

NSW Curriculum Review

Submission to the NSW Curriculum Review Taskforce

November 2018

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of New South Wales

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Introduction

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful to the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESAs) for this opportunity to contribute feedback into the NSW Curriculum Review. P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents¹ and families.

The core belief of P&C Federation is that the education of our children and youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource.

Our response to this inquiry is guided by our belief that the purpose of the curriculum is to provide a framework for delivering education, and that the purpose of education is to provide pathways for individual students to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that are appropriate to meet their individual goals and abilities, and to develop valued and contributing members of society. This stems from the Convention of the Rights of the Child, section 29 of which commits the Government of Australia to ensuring education is directed to *“the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.”* Our submission seeks to identify the challenges and limitations with the current curriculum, and to propose some pathways to reform the curriculum so that it is better suited to preparing students for life after school.

P&C Federation response

1. Overcrowding

In the numerous consultations P&C Federation has had with parents and educators, there is almost unanimous agreement that the curriculum is substantially overcrowded. Especially in the years after Year 6, there is a steep increase in the number of subjects available to school students. Consequently, the number of key learning areas (KLAs) may be so high that teachers either cannot cover subjects in adequate depth, or there are an insufficient number of qualified teachers to cover the KLAs.

We believe there are at least two broad causes of this overcrowding:

- **Political interference:** The content of the curriculum is essentially subject to approval only from the NSW Minister of Education (the Minister), and there is therefore little to nothing that mitigates against content being added to the curriculum due to political whims or pressure from special interest groups. Such decisions are often made hastily and without proper consideration of the impacts on time, resources, funding or even the benefit of

¹ “Parent” refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

such changes. A key factor here is that while NESAs describe themselves as “an independent statutory authority”, section 5 of the *Education Standards Authority Act 2013* (NESAs Act) states that NESAs are subject to the control and direction of the Minister, and there are no checks to ensure changes made by the Minister to the curriculum are beneficial.

- **Poor distinction between what is mandatory and optional:** There are numerous cases where areas of the curriculum are ostensibly optional, yet they are treated by NESAs in their inspections of schools as mandatory. This practice allows for less time to be spent on core proficiencies.

1.1. Lack of Regular Reviews of the Curriculum

A semi-related issue is that reviews of the curriculum are entirely ad hoc. Consequently, many changes and additions to the curriculum may accumulate over time, and there is no framework to ensure the changes are effective or to identify problems with the curriculum, let alone full funding and resources.

P&C Federation Recommendations

- Subject options which overlap and/or have low enrolment should be consolidated.
- The task of reviewing and formulating changes to the curriculum should fall to an independent, non-political body. We suggest this body consist of professional educators, parent and community representatives, and other relevant stakeholders and specialists. The appointment of members of this approving body should not be subject to Ministerial approval, and may be by the peak organisations that the representatives come from. This could perhaps be under the auspices of NESAs, following an amendment to the NESAs Act.
- The rules governing this independent body must ensure that any proposed changes to the curriculum be supported with:
 - (1) clear explanations of the educational benefits of the proposed changes;
 - (2) detailed breakdowns of the resources (human and physical) and the approved budgeted funding that will be required to implement the proposed changes;
 - (3) clear estimates of how much time it will take for teachers to implement the proposed changes in their classrooms, based on the time it takes for them to cover what is already in the curriculum; and
 - (4) supported by robust data

We stress that no changes should occur to the curriculum without demonstrating clear educational benefits, guaranteeing full funding and full resourcing, and demonstrating that teachers will be able to implement the changes.

- To further prevent overcrowding, we support the guiding principle of “add something in, take something out”, although there could be flexibility. However, there should be core knowledge and skills that the curriculum maintains.
- Reviews of the curriculum should take place on a more structured cycle. This should be accompanied a total quality management (TQM) philosophy, whereby the curriculum is constantly being assessed and reviews can still occur between these cyclical reviews if there is a substantive reason for a fast-tracked curriculum update (e.g. if there is a major scientific or educational breakthrough or discovery that renders the curriculum obsolete in some way).
- The reviewing body’s recommendations at each curriculum review should be subject to approval from Parliament rather than the Minister of the day.

2. One Size Fits All Approach

A widespread criticism of the curriculum that P&C Federation has encountered among parents and educators is that it is excessively rigid, and does not adequately accommodate the diverse abilities, interests and aspirations of students. This is manifested in the following ways:

2.1. Too much focus on university:

Despite a large portion of Year 12 completers not entering university after school, there is an implicit assumption throughout the entire curriculum that all students aspire to go to university immediately upon finishing school. This assumption is apparent in the curriculum’s disproportionate focus on academic achievement and on preparation for university study, while vocational options receive considerably less focus and are thus implicitly treated as inferior to academic pursuits. This essentially means that students who wish to enter university after school get considerably more support and preparation under the current curriculum than students who would prefer to undertake vocational study, start apprenticeships or enter into the workforce after school.

