



... Leadership, Advocacy and Support

Council of Catholic School Parents

Submission

Review of the NSW Curriculum

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Executive Summary

This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) on behalf of the parents of 257,000 students in Catholic schools in NSW.

CCSP is an independent association and the officially recognised body representing the interests of parents and carers with children in Catholic schools in NSW/ACT. The work of the Council is guided by the principles of choice, equity and social justice. CCSP is a founding member of the national body Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA).

This submission provides general comments in relation to the scope of the NSW Curriculum Review and recommendations based on feedback and input from Catholic school parents and carers across the state.

CCSP acknowledges that the Review of the current curriculum is timely, for a number of reasons including:

- the length of time passed since the last review
- the opportunity to reflect on the relatively newly implemented Australian Curriculum.

CCSP concurs with the Terms of Reference when it states that the Review takes place in a *'context of a high performing NSW Education system, which strives to meet the needs of a wide range of students'*.¹

This submission will follow the review structure and therefore sets out to:

- articulate the purpose of the school curriculum and its underpinning philosophies and principles
- identify the essential knowledge skills and attributes as an entitlement of every learner
- imagine a redesigned curriculum that better supports teaching, learning, assessment and reporting
- identify the implications for a new approach to curriculum.

This submission will also acknowledge other areas for change or improvement as highlighted by parents and carers of students in Catholic schools across NSW.

¹ NSW Education Standards Authority. NSW Curriculum Review. <https://www.nswcurriculumreview.nesa.nsw.edu.au/assets/docs/nsw-curriculum-review-terms-of-reference.pdf>. Accessed September 2018.

1. What is the purpose of schooling in the 21st Century?

1.1 Contributing and valued members of a global society

Overwhelmingly, our data recognised the responsibility of schools to adequately prepare children to become lifelong learners and contributing and valued members of a global society. Parents acknowledged that this means educating students to become collaborative, innovative, adaptable problem-solvers who leave school ready and able to embark on their post-school journey, whether that is further study or the workforce.

The goals of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, although not necessarily known to our community were articulated in their comments. In particular, Goal 2 that states all young Australians become:

- successful learners
- confident and creative individuals
- active and informed citizens.²

Further, parents and carers feel that an inclusive and flexible curriculum could better meet the needs of the diversity of learners in NSW classrooms today with an emphasis on all students reaching their full potential cognitively, emotionally, socially and physically.

Recommendations

That the NSW Curriculum becomes less content heavy and instead is redesigned in a way that allows freedom of content with an emphasis on the development of lifelong learning skills, built around broader areas of interest, giving flexibility, scope and some degree of choice for students and teachers.

Greater emphasis on metacognition and its impact on learning.

Allow for depth and consolidation of learning, especially in K-6.

1.2 Setting students up early for a love of learning

Both parents and educators recognise the importance of setting children up with positive learning experiences early in their educational journey. In primary school settings, one classroom teacher is required to be a 'specialist' and passionate in all subject areas, which is unrealistic and naturally affects the learning experiences of their students. In John Hattie's meta-analysis of effect size, teacher quality has a 'marked and meaningful effect on student

² Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. National Report on Schooling in Australia 2013. http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/national_declaration_on_the_educational_goals_for_young_australians.pdf. Accessed October 2018.

learning'³. Further, he explains that 'the quality of instruction by the teacher has a major influence on student achievement.' Quality instruction relies on a teacher who knows deeply the content of the subject area.

While it has been reported for some time that there is a lack of specialist teachers in the secondary years, parents and carers in NSW have also expressed their concern regarding the current lack of specialist teachers at primary level, such as in STEM subjects.

The key to unlocking a student's passion and interest in lifelong learning is to provide them with teachers who are knowledgeable in subject matter and can teach children curriculum content through real world examples.

Recommendations

That specialist teachers working at Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher accreditation levels are available in schools for collaboration, modelling, feedback, solving problems of practise, co-teaching and to offer in situ professional learning.

Develop industry partnerships to make the content relevant in the real world and to tap into and make use of industry expertise.

2. What knowledge skills and attributes should every student develop at school?

2.1 Literacy and numeracy

Identifying and teaching the knowledge, skills and attributes that build a society that is both literate and numerate are of greatest concern to our parent and carer community.

