOPE: Yes, I have, particularly because it is called the "ACT model", like there is some action—

Mrs BROWNLEE: They are actually acting or something!

Mr HOPE: We would support something like that. It is expensive, but for the economy it is cheaper to have—or less costly—if you have got an educated population.

Mrs BROWNLEE: That is right. If you do it in the early years you save money in the future for teachers' aid, for catch-up for children who are disengaged and not engaged in learning. The NSW Primary Principals Association talked about the wellbeing and welfare needs of some of the children in its care. If those children had a prior-to-school experience the government agencies capture them there, and there are referrals earlier and much better early intervention. Children who have got drug or alcohol fetal syndromes or family crisis or issues are much better identified. Having that prior-to-school experience helps those children, but it also helps those families. Then it also helps the other children in the class and teachers as they progress through their schooling years. It is a win all around. It is an investment, not a cost.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I am interested in the discussion about the Lindfield Learning Hub and also Anzac Park Public School. What sort of feedback are you getting from parents in terms of the learning experience from those schools?

Mr HOPE: At Lindfield there is—

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Which has only been operating a year, I guess, so it is a bit hard to—

Mr HOPE: Yes, a year and a bit. At Lindfield there are some parents who do not like that model, and they have taken their kids to some of the other local schools, but the parents who are there are very enthusiastic

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about it. It is one of those things where this is new-school; if a parent thinks old-school then they would prefer a more conventional school.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: The Lindfield Learning Hub has got a much wider catchment as well, does it not, in terms of where students can come from? It is not the sort of traditional model—

Mr HOPE: No, it has not, because the demand is so high.

Mrs BROWNLEE: That is right. They did try it, but the demand is high.

Mr HOPE: They have not fully opened yet. They have not got up to their 2,000 students, because if you start up a school like that that is experimental, basically you have got to take it slowly. There were also some building issues.

Mrs BROWNLEE: I think the risk is, though, that the department eventually will capture it back into the one-size-fits-all model—things like the Bradfield learning community, alternative schools, children who have got special needs who cannot be mainstreamed. I put a plea out again for behaviour schools. While people do not want segregation, we certainly need wherever possible to integrate, to have equity and have children go, as best as possible, to their local school to be part of their local community. Children who have anxiety or trauma need to be in a special setting. We need to make that investment in a special setting with specialised teachers. I think the lack of new behaviour schools and settings and the new multi-categorical classes that are being set up serve a purpose within a school, but children with really high needs cannot be mainstreamed. We really need to make sure that those children are identified early, that they are put in specialised settings in normalised school activities, but in a safe place with reduced class sizes and highly trained teachers. You can, and do, make a difference.

If you look at what is happening at North Gosford Learning Centre, if you look at Glenvale special school and some of the special schools that were put in place and the 85 per cent success rate—which is really high for children with massive trauma and violence issues who have been harming themselves and other children. That is a very big success rate. That investment there would really change what is happening in mainstream, and you would not hear continually the behaviour stories and issues that are coming to you, because those children would have specialised care in the right setting. Again, that is an investment in—with the billion-dollar budgets that New South Wales has year after year, it is really disappointing to see that there has been no investment and no change over the last six or eight years, 10 years.

Mr HOPE: We have only got about 10 seconds to go, but if you want to know more about Lindfield Learning Village or Anzac Park you can either get in touch with us or ask the department to—

Mrs BROWNLEE: Facilitate a visit.

The CHAIR: Yes, we might organise a visit up there.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: That is a very good idea. Let us put that on the agenda for early next year when schools—

Mr HOPE: I was on the panel that selected the principal for that school, and I know she is chock-a-block with work. There is one other thing I was going to say, quickly. With the preschool stuff, there is money that I believe is wasted by some kids who are academically advanced going to year 12. In past times, people left at fifth year in high school and went to university. If some of those kids—like 10 per cent or 15 per cent of them—went to uni after that period, there is money there to be saved to put into preschool. There you go.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Brownlee, that position that you have in terms of investment in additional special needs schools: You would accept that is a highly contested space, would you not?

Mrs BROWNLEE: I do, but I have spent the last 12 years with North Gosford Learning Centre from its inception and I have seen what has happened to the local partner schools and how they often return children back to schools. These children are not isolated forever from their mainstream schools. They get specialised intervention in a safe, controlled environment, and then they are transitioned back to school and normalised for their education. It is an amazing transition to see. I also see children on the streets. With the non-school-completers you look at the year 7 attendance rates, then you look at the year 12 completion rates. What happens to those children in the middle? Who is taking accountability and responsibility for them? That is where the department's failure sits. Attainment is only one part of it; attendance and completion really matter.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I one hundred per cent agree with you on attendance and completion, and being part of the socialising experience of school is really invaluable. But is it your position that if those special learning centres and schools are to continue that one of their goals should be, wherever possible, to transition children back into mainstream education as a primary focus?

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Mrs BROWNLEE: Absolutely.

Mr HOPE: Yes.

Mrs BROWNLEE: They also train up teachers in those home schools for when those students return, because your comments earlier about who has got mental health first-aid training, how much investment has been in that space to deal with those complex children—those are the critical points. At the end of the day, by law children must be at school. The system has an enormous budget and great community support and engagement. They need to use agencies and support. I restate our comments about a board. Strong health boards have made a big difference in New South Wales for community in health. We really should see education boards. That is not to say that we should have interference from parents in the teaching and learning component, but we need to have advisory boards, governance and accountability. The Auditor-General's reports are not enough, and reporting to Parliament often gets lost in the accountability for education.

Mr HOPE: The Minister is one person who comes and goes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: But if a board is going to add value, surely one of the things they could do is actually have a board that spreads across education, health, family and community services. Everything we hear—

Mrs BROWNLEE: Of course you could.

Mr HOPE: You could.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: —is that it is bringing those agencies together. Maybe you could take on notice whether or not if you are going to have a board structure, bringing in those key government agencies so we see kids as whole human beings, as opposed to being at school one day, being at hospital one day, being the subject of a Risk of Significant Harm report the next day.

The CHAIR: We will have to—

Mrs BROWNLEE: I think, Chair, that you are right about—

The CHAIR: If you can take that on notice, we are out of time. We are not strictly on the curriculum, although it is a very important point and we look forward to the answer. Mrs Brownlee and Mr Hope, thanks very much for your contribution today and your service to the cause of public education. We really appreciate it.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Thank you very much. It has been a pleasure.

Mr HOPE: We are happy to talk to MPs anytime.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Thank you to the Committee. We really value what you are doing.

The CHAIR: We look forward to organising that visit to either Anzac Park Public School or the Lindfield Learning Hub.

Mrs BROWNLEE: Absolutely. They would be very happy to have you.

The CHAIR: That would be very valuable indeed. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

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ANNABEL STRACHAN, Rural Schools Portfolio, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

DEBORAH NIELSEN, Early Childhood Portfolio, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short statement to the Committee?

Mrs NIELSEN: I would like to make an opening statement. ICPA NSW welcomes the chance to submit to the review because the Isolated Children's Parents' Association was developed over half a century ago and has developed the rigour to—with every confidence—identify the issues which prevent regional, remote and very remote students being able to equitably participate in the education process. ICPA also has developed regional networking to enable conversation to be balanced. Coupled with these attributes, ICPA, in most instances, offers pragmatic solutions which often are less costly than those the Government proposes. To an extent, a successful education experience for all of the students in Australia is more precarious than it should be, as Professor Geoff Masters opines. A full and robust education is, however, becoming a luxury rather than a right in some regional, remote and very remote areas.

These students are too highly represented in the lowest rankings. Professor Masters explained that there has been student disengagement with syllabus content and that has certainly been ICPA's findings over the last decades. ICPA NSW maintains that in outback Australia correction of government policies which bill the processes involved in the delivery of the curriculum are amongst the tools to stop this decline in standards. ICPA NSW has enjoyed healthy working relationships with all government parties over the last 50 years and there are multiple examples of social enhancement in the bush due to ICPA's advocacy having been enacted. It is rare for any Minister to have disagreed with the deputation wish list, however, increasingly the good intentions of authorised personnel have not been matched with actual action either in an expedient or effective manner.

The Hon. WES FANG: How have your experiences with curriculum changes in the past affected schools in regional and remote areas? Has that created an extra workload or has it been a relieving symptom for teachers and schools and families in those areas? How do you see the Masters' proposals affecting the schooling into the future?

Mrs NIELSEN: So, are you wishing us to comment on a particular part of Masters' proposal?

The Hon. WES FANG: I am more looking at how curriculum changes will affect rural and regional schools as opposed to metropolitan schools where there might be more resources in place to enact those curriculum changes and how it has worked in the past and how we can learn lessons from those past changes into the future with what Masters is looking at.

Mrs NIELSEN: I think the main aspect to be discussed in the rural and remote context is that with curriculum changes it will make no difference at all unless there are policy changes about the delivery of the curriculum. Then we drill down into the issues, which ICPA has been presenting over many years, to do with the delivery which is staffing and infrastructure and different methods of funding to incentivise quality education being delivered to our students.

The Hon. WES FANG: Coming back to the curriculum changes that we may see moving forward, how have you found past curriculum changes and the workload that it does place on teachers? Do you see a way in which it has either an adverse or a positive effect on the schooling systems in remote and rural New South Wales?