While it may not have been the original intent, this emphasis on academic options has rendered the curriculum highly elitist, and fails to adequately acknowledge the value of non-academic pursuits. In previous times, students wishing to pursue more vocational pathways had the option of leaving school after Year 10 to study at TAFE, or enter apprenticeships or enter the workforce directly. This is still theoretically possible by obtaining a Record of School Achievement (RoSA), however the RoSA in practise is simply a confirmation that a person has attended school and carries little weight among employers. Further demonstrating the decline of vocational education are reports that vocational training funding is at its lowest

levels in over a decade.² Thus, for most practical purposes, remaining in school and completing the Higher School Certificate (HSC) is the only viable option for students. Consequently, there are many students in Years 11 and 12 who do not want to be there and this may exacerbate disengagement and other behavioural challenges who would prefer other pathways. Their interests could be better served by having more viable vocational options.

2.2. Lack of meaningful progressions:

Under the current curriculum, students are progressed from year to year regardless of how adequately they have met the outcomes or achieved the required learning foundations, or even if they have not achieved the outcomes or foundations at all. This does not acknowledge that individual students may vary dramatically in how they perform against the curriculum. There are innumerable factors affecting students' performance, including their language or ethnic background, the stability of their homelife, their upbringing, whether they have a disability or special needs, or the stability and quality of teachers. The current curriculum requires all students to follow the same progressions, and there is therefore little scope for students to meet the curriculum outcomes at their own pace or in ways that suit their own needs. Also, as cohorts in schools are based purely on age, there can be enormous gaps in a single cohort in terms of the most and least advanced students. As these students are essentially required to progress at the same rate, there is little scope for teachers as to adapt to these differences in one class.

There are several consequences of this:

- It has led to a situation where many students are perpetually underperforming throughout their school lives, as they have little opportunity to catch up or be extended. They are thus not getting the benefits they could from the curriculum.
- There is little room for schools to implement the curriculum flexibly in ways that suit their local contexts.
- There is little support for teachers to adopt alternative strategies that may engage or re-engage a disengaged student.
- Like the over-emphasis on university preparation outlined in section 2.1 above, this may fuel disengagement and other behavioural challenges in students.

² Pilcher and Torii. *Expenditure on education and training in Australia 2017. Update and analysis*. Mitchell Report No. 05/2017. December 2017

2.3. Siloing of subjects

The current curriculum has long been plagued by lack of cross-syllabus integration. This often makes it harder for students to recognise the significance of a subject, and the connection of the subject to other material in the curriculum or to the world at large.

2.4. Too much at stake with HSC:

Under the current curriculum, the HSC serves as a high-stakes test at the end of a student's school life which reflects little on their performance in school in the years before the HSC. Apart from the questionable relevance of the HSC written tests to vocational or direct to work candidates, the heavy emphasis on the HSC leads to a great deal of anxiety and other mental health problems for many students.

P&C Federation recommendations

Too much focus on university

To lessen the heavy emphasis on university preparation, P&C Federation proposes the introduction of vocational and academic pathway options for students, which students could choose while still having the chance to change pathways throughout their education. This would have the following characteristics:

- Primary school should focus on the development of students' core basic skills and competencies. Throughout primary years, teachers should continually monitor students' aptitudes and inclinations in these formative years.
- Starting at approximately Stage 4, students will have the option of entering pathways which will serve as preparation for life after school: the university pathway(s) will prepare students for university entry, and the vocational pathway(s) will prepare students for vocational courses, apprenticeships or entry directly into the workforce after school.
- After students enter a pathway, they must have the opportunities to change pathways at any point in their education if they feel another pathway would be more appropriate for them. This would avoid pressuring students from deciding at a young age what they wish to do after school and avoid locking students into a particular pathway from a young age for the rest of their school lives.

A potential model for this is the education system in the Netherlands:

- The primary school years in the Netherlands, like in Australia, are characterised simply by age cohorts without any streaming. In their secondary school years, however, students must opt for one of the following streams:³
 - *VMBO (voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs)* – lasting four years (typically from ages 12 to 16), this stream combines mostly vocational subjects with some academic subjects. Depending on their specific learning pathways, students in this stream may go onto further vocational study after school or enter the workforce directly.
 - *HAVO (hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs)* – lasting five years (typically from ages 12 to 17), this stream prepares students for polytechnic tertiary study. The subjects in this stream are primarily science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) subjects.
 - *VWO (voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs)* – lasting 6 years (typically from ages 12 to 18), this stream aims to qualify students to enter university. There are numerous specialisations available in this stream consisting of subjects in the humanities, sciences, arts and languages.

A visual representation of the Dutch education system is provided in the Appendix (page 11).

- There are some opportunities for students to change streams, and the Dutch government has reportedly considered further tests at age 14 to further allow students to change streams.⁴
- We stress that P&C Federation is not proposing to transplant the Dutch education system wholesale to New South Wales – for one thing, it is difficult for students to change streams, which pressures students to make decisions about their future career paths at the young age of 12. Rather, we are presenting this system as an example of how a school curriculum can better acknowledge the importance of vocational pursuits and show more recognition that not all students will attend university after school.
- The role of mandatory subjects under such a system would need to be assessed. Currently, English is the only subject that is mandatory across all stages; under this new proposed system, it is doubtful that there should be any subjects that are mandatory across all pathways at all stages.

³ Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO). *The Dutch education system described*. January 2015.

⁴ Expatica. *Education in the Netherlands: A guide to the Dutch education system*. Available at https://www.expatica.com/nl/education/Education-in-the-Netherlands_100816.html

Lack of meaningful progressions, siloing of subjects and too much at stake with HSC

To mitigate the lack of meaningful progressions, siloing of subjects and over-emphasis on the HSC, P&C Federation proposes the following proficiency-based progressions as a model for a future curriculum, which has the following characteristics:

- Progression through school based upon the attainment of successive proficiency levels in individual subjects or key learning areas.
- Each proficiency level contains an essential core knowledge, skills and competencies component with students only being able to progress to the next proficiency level by having demonstrated they have mastered the core elements.
- There would be full funding of supports for teachers and students to move through these core elements.
- Each proficiency level would also carry with it an element of non-core knowledge, skills and competencies that would be developed to maintain engagement and complement the core material while adding depth.
- Proficiency level trajectory based upon the minimum core competency trajectory that a student needs to reach at the end of schooling.
- Students remain in the age cohort to help promote normal emotional and social growth.
- Students that master proficiencies early can traverse a steeper trajectory (within limits) by seeking to obtain higher proficiency levels, while still receiving support for any proficiencies that they are struggling to meet.
- Students that are struggling to meet a proficiency level would be given additional time, supports and funding within limits, to acquire the necessary core before moving on.
- Students should be able to attain a particular proficiency at any time.
- Higher proficiency levels shall reinforce and build upon the core knowledge skills and competencies of the lower proficiency levels without rehashing the material of previous levels.
- Proficiency level achievement should indicate to what level the student has achieved (for teaching and learning purposes) e.g. has the student only met the core requirements or have they met the core plus all of the additional material.
- Judgement about readiness for any particular proficiency level should rest primarily with the child's teacher.
- Progression through proficiency levels should normally be one at a time but not limited to this.
- The core should contain skills and competencies that minimise the ability of students to rely on external coaching to game assessment tasks.
- Differentiation in classes will be based on a child's proficiency level.

- A combination of team teaching, cross year class collaboration and trained specialist teachers would help cater for the potentially large diversity of proficiencies in any given year cohort.
- Assessment against a proficiency level should start as formative only testing in the early years of schooling, with the slow introduction of more summative assessment in the later parts of high school.
- Assessment results are cumulative throughout school. This would:
 - Make the transition from primary to high school more continuous
 - remove some of the stress on the HSC as a high-stakes exam
 - add meaning and purpose to other years (i.e. they genuinely count)
 - Allow meaningful information to be conveyed if a student decides to leave prior to year 12. (i.e. an actual proficiency level for all subjects studied including any elective subjects, including VET).
- Senior secondary students that have already reached year 12 proficiency level may be accelerated by NESA approved extension courses in the first instance and then by:
 - Provision of in-school university approved courses taught by suitably qualified secondary teachers, with fully funded resources, which provide credits towards university courses or other pathways.
 - Provided at university or on-line by tertiary staff.

3. Teaching and delivery

For any curriculum to be successful, it must be implemented by teachers who are highly trained and qualified and given fully funded resources. This is why P&C Federation believes reforms of the curriculum should be accompanied by reforms of teacher accreditation and registration. Some possible reforms include:

- **Raise the standards of aspiring teachers:** Considering the impact school teachers have on the well-being of entire generations, teaching in schools should be considered a profession as prestigious and important as professions in the medical or legal fields. It is therefore highly disturbing that entry standards for initial teacher education are apparently low, with universities reportedly admitting high school leavers into teaching training with the lowest proficiency levels.⁵ P&C Federation stresses that for the curriculum to be effective, and for parents to have confidence in the teaching profession, there must be the highest standards for teaching education.
- **Allow for more subject specialist primary school teachers:** there is currently a strong disconnect between primary and secondary school education, in that primary

⁵ Natasha Robinson. Students with lowest ATAR scores being offered places in teaching degrees: secret report. *ABC News*. 18 September 2018.

education is typically characterised by a single generalist teacher covering all subjects, while secondary education is characterised by a large range of specialist teachers. We question whether this strong contrast between primary and secondary years should continue. We believe there is scope for introducing more specialist teachers at the primary level and thereby make the primary-secondary transition more seamless. In secondary school there must be subject specialist teacher in all subjects.

- **Professional development and higher accreditation:** The opportunities for teachers to continually build their skills through higher accreditation and professional development can be valuable, however the process of doing this may be unappealing due to its complexity and time-consuming nature. Casual teachers in particular may suffer from a lack of opportunities to attain higher proficiency due to the unreliable nature of their employment. P&C Federation believes there is room for more opportunities for teachers to improve and develop professionally, though such development should occur outside school term to avoid impacting on students.
- **Limiting reporting:** Excessive reporting requirements for teachers can impinge on the time that teachers could spend on students or professional development, and also erodes the autonomy of teachers. P&C Federation believes that with high-quality teacher training, teachers should enjoy autonomy to teach and use their judgement without being overly prescriptive.

Appendix: Visual representation of education system in the Netherlands (Source: OECD)