Literacy and numeracy skills are fundamental and the foundation for all learners. Currently, there are too many students in NSW who are 'slipping through the cracks' and falling behind in the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. It should be unacceptable that any child leaves school without being both literate and numerate. To address this urgent societal issue, schools must make every effort to capture those who are not experiencing success and work across education sectors to improve the learning outcomes for these students.

In 2013, *the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)* surveyed a sample of Australians from 15 – 74 years old and rated them on a level of 1-5 for their literacy skills, with Level 3 meaning the person was considered proficient. The survey found that 43.7 per cent of Australians had below-proficiency level literacy;

³ Hattie, J.A.C. (2003, October). Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence? Paper presented at the Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us ACER Research Conference, Melbourne, Australia. http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2003/4/. Accessed October 2018.

around 7.3 million people. The survey found even lower levels of numeracy amongst Australians.

‘Our numeracy scores were worse, with around 53.5 per cent of the population below-proficiency levels. The greatest group (5.4 million people) were ranked at Level 2 of numeracy.’⁴

The emotional, practical and financial toll of low literacy can be severe and any student leaving school with a less than proficient level of literacy or numeracy should always be an unacceptable outcome for parents, teachers, governments and the community.

It is critical that all students are given the tools and resources they need to reach their own learning goals (which must include basic literacy and numeracy skills) that have been identified and developed with teacher, student and parent input. This is a problem beyond the child and their school and belongs to society more broadly and it is on this basis that we make our recommendations.

Recommendations

Provide sector-blind support when teaching children who have learning difficulties to become literate and numerate. Give access to human and other resources so that schools and teachers can source the best possible learning for students who are struggling to achieve expected outcomes, or failing to achieve expected progression. Teachers and students contribute to and benefit from action research that forms a national database of evidenced based practice. The National Education Reform Agreement makes this timely. We recommend that teachers collaborate beyond the school and system about challenging problems of practice particularly in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy.

It is critical that strong mechanisms are in place to capture students wherever they are who are falling behind and use evidence and research to facilitate their ongoing learning so that they graduate from high school with literacy and numeracy skills of a level that meet community expectations.

Use research and evidence to make decisions about the most effective ways to progress students through their learning.

2.2 Develop the whole person

Teaching subject content is one thing in school, but parents and carers have also expressed to CCSP that values such as respect, diversity, compassion, empathy and emotional

⁴ King, M. August 2016. SBS. The hidden costs of low literacy in Australia. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/explainer/hidden-costs-low-literacy-australia>. Accessed October 2018.

intelligence are underpinnings to a curriculum that caters to the needs of the individual learner.

Resilience, social skills, good communication, teamwork – these are again examples of essential personal attributes that are developed within individual students and valuable in life and in the workforce. These skills can't be overlooked within the classroom context, but instead students should be empowered to hone these skills when they are at school.

Recommendation

Some degree of focus on the soft skills, so potentially greater flexibility on content and greater emphasis on skills and knowledge of emotional intelligence.

3. How could the curriculum better support every student's learning?

3.1 Parent engagement

*Research demonstrates that effective schools have high levels of parent and community involvement. This involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour. Family involvement can have a major impact on student learning, regardless of the societal or cultural background of the family.*⁵

While communities across NSW are diverse, engaging with families is always possible. Dr Steve Constantino explains “families who build strong efficacy with the educational lives of their children can make a huge difference in the degree to which their children are successful in school. The concept of family engagement is simple: involve families in the learning lives of their children, and they become partners and advocates of success (2016)”.⁶ Many of our parents feel that they understand little of the curriculum and as such, are removed from their children's learning. Drawing parents into the curriculum means knowing the community in which you work. Often, schools need to go beyond the gate to ‘involve families in the learning lives of their children’.

A school in southwest Sydney went beyond the gate when they set up the Early Bird Reading Program. The program required parents to bring their children to school early to read with teachers and older students. For a number of reasons reading practise was not happening at home daily. The school looked at their mostly non-English speaking community and understood that they needed to do things differently. Asking parents to drop children off early was a simple way to give students the reading practise they needed,

⁵ Australian Department of Education and Training. The Family-School Partnerships Framework. <http://www.familyschool.org.au/files/9413/7955/4757/framework.pdf>. Accessed October 2018.