Mrs NIELSEN: To pick up on the changes that have happened, we believe—as Professor Masters does—that the curriculum is way too crowded to allow for consolidation of the basic skills required to absorb the amount of information a child must learn. So we are in total agreeance that teachers are struggling with that load, and the fact that they have to report upwardly to their directors etc. has negatively impacted rural and remote children.

Mrs STRACHAN: I think it is not so much the curriculum workload in small schools; it is more that administration workload for the TP1 schools. The administration workload is huge and that is the one thing that takes away from the teaching ability of the teacher.

The Hon. WES FANG: So, in your opinion, by decluttering the curriculum it is potentially going to be advantageous to regional and remote schools where they will be able to focus more on the core of the curriculum and provide a better teaching outcome for students. Is that where you would see this potentially moving forward?

Mrs STRACHAN: Yes, definitely, ICPA feel that way and our members do as well. I think the curriculum should be less cluttered and also outcomes, to be knowing exactly what the children need to know so

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that can be taught instead of so much other or many things that go along in a subject; just try and get to the core basis so that all students can have good outcomes, not just the students who get it at the time but also the students that are struggling; it gives them time to catch up and go along with what is going on.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Ladies, how are you?

Mrs NIELSEN: Well, thank you.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Whereabouts are you?

Mrs STRACHAN: We are sitting in a kitchen 120 kilometres south-west of Bourke.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Thank you very much for joining us. I wanted to ask you a couple of things. I note in your submission, as you mentioned earlier, that a lot of what you put to the Committee is in relation to how the teaching service, if you like, is delivered, be it problems with internet access, be it problems in relation to perhaps having tutors for students or, indeed, in relation to early learning and access to preschools and the like. I wanted to ask you about a comment you make in your submission about social or emotional development of students and the need to look at ensuring that there are some health facilities or health contact with students in isolated areas. Could you expand on that for the Committee please?

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes. I think the Country Women's Association have talked about this perhaps more at length than us, but that is quite obviously an issue for us, especially given the bad environmental effects that have existed for a lot of remote and very remote students. I think I could speak for the organisation by saying the very best tool to have in place would be a nurturing quality education facility for them to be able to depend on from the age of four to the end of at least stage four as in age 14. The only thing that is provided to us in terms of schooling and any wraparound wellbeing services is for children from five until 12.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Okay. I was wondering in relation particularly to counselling services, particularly as we have just gone through COVID-19 and there are, obviously, much more readily available in schools in metropolitan areas, what is your access to that type of service through perhaps a school situation?

Mrs STRACHAN: I am just talking on behalf of Louth Public School and a lot of the small schools, they are still on the old satellite network. Parents who have NBN are able to access the Royal Far West, but the schools cannot actually access it as the connection is so poor it just drops out all the time, so it does not work. So for students in our areas that do not have that facility in their home, which there are some, they are unable to access any counselling services or speech therapy or any of those things.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: How many schools are affected by that, without that proper access to the satellite service?

Mrs STRACHAN: There are probably about seven still, I think, affected. We did have something come out the other day that they are going to put fibre optic cabling to some of these schools. I am not sure how long that will take but in the meantime there is nothing other than the satellite, so that makes it really tricky to get onto, as I said, Royal Far West or any of those things. Another thing, the COVID, apart from not going to school, probably has not affected a lot of our areas greatly, as in we are all isolated anyway. But certainly droughts and different things like that are when parents cannot get their children assessed or have the money to take their children to be assessed. It would be great to have that facility so that they could be assessed online and then maybe know whether they need funding for more visits from whatever has been found out about them, and that could all be done online if we had the facility to do that.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Okay, so it is technology letting you down on that front, but you are right, we must do more on that front as a government. So hopefully we will see things come through not too distantly in the future. Thanks again for being available today. We appreciate your contribution.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Could I just ask one follow-up? Thank you for your attendance. You are probably the most skilled at this kind of remote evidence of any witnesses we have. You said there were, I think, seven schools that did not have reliable connection to Far West. Could you, on notice, provide us with a list of what those schools are?

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes, we certainly will—and there may be more; that is off the top of my head. But yes, I will let you know.

Mrs NIELSEN: [Inaudible]

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Sorry, we are not getting that last contribution, it has not come through.

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Mrs NIELSEN: I was just going to add something which is off-script, but the potential that the schools can provide in terms of wellbeing should there be the technological ability to do so. As I said earlier, the only children who have access to these primary schools that we are talking about are five-year-olds to 12-year-olds, so from kindy to year 6. Quite obviously, children exist on either side of those ages and currently here in the far west of New South Wales the State government schools are only catering to primary school students. So if you are older or younger and you have any issues with any wellbeing needs, then you are in another category altogether, as in there is nothing for you.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Do you think one of the answers to that is expanding the services provided out of those schools to cover the whole spectrum from three to graduation?

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes. I will not say "I", ICPA NSW has been advocating for the State government schools to be available from definitely preschool—three- and four-year-olds—to at least a 15-year-old, understanding that a 13- or a 14-year-old can hardly teach themselves distance education, which is what in some cases they are expected to do at either end of the preschool accommodation, of the primary accommodation which is provided.

Mrs STRACHAN: Can I just make a comment there just on the older students? Because of the government housing they do not have the facility to even have a computer, so they are just doing it by distance education; because they do not have NBN in their households they are unable to set up computers. If that computer was set up at the school they would be able to go to the school each day and participate in the distance education lesson and have someone supervise them, making sure they are doing their schooling.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Have it like a remote learning hub that could be accessed as needed.

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes.

Mrs STRACHAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Ms Houssos?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you very much, Chair, and thanks very much Mrs Nielsen and Mrs Strachan. I know you appeared before us previously and this video is certainly a much more engaging way than on a teleconference, but thank you, you gave us great evidence last time and this is fantastic as well. I want to congratulate you on your advocacy and your organisation's advocacy on behalf of some parents who can find it quite difficult to have a voice in the education system, so thanks for that. I want to ask you about this question of tutors and the availability of tutors, which you kind of touch on in your submission and you say that at stage four and stage five there is often not the appropriate tutors that are available. Would that be something that could be overcome by these remote learning hubs that you are talking about?

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes.

Mrs STRACHAN: Yes.

Mrs NIELSEN: We have quite a good model in our head and in writing for how they would work.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Will you explain first of all the problem of how that would solve the issue?

Mrs NIELSEN: The problem is the dual enrolment. If you are enrolled at Louth public school or Weilromingle Public School you are a primary school student only. So you have a teacher and that is available to you and what the Government is giving you. That is what our taxes are paying for all children. However, if you are a four-year-old, a three-year-old or a 12-year-old finished primary school you various choices. Your parents will send you to a boarding school which is a cost although in some cases, there is criteria groups, that is not too much of a cost but it is an emotional burden, very often, for those children who are the vulnerable ones to leave their families at 12. It is always going to be a long way away. It is going to be more than a day's drive away and that we have found, has not been a successful thing for a 12-year-old to go away and board with some students.

Those students come home and then they have to enrol in distance education. If they are a student whose parents are not literate and they live in an over-crowded house they actually do not even have a table to do their work on. It is my experience personally that the level that they are expected to achieve only is to be engaged. So they are not being asked to participate or excel. If they are engaged, well that is sort of good enough because pragmatically there is no other solution. So what ICPA NSW would like to see is that beautiful big school in north western areas has an under-used extra building which is a beautiful building, thank you to Julia Gillard, for Building the Education Revolution. We would like to see those students being taught distance education from Broken Hill or Charleville or Dubbo who have high school capacity and the lessons are coming to the school—

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the physical packs are coming to the school. The child has to keep going to the school but that there is a tutor paid to deliver the lessons, or to make sure that the program is completed successfully and perhaps even excelled in.

In order for that to happen the problem is, which you very sensibly asked about, is that the child would have to be more than two entities. He or she would physically be at the primary school but he or she would be enrolled at the education centre. That seems to be the glitch. What ICPA NSW very much would like to see that that glitch is ironed out. We feel that the capacity to employ tutors into those schools is not as impossible as employing a tutor into their home which would not work anyway. Have you understood what I am suggesting?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Absolutely. This is something that a lot of parents have lived this experienced through COVID.

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: And from experience are probably much more receptive and understanding of the challenges of distance. I have got to say I certainly take my hat off to any parent who is permanently distance educating their child. That is an amazing sacrifice and an incredible thing for them to be doing but there are some practical ways that we can be help. If there is any more information around our models or whatever that you would like to provide us on notice, please feel free with that. I just want to move on to one other question which was around pre-school. I asked our previous witnesses about this as well because they brought it up in their submission.

There are real and clear physical and financial barriers to children in remote and rural New South Wales accessing pre-school education. We all accept the value of it and we understand why it is so important, and perhaps even more so important in remote areas. Can you just outline for us what are the things that the Government can do to give kids the very best pre-school education and, accepting that it might not be in our terms of reference but if kids start learning when they start kindergarten that early learning is so important.

Mrs STRACHAN: Firstly ICPA NSW is really wanting the School Drive Subsidy [SDS] for pre-school parents. Some parents out here are travelling 100 kilometres one trip just to get there and back again. SDS would make a huge difference to the pre-school students being able to travel to a small school for their pre-school. The other thing is the priority group for 3-year-olds. Rural and remote are not part of that so instead of a parent having to travel maybe 400 kilometres a week to get their 600 hours in, if they were a part of that priority group they could do it over the two years and maybe only travel the 100 kilometres in, and 100 kilometres back in a week. So if they were part of that group, and SDS was available to pre-schoolers it would make a huge difference for that pre-schooling to be able to happen.

Mrs NIELSEN: The other issue which is a long-fought battle that we are having, ever since the early childhood industry was formed actually is actually getting a pre-school. Currently in the Far West of New South Wales, there is only one at Weilmoringle and one now at Louth and one may be finally opened in Wanaaring. Those schools have been opened as part our advocacy where we identified 10 schools that needed to have a pre-school as part of them. So children out here do pre-school, as our children did, us teaching them at home which is fine because we were able to do that. But there are obviously a lot of children for whom that is not a possibility so they literally do not have a pre-school. They either have too far to travel or the parents are not literate and they are not going to be able to deliver it to them. There had been a problem with the amount of pre-school distance education places although right now they have a surplus, so that is good, that is not an issue.

What we are asking, what we have asked from this Government is to establish pre-schools in those 10 places. We asked in 2014 when it was still Leslie Williams and now, as I have just explained, we have 2½ up and going. But the process has been very lengthy and we feel extremely inefficiently done. The model which they have which is not worrying us, but it is a very expensive model, that they are finally setting this up and they, of course, do have to adhere to the National Quality Framework Guidelines so that has probably been why. But if you can imagine if a site is identified as being okay then it maybe it has to have some alterations done to it and you have to get three quotes from tradesmen to come out and quote.

It is a long time lag and the employing of the trained teacher who we cannot get to come and live and the remote village and be the teacher there so that teacher is somewhere else and the hub-and-spoke arrangement is that a person doing Early Childhood Certificate III delivers the program. It is hard to get that staff because that staff has to travel currently without any help with their travel. While you might be a trained person you are not going to travel 200 kilometres a day for three days a week because you are not paid enough and early childhood teachers, as you would be aware, are not paid what primary school teachers are paid. They are the sort of things that need to be ironed out.

The last and final one is that the Department of Education has done on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia [ARIA] map a reckoning of the places that they believe need the schools and ICPA NSW feels

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that because of our very extensive networking we probably have a better grip on where the schools will work because they have got to be able to be pop-up and pop-down. One year there might be four 4-year-olds and the next year there might be six 3-year-olds or 4-year-olds and the next year there might not be any. There has to be a workable model that is not going to change too much that they can just close down and open up

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Will you provide the Committee on notice the 10 schools that you identified since 2014 for pre-schools?

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes, in 2014 we identified Weilmoringle, Wanaaring Vale, Marra Creek, Ferndale, Pooncarie, Clare, White Cliffs, Tibooburra, and Palinyewah, down near Wentworth. I have certainly got it in my notes, I can send it to you.

Mrs NIELSEN: I certainly have it in my notes. I could send it to you.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Terrific.

Mrs NIELSEN: How that was formed was by a process of speaking to the teachers who were in those schools and who were receiving the kids from the kindy who had not done preschool, and the projections of the children who were around at that time. I think we did another one in '16 and it was still fairly stable, but because of the ARIA mapping sometimes they say, "You are close enough to a large centre to go in," but, you see, they are not considering that some people are beyond the remote centre. Their children might be at school at that remote centre, so they are not going to come to the school, drop their school-aged children and go on to a bigger centre.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: And then do another 200-kilometre drive to the other centre.

Mrs NIELSEN: Yes. It is all quite complicated, but we do have—

Mrs STRACHAN: Just as an example of the ARIA mapping, at the moment Hungerford has been placed on that list and Hungerford is actually in Queensland. It is totally on the border, but you actually have to go through the dog fence, open a gate and go into Queensland to get to Hungerford.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: That has been kind of tricky.

Mrs STRACHAN: Sorry?

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: That has been tricky to do of late.

Mrs STRACHAN: Yes. I am sure you will not be allowed to go into Queensland and set one up anyway, but that is the sort of thing the ARIA mapping is picking up on. It is right on the border, but you actually have to go through it.

Mrs NIELSEN: While Hungerford is very remote—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: You will have to lean into the microphone, Mrs Nielsen.

The CHAIR: I think it is breaking up a bit.

Mrs STRACHAN: Sorry.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: That is better.

Mrs STRACHAN: While Hungerford is very remote, and I can see that it would have been chosen, Mrs Strachan and I are in the privileged position of knowing everyone who is in Hungerford, which is not many people, and there is no-one under 20 years old.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Could I just ask quickly about the School Drive Subsidy?

Mrs STRACHAN: Yes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: A preschool payment without a School Drive Subsidy is a pretty hollow offering for many parents, I assume. If you are not being paid for the 200-kilometre-round drive, then the preschool subsidy is hardly going to cover the cost, is it?

Mrs STRACHAN: No. Certainly in the drought there were many families who had to choose not to take their children to preschool because it was just a cost they could not wear.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I understand. Thanks.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I have one question.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Sorry, I have one final question. You have given us a list of 10 preschools you have identified. Can you tell us on notice where the Government has indicated that it will do

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that? I know that you provided that to our last inquiry, so it would be useful to us to have that updated list. That would be very helpful.

Mrs STRACHAN: Not a problem. We can do that.

Mrs NIELSEN: The Government did provide one town very near here that we did not have, which was Ivanhoe.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: We heard earlier today from both the Association of Catholic School Principals and also the Primary Principals' Association about the difficulties in terms of resourcing, particularly when it comes to things like mental health and children who are falling behind. Of course, from your situation there would be immense problems when it comes to resourcing for some of those interventions. What do you think can be done to better help rural, regional and isolated students to be able to access some of those intervention programs?

Mrs STRACHAN: I think that what happens in our small towns is that, particularly for counselling and things like that, they fly in and fly out, so they are not the same people every time they come. That is really a disadvantage. My idea would be that it would be technology and maybe you could access that same person, because if you are telling someone your problem and you have to repeat day one every time someone new comes, it is very distressing. To be able to access that by technology and to have the same person at the other end, you can move forward and you can let them know what is really happening. At the moment there are people who come in to Bourke, but there could be a different person every week or every fortnight.

If we could use the technology that is provided—when we get it—that would be a really big plus for small and remote areas. It also saves a massive amount of travel. Our closest centre for speech pathology and occupational therapy would be Dubbo or probably further afield. It takes seven hours in a car just to get there. At the moment what would be great, and it has happened during COVID, though we are not sure how long it will extend, is if any school—Royal Far West School has been able to use Medicare, but that has not always been the case. It would be great if those services were allowed to be used through Medicare as well, which would really save on costs either for the school, whose parents cannot afford it, or for parents.

The CHAIR: Mrs Strachan and Mrs Nielsen, we really appreciate your contribution. Could I just ask about the excellent submission towards the end at point 5 on the final page? Have you engaged with the Minister about those recommendations and was any progress forthcoming?

Mrs NIELSEN: This is where we talk about the regional director's job description?

The CHAIR: The regional director's job description and the regional area relief teacher.

Mrs STRACHAN: Yes, we do it constantly.

The CHAIR: And how do you go?

Mrs STRACHAN: Well, they certainly take it on board, but I think what needs to happen is a policy so that it happens. Every time there is somebody new in the director's position, which happens often, you are back to square one. That has been our frustration. People honestly understand it, but it needs to be set in concrete so that the next person who comes along—I mean, they are not difficult things to do, but it needs to be a policy that everyone knows they have to do, because our experience is you get a new director and you are back to square one.

Mrs NIELSEN: And the point is what we had put in place in 2011, which is what Mrs Strachan was speaking about. We had an annual meeting with the directors at the beginning of the year. We have our State conference in March, and traditionally by March everyone is pulling their hair out, there are lots of motions and a little bit of anger, which probably could have been solved if the directors—who have not even heard of us in January and March—but if we could already have a working relationship at the beginning of their tenure so that they know the problems they are probably going to be facing.

The CHAIR: We are out of time. We will have to end. Can I just say that the Committee loves chatting with you and very much admires your dedication to the cause.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Hear, hear.

The CHAIR: We come across a lot of interest groups or advocates in the education space, but none more dedicated to a worthwhile cause than you and your organisation. Thank you for your time today and thank you for your submission. You have supporters here and we will do our best to back you in.

Mrs STRACHAN: Thank you very much.

Mrs NIELSEN: Thank you. That is lovely to hear.

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The CHAIR: I will adjourn the meeting.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

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MARTIN GRAHAM, Acting Deputy Secretary, Education and Skills Reform, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

JANE SIMMONS, Acting Deputy Secretary, Learning Improvement, Department Of Education, sworn and examined

PAUL MARTIN, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Education Standards Authority, affirmed and examined

ANDREA FROST, Director, NSW Curriculum Reform Taskforce, NSW Education Standards Authority, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you to the representatives of the Government here today. Thank you for your time on this important matter. We have had a very good discussion through the rest of the hearing today. As you know, this Committee takes these big issues seriously so we welcome and appreciate your contribution this afternoon for a session that runs for an hour and a quarter. Do you wish to make opening statements to the Committee?

Mr MARTIN: I will make an opening statement.

The CHAIR: You are leading it off?