⁶ Constantino, S. (2016). *Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles*. Sage Publication California USA

while not being critical or dismissive of the parent community. Outcomes included improved reading attainment for children and stronger relationships between older and younger children. The growing social cohesion extended into the parent community who began coming with their children to see the 'magic' that was happening each morning in the library. Relationships were built and conversations between parents/carers and teachers about student learning and curriculum started to happen. With children at the centre, the school found a way in which to engage parents in the curriculum.

At the 2017 ARACY Conference, when asked if they wished to be more involved in their child's learning, the majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This has also been the general feedback of CCSP's most recent survey in relation to the NSW Curriculum Review. Parents are unsure of the curriculum and what it means, but many would like to have a better grasp of the content and concepts, skills and knowledge taught to their children. They would like to see schools engage more with families and communicate about the curriculum. Educators should be given the learning and support they need so that they feel confident and encouraged to involve parents and carers in their children's education. This allows for families and schools to successfully 'walk alongside' and support student learning.

Recommendations

By and large, parents and carers know very little about the curriculum, which is understandable as the curriculum and syllabus documents are drafted and developed for professionals to interpret and use – educators. However, parents should be able to access resources and other tools that enable them to understand and support what their children are learning each term/year and the goals they are working towards. While we do not advocate simplifying the professionalism of teachers, we do believe that parents and students should be supported in accessing the curriculum. CCSP supports the further development of existing tools and resources for parents and students about the curriculum in multiple formats/modes of delivery that will reach them and in simple ways free from jargon.

We recommend the development or further development of existing resources to support schools in engaging their particular community in the curriculum. We recommend the skilling of the teaching profession in going beyond the gate to engage the community whomever they are.

3.2 Curriculum content

Our data confirms that parents and carers in NSW feel that the current curriculum is overcrowded, which is a significant barrier to depth and consolidation of learning.

Teachers are currently pressured to move from one outcome to the next too quickly, which

does not allow sufficient time to explore the content. Students need more time to explore concepts and engage in the learning process to master skills and knowledge before moving on to the next concept. The design of the current curriculum simply does not allow for this.

Recommendations

Gather qualitative data from teachers about the current challenges and potential solutions around depth and consolidation of learning.

Give teachers flexibility to make decision around student learning so that children are allowed sufficient time to explore and develop depth of learning of a concept, skill or knowledge before having to move on to the next thing.

Future-proof the curriculum by adopting a policy of “put something in, take something out” and ensure that any changes made are done so from an informed and evidence based position that explains the benefits to both teaching and learning. If you put something in and take something out, be transparent in terms of why the decision has been made and the benefits.

3.3 Teacher support

Diversity is the norm in classrooms and inclusivity is the expectation. To make adjustments to and best implement the curriculum, teachers require ongoing support and professional learning to meet the needs of a diverse and inclusive classroom – addressing the additional learning needs of students at both ends.

Recommendations

Ensure allied health professionals, parents and carers are involved in supporting the diverse learning needs of students inside and outside the school gate.

Use evidence and research to ensure that students thrive in the cohort/grade system which best supports their development and integration.

Teachers access and contribute to the evidence in the national database of evidence-based practice to inform learning that addresses additional learning needs at both ends.

Empower teachers to use and embrace technology in their classrooms as a teaching tool by providing them with ongoing professional learning and other support tools.

Give teachers the professional learning and time to know and implement changes in the curriculum. They need time to review the impact of any changes on their teaching and current students.

3.4 Bridge the cultural gap for ATSI students

Currently, ATSI parents report to us that there is a significant cultural gap experienced by students and families, which directly impacts educational outcomes. For example, ATSI families engage in Sorry Business when there is a family or community death. This cultural practice requires students to be away from school for an extended period, sometimes up to three weeks. This absence impacts learning, however is a very important part of the ATSI culture. The question is, how can the curriculum respect the cultural needs of ATSI students while responding to their learning needs?