Mr MARTIN: Yes, that covers everybody, I think.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr MARTIN: My name is Paul Martin and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the NSW Education Standards Authority or NESA. I am joined today by Andrea Frost, Director of the NSW Curriculum Review Taskforce at NESA and by Martin Graham and Jane Simmons. NESA is an independent statutory authority within the Education cluster and is a portfolio responsibility of the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning. NESA brings together all four educational pillars—teacher quality, school standards, curriculum and assessment—under the umbrella of a single education authority. These are the drivers for improving student outcomes in partnership with schools and school sectors, teachers, parents and other community stakeholders. As an independent authority acting across the New South Wales school sectors NESA provides support to government and non-government schools as they go about the work of lifting student achievement through their teaching and learning programs.

In 2018 the New South Wales Government announced that it would undertake a review of the New South Wales school curriculum. Professor Geoff Masters, CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research, led this independent review, supported by a secretariat within the NESA agency. The review has been informed by extensive consultation with thousands of teachers, parents and education experts from around the State along with detailed examination of curriculum in the world's top-performing education systems. In late 2018 Professor Masters released an interim report which was subject to further extensive consultation across New South Wales. In June 2020 the New South Wales Government announced its response to the NSW Curriculum Review final report. The NSW Curriculum Review charts a course to rework what is taught in New South Wales schools and to equip every student for success both at school and beyond.

The NESA board, which is comprised of the leaders of all New South Wales government and non-government education systems, will oversee the rewriting of the curriculum to meet high community expectations. NESA will support the NESA board to implement the curriculum reform program in line with the New South Wales Government's response to Professor Masters' review. The New South Wales Government has set an ambitious time frame for reform. A new English and mathematics curriculum for kindergarten to year 2 students will be introduced by 2022. By 2024 the new curriculum will be available across all years. I am joined today, as I said, by Jane Simmons and Martin Graham from the Department of Education. They will answer questions relating to the department and the operation of government schooling. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. If I could start the questioning on a point that John Hattie and others have made that it is not necessarily the case that curriculum reform leads to improved academic results because of the reality that, no matter what is in the syllabus, teachers—particularly in the system in New South Wales where we have had Local Schools, Local Decisions and lots of school-based flexibility—can race off and pretty well use their own learning materials, their own textbooks. Nothing is mandated, seemingly, in New South Wales to say, "Well, here is the syllabus and here are the materials for teaching it." Is that not an immediate problem in the way this is unfolding?

I have in my office a folder that is about 20 centimetres high and growing all the time. You have seen some of the publicity about the complaints of parents as to some of the rubbish that is taught in New South Wales

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schools, just off the radar, sexually inappropriate material. My own favourite is that in year 8 English at Pennant Hills High School they have a stimulus item on colonisation and Stolen Generations to learn the meaning of the word "devastating", one word that you could take a minute to look up in the dictionary. If teachers have that flexibility, unless there are some boundaries around this we are not necessarily going to reverse the slide in academic results, are we?

Mr MARTIN: So if I take the question as "Is the syllabuses or the curriculum in and of itself enough to ensure that all students are well educated and with the most appropriate pedagogy?" no, it is not—of course not. But it is necessary for the right teaching, the appropriate teaching and the high-quality teaching that we need to occur. We cannot let the syllabuses as they currently stand—and they have for a while—get in the way of quality teaching by having too much material or having material that less experienced teachers are unsure of how to prioritise and identify. So my answer to your question is that the syllabuses are an important plank, almost a foundation stone, in improving student learning outcomes but of themselves, no, because the teachers need to interpret, program and apply syllabuses in classrooms. So the instructional models that they use are necessary but they need to be based on the appropriate sequencing of knowledge and content in a syllabus document.

The CHAIR: That leads to a point that Fiona Mueller, ex-ACARA, made this morning in the hearing. Will the curriculum be accompanied by alignment to certain textbooks, certain learning materials, teaching methods and assessment methods? Does this reform stand in its own right or will there be alignment to all the other things that are necessary to make sure that curriculum reform in tandem with other reforms improves academic results?

Mr MARTIN: I think Professor Masters refers to the necessity for alignment. It is also professional learning built in there. There are 160,000 teachers across three sectors. If you have all of the syllabuses redone, resequenced and made new by 2024 then there is a significant professional learning requirement that the systems and the sectors are responsible for. In terms of assessment, NESA provides significant advice on the best way to assess students. I think we have enormous assessment expertise. We run the HSC. We deliver NAPLAN for ACARA. We have psychometricians et cetera, et cetera.

We will be accompanying the delivery of the syllabus documents this time around with as much advice as we can give to school system and sectors about appropriate assessment and programming for teachers. As far as textbooks go, if you have a look at some of the work produced by Ben Jensen from Grattan in some of the lower performing jurisdictions they mandate a textbook. We would not assume that that is required in New South Wales but if the syllabuses are, as I said, full of the appropriate content and appropriately sequenced then the professional learning that is provided should do the work of a textbook because each teacher has the expertise rather than it sitting in an external piece of writing.

The CHAIR: But why do we not mandate textbooks and learning materials in the name of alignment, because the Jensen research pointing to Johns Hopkins University research and those examples out of Louisiana, for instance, do point to the fact that the right materials naturally bump up academic results whereas the wrong materials will take you in the other direction. Some of the stuff that is sent in to my office under the name of a stimulus or a comprehension item in English—it just beggars belief that this stuff is out there in the school system. Is it not time to mandate so we actually have a focus on the right materials getting the improved results?

Mr MARTIN: I think that the thrust of Professor Masters' review—and I would have to say other States and Territories in Australia and most jurisdictions in the world attempt to balance a textbook, often in maths, for example, with teacher expertise. If a student is unable to do work that comes out of a textbook the teacher needs to be able to adapt, model and appropriately deliver something that is not just reliant on a set of exercises that sit separate from their own intellectual capital. So there is a balance there but I would imagine that a professional teacher should be able to do the right thing with the syllabuses.

The CHAIR: What do you say to all the teachers who are not doing the right thing? Is it your opinion that there should be a mandating of these learning materials to go with the new syllabus?

Mr MARTIN: In terms of making sure that teachers are ready to teach the syllabuses when they appear there should be guidance provided in terms of the sorts of appropriate teaching methodologies that work best. I think that the department and the independent and Catholic sectors will do that.

The CHAIR: But that guidance is there now, is it not? You have to take this seriously. We have the fastest falling academic results in the world. That does not happen by accident. It did not drop from the sky one day. There are chronic structural problems out there. Is it not time to get serious about fixing them?

Mr MARTIN: The remit of this process is the syllabus documents themselves. The training of teachers, the professional learning and the appropriate textbooks are not part of the remit of Professor Masters' review. Our job is relatively straightforward. It is a complex job and it has a tight timeline, but our job is to make sure that the

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syllabuses give the best platform to teachers to teach. The rest of it—whether the points you are making are correct or are from the experience of people who have written to you—are a separate set of arguments. What we are trying to do is make sure English and maths, and then the other KLAs, have the right sequences of information in the right order so that the teachers who are teaching them know what to do next. They know what to do tomorrow and they know where the students are situated. All those other things that you have raised are relevant but they are separate from the gist and the argument Professor Masters put forward.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I will direct this question to Mr Martin. This curriculum review has been, certainly from the Government's perspective, touted as the solution. It is the Government's big initiative in terms of turning around school results. In 2017 NESA received the report for student achievement in New South Wales, a review of data from selected large-scale assessments. It was the investigation that the Minister had commissioned to try to get some answers about why the school performance was declining and curriculum review was not actually a major proposal in the recommendations. My first question is why is it that we are putting all of our chips on curriculum review when your own commissioned research seems to suggest that actually one of the major problems is geographic inequity in terms of our school system?

Mr MARTIN: I would respond in a way similar to the way in which I responded to Mr Latham, which is that though it may not answer every question in relation to falling standards or student performance, it is a necessary precondition for improvement to make sure that we have a solid, agreed set of syllabuses that teachers can teach from, that parents understand and that students are assessed against. Issues of geographic isolation or socio-economic status or Aboriginality are all issues that are pertinent to performance of students in New South Wales but not necessarily in the remit a curriculum review. Our syllabuses need to be built from the ground up, mostly in relation to simplifying and sequencing more appropriately.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Can I ask about the timetable for implementation? Certainly, Masters is proposing a significant structural change to the syllabus and the Government appears to have hedged its bets on that, in particular the critical recommendation 3.1 about untimed syllabuses. The Government appears to not give a conclusive answer about whether it is going to support that proposal. Given that you have already said that you will have a truncated process, when will we get an answer about whether the untimed syllabuses proposal is going to be adopted by the Government or not?

Mr MARTIN: So, the Government in their response to Professor Masters' report supported, in principle, the untimed syllabuses and asked for additional advice from the NESA board. The steering committee and the various curriculum committees that are doing the work at the moment will report back to the board before the end of this year in relation to the untimed syllabus proposal. The question mark I would argue is that the Government supported the thrust of Professor Masters' proposals that students not be left behind as they progress through schooling; therefore, that there needs to be some attention paid to their ongoing performance before you move to the next work.

That is a reasonably appropriate analysis. His recommendation of untimed syllabuses is a recommendation that requires further analysis. Obviously, the Government feels that that is the case and the board will look at it. It is a question of how well you can implement something so wide-ranging, whether teachers are in a position now to move students across an untimed syllabus process. For example, if they have a range of primary school students with different abilities across all of the KLAs or the subjects. What we will be doing is providing some advice from the board up to the Government about that particular proposal in line with the Government's response.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Is there further research informing that advice?

Mr MARTIN: Yes. We have some work happening with Ben Jensen from Learning First. He was previously at the Grattan Institute. That work will come to us and that will be part of the board's deliberations.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: And what about the cost in terms of the implementation of the new syllabus? We heard from the Primary Principals' Association today that there will be a significant investment of time and effort on the part of staff. What is required is effectively additional staff time to be able to make the transition to a new syllabus. How much is it going to cost to transition and will there be additional staff resources provided to make sure that the transition to the new syllabus arrangements will be smooth?

Mr MARTIN: I will refer that to my colleagues in the department as one of the sectors that will be putting syllabuses in place, but I will say that the cost for NESA is in producing new syllabuses, in having them available in terms of the Government's timetable, and then having them delivered in such a way that teachers are able to teach them reasonably efficiently. We are not adding content; we are reducing content. Hopefully, what we are doing is making the existing work of teachers more straightforward and streamlined. I take the point that

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systems and sectors will be supporting teachers in terms of the professional learning to deliver the syllabuses in a timeframe that is a lot longer than our four years for writing and producing the syllabuses.

Ms SIMMONS: The department is working with NESA around ensuring that we are sequenced in terms of supporting our system to be able to implement a new curriculum. So, what we are doing is we have a number of people across the system that have various expertise surrounding implementing curriculum. We have recalibrated our current resources to ensure that they are focused on supporting schools to deliver new curriculum from 2022. We are at the moment planning 2021 professional learning and what that will look like to support the system in the implementation of new syllabus from 2022, obviously focusing in 2021 for K-2 English and maths in primary school. That is our sequencing and our focus.

We are also undertaking some work where we are going to be working with principals and schools right across the New South Wales Department of Education and supporting them in designing and developing new programming to support syllabus, also to assist them with assessment that will go with that. That will be part of our responsibility. We are also working with them to assist them to work out how can we support them in differentiation of learning and also ensuring that we support them around reducing administration burden on schools. That is our plan for 2021. We are in the process of finalising that and we will have that finalised by the end of this year. That will be one of our prime focuses around professional learning for 2021 for New South Wales schools.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Teacher workload is obviously an issue across the sector. Have you done any assessment in terms of how much it is going to add to teacher workload given that they are going to have to reprogram, and develop new materials and resources? That is all additional work for teachers, is it not?

Ms SIMMONS: Well, what we have done is we have had a look at what teachers are doing above and beyond in terms of extra workload and we are looking at how we can reduce that in terms of administration burden. As I said, we will support schools. There are staff development days that schools have that they can utilise to help with the designing and preparation for a new syllabus. We are also looking at, as a system, how we can learn from our recent COVID experience where we did design professional learning. We provided samples and materials in an online forum so that the teachers could access that readily to support them in designing and implementing teaching and learning programs. That is the way that we will be supporting our system. Of course, whether it will be professional learning for groups of people or online on-demand professional learning, we are looking at different ways that we will be able to support the system as much as we can so that it does not impact on the time.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: But it must impact upon their time. I cannot see how it would not impact upon their time. If teachers have to learn to teach a whole new curriculum and they still have all of their other work to do—classroom preparation, professional development—how could it not impact upon teachers' time?

Mr MARTIN: Some of the issues that you have raised hopefully will be addressed by the clarity and the simplification and the streamlining of the syllabus documents themselves. When you say learning a whole new curriculum, it will still be the K-2 maths and the K-2 English. It will still be broadly the same syllabuses in terms of content, but a hell of a lot less dot points and dash points and additional and extraneous material. The idea is that it will give teachers an opportunity to focus better. You are right; there will be some demands on teachers as you introduce new syllabus material, but it is not as if they are starting from scratch.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Simmons, you are probably more at the implementation level. Is there something fundamentally wrong in my analysis, and the analysis of the Hon. Anthony D'Adam, that there will inevitably be a whole lot of additional work that teachers will have to do?

The Hon. WES FANG: What is the alternative?

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Can we start at that point? Do we agree on that as a starting point?

Ms SIMMONS: I am not going to agree or disagree. The department's position will be that we are supporting the system to implement a new curriculum. We will work with teachers to support them to do that. Teachers do not design a program and then leave it for five years or 10 years. They are constantly upgrading their programming and constantly upgrading their materials for teaching and learning. We will expect they will continually work through the syllabus. Syllabuses are updated on a reasonably regular basis.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: The maths syllabus was only just done, was it not?

Ms SIMMONS: Let me finish. It is not as if we are asking them to do something completely new. As Mr Martin has just said, yes, it is a new syllabus. It is not asking them to have additional material in the syllabus. Our understanding is it is going to be a deeper look at the syllabus. In actual fact, a lot of information and work that they are already aware of is a case of re-scoping what that looks like in terms of implementation, and

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12 months' lead-in time with the system supporting to do that. We have got a number of staff across the State that support schools in the implementation of curriculum.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I will be quite frank. I understand that there are supports in place, if I understand that answer. But I find it frustrating that we cannot acknowledge the basic, simple truth that with a new curriculum there is inevitably additional workload for teachers. If we cannot even have that as a starting point, I suppose I will just reserve my right to sit this out.

The CHAIR: You are frustrated.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I will just sit it out. If we cannot even have that as a starting point, what is the point of this discussion?

The CHAIR: There is an obvious opportunity cost, is there not, in the fact that teachers have to do this extra work to be on top of the new syllabuses?

The Hon. WES FANG: To be fair—

The CHAIR: I am asking a question. Ms Simmons, is that not self-evident?

Ms SIMMONS: We are constantly asking teachers to review what they teach in their teaching and learnings.

The CHAIR: That is not an answer, is it? I remind you that you are under oath.

Ms SIMMONS: I am giving you an answer.

The CHAIR: There is a straightforward proposition from three Committee members that there is an obvious opportunity cost and extra workload for teachers in implementing a new curriculum. Mr David Shoebridge is right. We do not often agree on much, but he is certainly right in saying it is a straightforward proposition that should be acknowledged by the witnesses.

Ms SIMMONS: The department's position is that there will be—obviously, there is expectation that teachers are constantly reviewing their teaching and learning.

The CHAIR: Is that honestly your answer?

Ms SIMMONS: Yes, of course there is going to be extra work that teachers have to do. But they are constantly doing—it is not as if that has not happened before. We are constantly needing to review our teaching and learning programs. That is an expectation that we undertake. The system will be supporting teachers to do that. As I said up front, we are doing everything we can to ensure that we reduce the workload here and administration burden here to allow time to assist them to be able to plan and implement a new curriculum in 2022.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Can I ask one question on the implementation? Is there an implementation plan?

Ms SIMMONS: For the department?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Yes.

Ms SIMMONS: We are in the process of finalising our time frame for the implementation of professional learning for 2021. Our time line is contingent on the timing in terms of when the draft syllabus is going to be available for us, and that is contingent on the work that NESA is doing. We are working alongside our colleagues in NESA.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: You are talking about professional learning. Is there an implementation for putting in place the new syllabus?

Mr MARTIN: Yes, we were given a reasonably direct set of time lines from the Government's response to the Masters review that says 2022 English and maths K to 2 and then another set of sequences, including senior secondary.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Could that plan be produced to the Committee?

Mr MARTIN: It is in the Government's response, but yes, of course.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: But a time line is different to a plan. I could come up with a time line but that would not explain to me how it is going to happen. Is it a time line or a plan?

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Mr MARTIN: NESA's responsibility is to produce the syllabus documents in the time line in the order asked of us or requested of us by Government, and then the implementation processes by individual schools and by sectors is a matter of their own processes and time lines.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I am talking about an implementation plan for developing the new syllabus arrangements. That is NESA's work plan.

Mr MARTIN: Yes, of course we have that and I am happy to provide it to you.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Untimed learning progressions is something that the Government has accepted in principle. We heard this morning, though, that it may already be in practice at Lindfield Learning Village and at the Anzac Park Public School. Will that be informing the work of NESA or of the department in rolling out the new curriculum?

Mr MARTIN: We will use the research that I already mentioned, which is Ben Jensen's research, plus practical examples of where similar reforms have been rolled out. I think Wales has a reform that is similar, but it is a bit too early to pull in results from that. I will just differentiate slightly between learning progressions and untimed syllabuses. Learning progressions, as they currently exist, are a scope and sequence of understanding in primarily the maths and the English sphere—English literacy and numeracy—and they go from kindergarten to year 10 and the set of sequences that are required before you can learn consequent or subsequent knowledge. Untimed syllabuses, as they are recommended in Professor Masters' review, are units that a student would have to complete before they moved onto the next unit, irrespective of the age or year level they were in. The manner by which progressions may be a useful addition to what Professor Masters has recommended will be discussed by the board. But at this stage we are doing the research to provide additional advice because we have been asked to by government. We will make sure that we bring anything we need to in from schools you mentioned.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: When are you planning on making that recommendation around the untimed learning progressions?

Mr MARTIN: Because we are trying to write syllabuses that go right through from kindergarten to year 10 over a four-year period, some of the structural and architectural issues need to be settled reasonably quickly. Untimed syllabus would fall into that category, so we would need to provide appropriate advice to government before the end of this year.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: This might seem like a simple question, but we have heard evidence today, and also from yourselves, that syllabuses are constantly being updated. How will this be different? How will it be different for parents, for students and for teachers? How will it actually address the declining education standards in New South Wales?

Mr MARTIN: I need to correct a comment I just made. I said before the end of the year. Apparently, in terms of our provision of advice to the Government in relation to untimed syllabuses, it is March. It will be discussed before the end of the year, at the very next board meeting, but we will be providing advice up early next year. My apologies. In terms of the second question you asked—how do these proposals improve student learning outcomes and how does it work for teachers, students and parents—our current syllabuses have accretions of years of additions and they lack a level of clarity of what is essential and sequential learning.

We have a lot of dot points and dash points in relation to, say literacy and numeracy, or even in history or math in the other content areas. An inexperienced teacher is less able to navigate and chart their path through those essential prerequisites. We need to provide them with advice via the syllabuses then make their job easier. This is a not negotiable piece of information for a student and this is a not negotiable way of teaching, in some respects for some parts of the syllabuses. This should also, hopefully if it is written in the plain language, it has to be to some degree technical because it is a technical document for teachers, but it should be able to be understood by parents as well.

The idea behind the reform proposals is that a student who is falling behind does not continue to fall behind as they progress through the year levels of school, but that their decline is observed, that through proper assessment methodologies they can see where the students are up to and that that student gets additional and increasing attention, and that might and should include parental involvement. We have a tail. People have mentioned the issues of NAPLAN. We have an increasing number of students who are at lower bands. We need to make sure that is addressed before they progress through schooling so that we do not have a minimum standard that kicks in at year 11 and year 12, but in fact that most students meet it in a highly educated, civilised, culturally sophisticated place like Australia, that they reach those achievement levels much earlier. It needs to be plain speaking, the syllabuses need to be understood by teachers and the sequences need to be right. That means taking a lot of content out.

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The CHAIR: We asked this of Professor Masters and he did not have a clear plan in mind, what is the scenario for a student going into year 11, at the beginning of their HSC process, who is still at year 5 or year 6 literacy level?

Mr MARTIN: There are two things I would say. NESA produces the syllabuses, so the manner in which the teaching occurs, the quality of the teaching, the appropriate supports for students are the responsibility of the systems and the sectors in the schools and the teachers. There is a part of the answer that I cannot give, but if Professor Masters proposals are correct, and I think he is correct certainly in the sense of addressing decline as it occurs, then there are less students by the time of year 11 who cannot read and write. But schools and systems, all of them, have interventions that address particular student results and capacities. We have got the minimum standard happening for the first time in relation to the HSC this year. That is an attempt to make sure that students do not graduate from high school without the basics in literacy and numeracy.

The CHAIR: What are you saying? You are hoping there will not be students like that? At the moment we have 16,000 students who start year 7 who cannot read to a decent standard. Inevitably there will be students who are untimed are back there from three or four years ago, compared to year 11 standard. How do they make up six years of work in just the two years of year 11 and year 12? It is just not feasible, is it?

Mr MARTIN: The intent is to make sure that they do not keep progressing without meeting the appropriate standards and that the attention should go in, in terms of additional support, earlier, so that there is not x number of thousand at year 7, there are only a very few who need significant additional support. The point of that process is to identify it and address it earlier.

The CHAIR: We hope that works. Can I just say, Masters also projects, having opposed streaming earlier in his report, towards the end of it he says, put them into vocational programs if that is the case. Is that part of the plan as well?

Mr MARTIN: There is a range of positions in Professor Masters' report. I would hesitate to equate vocational versus academic with streaming. One of the things that Professor Masters is, I think, attempting to do is to make sure that vocational pathways and academic pathways have to some degree equal merit and that students are not propelled or pushed into a space less, that they are not interested in or they are not, there is no career for them. I would just slightly hesitate to say that that is a streaming thing. Streaming is an interesting and philosophic argument. Most schools target students, they have reading tables with less able and more able students in the same classroom, they have identification programs where they put students into groups who are struggling in particular ways. It is a standard practice in most schools.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: If we take this non-prescriptive achievement-based progression rather than time-based progression, which is what we are talking about, if we roll it through over a couple of years, are we going to see a group of 14-year-olds in classrooms that overwhelmingly have 12-year-olds? Or are we going to see 20-year-olds in year 12? It seems to me inevitably what we are going to see as this rolls out. Or have I misunderstood it?

Mr MARTIN: There are two things. One is that that particular recommendation, the Government has asked us to provide advice. There is obviously a question over some of the issues that this Committee is raising, and we will provide advice via the NESA board with the research we have done to the Minister and the Government. That is the first thing, rather than talk about implementation strategies of something that has not yet been advised.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: But that is the guts of the proposal. That is the real heart and soul of this proposal from Masters, and you are saying the Government has not made a decision. In the absence of that change this is no different to any other review of the syllabus. It is really just smoke and mirrors. It is actually a con.

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: I have been noting for a while, the Hon. Anthony D'Adam is using commentary around reporting and the decisions of the Government in his questioning. I was going to pull him up earlier in his first tranche of questions, where I think he used—I forget, I have to pull *Hansard* up—it is just constant emotive language within the questions. The idea is to ask questions, elicit a response from the witnesses and we move on from there. The smoke and mirrors type commentary is unhelpful.

The CHAIR: With all due respect, I do not think there is a standing order about emotive language. If I was a year 11 kid at year 6 literacy level I would be pretty emotive and more so the parents. It can be an area that raises passionate concerns. What I will do is ask for a response to the Hon. Anthony D'Adam's question, then I will go back to the Hon. Courtney Houssos and resume the normal sequence of questioning if we can please.

Mr MARTIN: If I can I might refer back to Mr Shoebridge—the second part of his question.

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The CHAIR: Yes, a response.

Mr MARTIN: I do not think there is anybody envisaging that 14-year-olds will be sitting in the class with 7-year-olds, but teachers need to know if the 14-year-old in the class is at a 7-year-old's literacy level and that needs to be addressed. The capacity of the syllabuses to identify where the student is up to, and for the teacher to be able to assess and address it, either themselves or with other support, is absolutely necessary.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: You did not address my other—let us assume that is true. Let us assume that you are in year 9 and instead of teaching at what had previously been a year 9 level, you have a cohort of students you are teaching at a year 6 level. What happens when you get to year 12 and you have a cohort of students at year 12 that, even if you have made advances, you are teaching at a year 9 level? What happens at the end of that year? That has never been explained. What happens at the end of that year?

The CHAIR: They have not done the work, you see. They have not done the syllabus that leads into the HSC. They are left stranded, are they not?

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What happens?

The CHAIR: Is that not the point?

Mr MARTIN: At the moment what we are trying to do is deal with an issue that currently exists. We have those students sitting in those classes, arriving in year 7 behind their peers and heading through all the way already, as it currently stands.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I am not debating you on that. I am asking what happens in that very practical circumstance?

Mr MARTIN: In terms of the Masters review recommendations over a long period of time, over the period of time where we are talking about kindergarten, year 1 and year 2 in 2022, there be less students, significantly less students who hit year 7 or later years with the deficits we are talking about. All the way through though, every student needs to have their needs identified and met, including the year 10 student who is going to go into year 11 subjects. That needs to be done, and that needs to be done irrespective of Professor Master's recommendations or not. Going to Mr D'Adam's question in relation to if you take that untimed syllabus out what is there, the decluttering is a significant piece of work and the kernel of the idea of which untimed syllabuses is Professor Masters' response, is to make sure that teachers have a clear understanding of the scope and sequence of the syllabuses so they can address individual student need.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: The reason I ask that question is—

The CHAIR: Sorry, we have to cut it off there. Okay, very last one.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Parents are asking these questions, students are asking these questions, what does it actually mean in practical terms and it seems to me you do not have an answer. I could have missed it but I did not hear my question answered. What happens at the end of year 12 a student under this plan who has only attained year 9 standards, what do they do? Do they get the HSC? Do they have another two years of high school? What do you do?

Mr MARTIN: The question in relation to untimed syllabuses and their consequences will be discussed, as I said, by the board. The ways in which it will be manifest in classrooms will also be part of that discussion.

The CHAIR: Maybe the board will recommend it and it cannot be implemented.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Is there in the system of untimed syllabuses that operate anywhere else in the world—you talked about Wales, but they have put it off. They have delayed implementation. Is there anywhere else in the world where untimed syllabuses are working?

Mr MARTIN: I will have to take that on notice and give you some answers outside of the Committee time. The board will have a look and make sure that that recommendation is analysed with the additional research we have got and any practical examples. I cannot say whether or not it is working because at this stage I do not have information in front of me.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Okay, so you are taking that question on notice.

Mr MARTIN: I am.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Then can you explain what is being implemented in the new curriculum review from school systems that are doing well?

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Mr MARTIN: There is a range of things. Part of the problem with learning from what works overseas is that cultural and other contexts have a great part to play in that. What is working in Quebec or in Ontario is potentially very different to that working in Shanghai, China or Hong Kong. Some have streamed classes. Some have concrete syllabuses or syllabuses that are developed by teachers, et cetera. There is a range of things. The most obvious thing is that the syllabus is clear and understood by teachers and is sequenced appropriately, that teaching strategies and methods are the most evidence-based for successful teaching, that the assessment methodologies allow teachers to know where students are up to in a program effectively, and ongoing professional learning and preparation of teachers in universities. There are some broad principles that sit outside the various jurisdictions, but there is an enormous amount of local context. We are going for principles here and we will attempt to deal with those over the next four years.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I have to say that the question of decluttering is something that there is certainly a broad amount of support for in the evidence we have heard and submissions we have seen. What specifically are you looking at removing? This was something that was raised with us this morning. Our syllabus needs to be content and knowledge rich, but the question of decluttering—what are you taking out?

Mr MARTIN: Without going into any specifics, our syllabuses have a broad statement. That is the intent of the teacher and where the students should be at the end of the teaching in relation to particular topic. Sometimes there are two or three. Underneath those they often have examples of how you might get to those outcomes. Then they may have dash points and dot points of teaching strategies. They may have a range of other materials attached. We have also got aims, rationales and objectives. We have got a very complex system and there is a coding system that matches to the Australian curriculum. When you look at the New South Wales syllabus document as it currently stands, it is quite a complex document for a teacher to navigate, particularly teachers who are less experienced.

We will clarify and put up front the absolute and expected learning outcome of the student and the aim of what the teachers are teaching. We will have, where appropriate, the most evidence-based pedagogy that would go there. The rest of that additional and extraneous material would be removed. The other part of it that is extremely important is getting the sequences right so that a student learns verbs before they learn adverbs. We have syllabuses that have, over the course of a generation, built up with additional content and material. So the decluttering is a simplifying, streamlining and sequencing process.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: One of the recommendations from the review that was not taken on board—in fact only one of two that was not taken on board—was the question of children being taught a second language. Do we have enough teachers if they did adopt this recommendation to teach a second language?

Mr MARTIN: The number of teachers and capacity of the workforce to deal with a recommendation like that is largely a question for the sector. In countries where second languages are mandatory they generally have identified one or two and they build in the teaching workforce over a period of time. I think we run over a hundred languages in New South Wales. The logistical exercise in mandating one or two languages and building your workforce around it was seen as worthwhile but noted by the Government. The short answer is that you would not know how many teachers you would need until you worked out which of the languages was the mandated language.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: I wanted to ask some questions of NESA so I might start with you, Mr Martin. In relation to the, if you like, implementation process and specifics, how many staff members do you have working on developing the new curriculum syllabuses that underpin that?

Mr MARTIN: I would have to take that on notice. I am not exactly sure. We have a smaller secretariat team plus our existing staff. The curriculum and syllabus inspectors have a role in it. There are a range of other people across the building, plus we have hired a significant number of people, first of all, for English and maths, the writing—lead writers—and a range of other people. We are also using and utilising the existing workforce out there. There are working parties and teams of teachers that will be involved in proofing and advising on syllabuses. They are not directly NESA employees. I am happy to take that on notice with more specifics.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: It is a big job that you are undertaking. Obviously we need to ensure you have got the necessary resources to get it done within the time line. In terms of your implementation plan, obviously there is developing the curricula and the syllabuses underpin that, but then there is also testing it and putting it before a teachers group or other experts and the like. In that regard, can you give us a picture of the key milestones in finalising, for example, the new English and mathematics curricula for K-2 in 2022?

Mr MARTIN: We will and are in the process of putting together. We have teachers who are experts in the field. We have university academics. We have our own expertise in the building, including probably the highest or the greatest number of assessment experts and psychometricians of any similar organisation in the

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country. We have got quite a bit of expertise. We will be using classroom teachers. We cannot use our normal processes of board curriculum committees largely because they roll out over a significant amount of time and they are inefficient and often rely too much on teachers in the city who can come to a meeting. Interestingly, COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to see more teachers. We will have a network of highly experienced practitioners identified by the three sectors who will have a look at, proof-of-concept and test our work before we release it more broadly next year.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Okay, so everything is on track in relation to the development and implementation plan.

Mr MARTIN: It is.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: You mentioned that you will not be using your committees. There are about 20 or 40 committees that report to the board, aren't there?

Mr MARTIN: There are a significant number of regulatory committees that report to the board. The nature of the time line for this syllabus process will necessarily limit the capacity of each of those committees to sign off on this work, but we have curriculum and assessment committees and we have a steering committee comprised of board members and senior stakeholders. We will be streamlining our normal process. The process work I mentioned before about expert teachers will be done prior to the steering committee recommending things to the board.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: In developing that curricula and, indeed, the syllabuses, will you have input also from parent groups, teachers in country areas and city areas, so a broader brush across all the stakeholders as well?

Mr MARTIN: One of the things that I would suggest is absolutely integral to everything that NESA and its predecessor, Board of Studies, has done is stakeholder work. We deal with each of the three sectors, with all of the Catholic dioceses, three parent groups. I am talking to the Catholic secondary principals tomorrow. I spoke to the Isolated Children's Parents' Association last week. The rounds of consultation and capacity for input on any board work is quite significant.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Excellent. The next question I had was in relation to the timeline or the time frame for implementation over to 2024. Are you working on each of the aspects of the work over those four years at the same time—for example, working on the new English and mathematics curriculum for kindergarten to year 2 and at the same time doing work on the syllabus for year 11 and year 12 so that it is not consecutive, it is happening all together?

Mr MARTIN: Yes, it is entirely—it is sequenced so that it is running in an aligned and parallel manner with particular focuses on the material that is required soonest. But there are some larger architectural pieces—we have mentioned untimed syllabuses here—but there are larger organisational and architectural pieces that are being done simultaneously that will make it easier when we hit the years 3, 4, 5 and 6, et cetera. The short answer to your question is yes, there is a lot of work being done simultaneously, but our focus at the moment is on the 2022 space.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Going to the question of the untimed stage of progression, which I think is one of the areas we are all grappling with and how that will actually be implemented, what sort of views do NESA or the department have in terms of how it actually practically rolls out in schools?

Mr MARTIN: I think that the Government's request that it was supported in principle—the idea that we deal with the students who are falling behind—I think gives NESA an opportunity—through its board and committee structure, particularly the board, and the expertise we draw in and the practical examples or lack of them in relation to some of the questions that have been asked here—to identify whether the Professor Masters notion of untimed syllabuses is the best way of dealing with the issue that he has identified. That is the advice that will go to the board.

If it is regarded as the best way, based on the advice we get from Ben Jensen and the schools and the jurisdictions that have done it, then we will put into place appropriate support mechanisms of how it would work in practice. But it may be that the board, after that research, basically says that Professor Masters is correct to this point but not here, or it has a different view, or it agrees and supports it completely et cetera. Some of the questions that are being asked here—legitimate questions about how this would be put in place in practice—are subsequent to the decision about whether this is the best way to go forward. That is what the Government's response has requested of us. I hope that is clear enough.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: That is pretty clear. Just on that point, has no work then been done at this stage in terms of what that would look like? Are you waiting for that trigger from the board's determination

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before any work is done to have a look at how it actually could be implemented in practice, or have you got a range of ideas that are sitting there for the board to consider along with that determination as to whether that is the best way to go forward?

Mr MARTIN: It is the second point there. I mentioned that the notion of progressions—quite well established; they are now being implemented nationally with particular assessments attached to them—has a scope and sequence that is not year based, so there is an interesting theoretical way of dealing with the Professor Masters problem. Our syllabuses for kindergarten to year 2 are being constructed at the moment to declutter and simplify and streamline. The people who are doing that are looking at it in the context of what the timing might be, or whether these are best taught in a particular year level, or whether they can be completely separated. What I am suggesting is that there will be a range of options presented to the board.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: To return to the question the Hon. Courtney Houssos was asking about a second language, was part of the reason why it was noted by Government because of those resourcing issues that were raised in terms of both the staff and identification of a preferred second language, for instance?

Mr MARTIN: I could not answer that question, I am sorry.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Is that something you could answer, Ms Simmons?

Ms SIMMONS: No, I am sorry, I cannot answer that question.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: With respect to the second language, are you doing any work in terms of how that could be rolled out across the syllabus up to year 12?

Mr MARTIN: NESAs did a review of language acquisition in about 2015 or 2016; I am happy to provide that. It identified a range of obstacles to the very often put desire by governments of all persuasions that Australian students have a second language. We have been asked to continue to support all of the languages we currently support through the HSC. Almost half the HSC exams are languages. We also run a very strong community language program with syllabuses from NESAs. It is a vexed issue in Australia from both the Commonwealth and the State perspective. I suppose the best way I can answer your question is I can provide this Committee with that previous report.

The Hon. WES FANG: I have really only got one question, and that was to address some of the points that some of my colleagues were asking. With regard to the impost on teachers, do teachers regularly undergo professional development training and the like throughout their careers?

Mr MARTIN: There are two ways—and I am going to refer some of the questions back to the department here—but NESAs has a requirement for an accredited teacher to complete 100 hours of professional development [PD] over five years. It is 20 hours a year. I think all of the States and Territories have agreed to a similar amount; some of them manage it differently. Teachers have the opportunity to identify things they need to do—IT, perhaps, or special education or the new syllabus documents. They also are often required to do PD by their employer. Sometimes there are new State legislative responsibilities around child protection or particular health issues that arise—anaphylactic shock, I think, was rolled out a few years ago for primary teachers.

The Hon. WES FANG: In a simple matter, a new syllabus could be part of that professional development?

Mr MARTIN: Yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Coming back to this issue of decluttering, is there a metric? How will you know? How will we know that a syllabus—because it seems to me that this whole exercise is really about emphasis. At the end of the day, one person's decluttered curriculum might be another person's cluttered curriculum. Is there a clear metric to say, "Okay, we have decluttered the curriculum by 20 per cent"? How are you going to measure whether you have actually achieved your purpose?

Mr MARTIN: I think that the nature of the document will be considerably slimmer—and online documents. There cannot be a metric, because each of the subjects has different levels of—I hesitate to use the word "clutter", but some are more dense than others. If you start from English and maths—as we are supposed to and we should necessarily as the foundations of all the other content areas—we will make sure that the content, the scope and sequence is correct. You cannot do particular levels of maths unless you have already done particular levels of maths. We will identify which of the things are essential and required, and the sequence of them, and those things that our experts think are outside of that scope and are additional will be taken out. It may be that in some syllabuses there is significant additional material that we think could be removed. We have experts that will attempt to do that for us.

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Outside of English and maths, content is a slightly different process. There are content areas like history that Australian society would like its children to understand. Then there are sequences of understanding history: How do you write or think about or understand how history works? It will be different from English and maths. The proof of the pudding will be in the testing we do with the teachers and the network of teachers that we will have involved to test out and make sure that we have done the right thing.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: My understanding is that not every syllabus is—there are degrees in terms of crowding for each KLA, that some are more crowded than others.

Mr MARTIN: Yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I wonder whether part of the problem is actually the time mandates. It was suggested earlier this morning that there are not actually specific time mandates, though I was reviewing a Government policy that stated that in primary you have to spend 50 per cent on maths and English and then 40 per cent on the other KLAs. Has any consideration been given to looking at the time mandates? Obviously those are quite rigid, and in high school there are actually specified hours for each KLA.

Mr MARTIN: The 50 per cent recommendation for literacy and numeracy—English and maths—in primary school is reasonably well supported across the sectors and the systems for kindergarten to year 6. For at least half the day you might be doing some history work but using literacy skills. The 50 per cent is generally regarded as a foundational building block of all the other content areas. Syllabuses in primary school were constructed over time with not an overall understanding of how much each other KLA was taking of the time. What we need to do as part of this curriculum review—not just a syllabus review—is look at the total amount in PDHPE, English, maths, science, history etc. so that it is not simply unachievable because a group of subject experts have filled up a syllabus with the things they think should be taught. It is quite a complex intellectual exercise to not only see within the content areas, but what should work, for example, in one subject area should be sequenced appropriately into the other content areas and it is not all too much for a teacher to deliver. That is the argument behind decluttering. There is not a formula though, I am sorry.

The CHAIR: Just on the decluttering point, this morning Greg Ashman raised an interpretation of the science curriculum, and I shared similar concerns about the English and history curriculums. He basically said that a third of science is content, a third is the scientific method—it is significant but should not be a third of the syllabus—and the final third is what he has called "waffly stuff on science as a human endeavour", which in other areas sort of becomes quasi-politics. Masters does not address any of this; the internal balance in a syllabus between content, method and waffle. He did not go anywhere near it in the length of his report. Is this something that NESA looks at in terms of the rewriting of the syllabus now for decluttering? The Ashman recommendation—and I support it—is obviously if you get rid of waffle and not so much on method, you will have a lot more room for content and the development of deep knowledge, which is what we are all after.

Mr MARTIN: Professor Masters talks about the broad principles and architecture of a curriculum and syllabuses, not individual syllabus areas. There is no reference to them. He was not asked to. It was not in the terms of reference.

The CHAIR: He was not asked to.

Mr MARTIN: Well it is about—

The CHAIR: So it is a curriculum review with no specific reference to the composition of the curriculum.

Mr MARTIN: It is a curriculum review in terms of the architecture of the curriculum rather than individual syllabus. The terms of reference for the curriculum review are public, so it indicates what Professor Masters was asked to do.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I do not agree with the Chair's analysis, but how do you draw conclusions unless you do that deep dive into it?

Mr MARTIN: That is the work that NESA is undergoing at the moment.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: But how did Masters intellectually draw those conclusions without that deep dive?

The CHAIR: This is the point that Dr Mueller made. Effectively the Masters report is so vague and general and the real work is delegated entirely to NESA.

Mr MARTIN: The Masters review was not only looking at our syllabuses and the curriculum more broadly—and I would emphasise the curriculum more broadly—the relationship between KLAs, the sequence

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between kindergarten to year 6, the transition from 6 into 7, senior and secondary, and the relationship between vocational and academic subjects. It was a broad overview of how curriculum in New South Wales works from kindergarten to year 12. There is no reference or specifics around individual syllabuses. That is a much larger piece of work. But in his conversations with stakeholders almost exclusively every stakeholder, particularly those who relate to work in the classroom, talked about the amount of detail in each of the syllabuses and how that inhibits their capacity to do both deep diving and arresting the decline in some students performance.

The CHAIR: So your work now is to deep dive and to look at these compositional questions.

Mr MARTIN: The role of NESA will be to use expert teachers, expert academics, our board, parents and the community to identify what should be in a syllabus—of each of the individual subject-based syllabuses.

The CHAIR: Finally, is it possible for our Committee to be regarded as a stakeholder and be part of that process?

Mr MARTIN: I cannot answer that question.

The CHAIR: You cannot answer that question?

Mr MARTIN: Well I am not sure how it works.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: No, I do not think he can. I do not think that is fair.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: It is a question for the Government.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: That is a question for the Minister.

The CHAIR: Well it is a suggestion from around the table. I just put it. We are here to ask questions.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I think that is a policy matter to go to the Minister, in truth. I think it is realistic but it is a policy question for the Minister next week.

The CHAIR: MPs hold a few stakes, but we will see how we go.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: One of my concerns is that obviously there is a lot of primacy given to maths and English—or literacy and numeracy—and the other KLAs tend to get short shrift. There is also a view that what gets reported on is what gets taught. If it does not have to be reported on, it does not get taught. What are the mechanisms for ensuring that the syllabus actually gets taught in its entirety?

Mr MARTIN: The first thing is making it teachable. If we are relying on every student in every school to have taught to them everything that is in the current syllabuses, it is a pretty steep ask for teachers, so I think I am agreeing with the premise of your question. Schools and systems have different ways of ensuring what happens within their school in terms of annual reporting, the directors of educational leaders in the department, various other methodologies in the Catholic diocese and in independent schools. NESA inspects independent schools and looks at programs and identifies what has been taught and what has been assessed. We have a similar process—though it is to assess the system—in the government and Catholic sectors, so we can provide advice about the level to which schools are teaching the syllabuses. One of the things that needs to happen—and is one of Professor Masters' theses—is that you need to identify what is essential and then the teachers will teach it, and then they can assess it appropriately and hopefully report on it to parents, but while there is so much there it is a very difficult task.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: If the priority is literacy and numeracy, how do you guarantee that kids are getting the requisite hours in terms of music or in terms of dance; those other kind of areas that tend to get pushed to the margins because they are not the big-ticket items?

Mr MARTIN: Well, NESA does not guarantee the amount of each of those content areas that gets taught in each school because it would vary according to the schools individual programming. Some schools have a much larger focus on music and some on community languages. There is a requirement that every student gets exposed to the NESA syllabuses in broad terms so that each students gets—what you might call in an old-fashioned way—a broad liberal education; that they do music and they do art and they do some languages and they do English and maths. But we leave the schools and the systems and individual teachers to do the programming, and their professional judgement to make sure everything is dealt with. It would not be possible, I would argue, that you could mandate some sort of an overview to make sure that everything gets taught by every teacher. I think we have to trust the teachers and the systems and the principals to professionally deal with the students in front of them and the curriculum we provide.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Are you saying that there are no random audits or specific audits of schools in the State system?

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Mr MARTIN: No, there are. NESA inspects government schools. We do not provide advice in relation to the strengths or weaknesses of any government school. We provide a report through the board to the department and we use the analysis of the school inspection as a means of judging and providing advice to the department about their internal processes. We do exactly the same with the Catholic system via their diocese.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How many inspections would you do per year?

Mr MARTIN: I would have to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Does the department give you the list of schools to be inspected?

Mr MARTIN: No, we select the list of schools.

The CHAIR: That is not like the sample of annual reports and so forth.

Mr MARTIN: I think we have some conversations with the department about it. We also do a series of random audits as well.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Are you able to provide data on noncompliance?

Mr MARTIN: I think that we provide information back through the board to the Minister in relation to the reporting. This came out of the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards review, I believe, and we have been doing it for about four years—three to four years. Because of COVID this year we have really cut down on our inspections of schools across all three sectors.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Obviously it was well publicised that you commissioned a report into the way that writing is taught in New South Wales. As part of the curriculum review are you looking at new approaches or a new way of teaching writing? How can that be implemented across the entire kindergarten to year 12 curriculum?

Mr MARTIN: The short answer is yes. The recommendations and information gleaned from the Thematic Review of Writing will form part of the work that is being done—particularly in kindergarten to year 2, but in all of the syllabuses. That will provide advice on the best ways of teaching writing.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your participation and assistance in the Committee inquiry and the matters that we are investigating. I think there were a few matters taken on notice and inevitably there will be the opportunity for supplementary questions that members think of. Thank you for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 14:55.