Recommendations

Engage with ATSI educators and families to find solutions that will improve educational outcomes for ATSI students while respecting and honouring cultural practices.

Support teachers to be culturally competent and have an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and how it impacts on their education.

3.5 Pathways to success

Currently there is a focus on ATARs and university as the ultimate pathway to success. However, only a minority of students go on to further study at university. There has been a de-emphasis on vocational pathways despite the fact that the majority of school leavers are not going on to university.

ATSI parents in particular have reported to CCSP that students who elect to study VET subjects offsite are then required to make up missed lessons. This is an added stress on students who are seeking alternative pathways.

Recommendations

Ensure an equal emphasis on VET and industry partnerships as meaningful pathways to further education and employment.

Ensuring a flexibility in school timetabling that supports the study of VET subjects.

Educate students, parents and the community about the many pathways to success, and also the many pathways to university beyond an ATAR.

4. What else needs to change?

4.1 Student-centred learning

CCSP acknowledges that student-centred learning is currently the goal in classrooms in the 21st Century, however, it is hindered as common practice in many classrooms by:

- a lack of resources
- not enough sharing of information across sectors
- teacher professional learning
- current assessment and reporting demands.

CCSP welcomes a review into the current way that classes are structured in NSW, including class sizes. It is important that research is conducted into what type of class structure best promotes a student-centred approach to learning. Evidence should then inform how NSW classrooms could be structured to ensure that the student is the focus in all classrooms and each student is working towards achieving their own personal learning goals and given every opportunity to reach their full potential.

4.2 Current assessment and reporting requirements

Parents and carers have expressed to CCSP on many occasions that NAPLAN and the HSC are assessments that raise serious health and welfare concerns for students, especially in relation to stress and anxiety.⁷

The HSC has been in existence for decades and thousands upon thousands of students have sat the HSC since it was first introduced in 1967.⁸ So why then are students struggling more than ever with mental health issues associated with the HSC? Is it because of the stigma associated with vocational education and training and the increasing pressure to achieve high ATARs to go on to university? Is there a lack of community information available about the role of the HSC and ATARs? Is it because parents and students are not aware of the many pathways to success?

The time has come to have look at the HSC and consider what needs to change so that final exams do not come at the expense of the mental health of our students.

NAPLAN is another national assessment that causes unnecessary stress among families and students. The way the data is used and the constant criticism that educators are teaching to

⁷ Council of Catholic School Parents. October 2018. Media Release: How parents can best support their child through the HSC experience. <http://www.cbsp.catholic.edu.au/2018/Media/MR-World-Mental-Health-Day2018.pdf>. Accessed October 2018.

⁸ Carr, M. October 2016. The Herald. HSC 2016: A look back at how we covered the first HSC in 1967. <https://www.theherald.com.au/story/4223320/how-we-covered-the-first-hsc-in-1967/>. Accessed October 2018.

the test all points to the fact that the national assessment is not seen by the broader community to be used in a constructive or effective way or for the benefit of the students who complete the test.

NAPLAN should be reviewed and the way national data on student performance is used and shared should also be explored.

School reports have recently been described as ‘sterile and technical’.⁹ The audience for school reports is parents and carers and in the current form, school reports are not providing enough value for parents and carers. If school reports are not conveying the information parents and carers want in a way they can easily understand it, then it seems fitting for the structure and style of school reports to be revised.

4.3 General teacher support

Much like most other professions, mentoring and supporting those who are at the beginning of their careers in education is an important element of developing and sustaining quality teachers in the NSW education sector. Early career teachers should be able to access a mentor or advice from more experienced educators from the day they graduate.

The mental health of children and young Australians is a genuine concern for parents and carers. According to recent research, Australian students reported higher levels of schoolwork-related anxiety than the OECD average and recent research suggests that the 65% of Australian 15-year-olds worry they will get poor grades at school.¹⁰ Further, Mission Australia’s recently released 2018 Youth Survey revealed that the number of young people reporting concerns around mental health has risen by 10% in one year.¹¹

This means that teachers are now increasingly having to identify and manage students with mental health concerns, which is something they are not specifically trained for. It is important that teachers are able to access professional learning that is geared towards addressing mental health issues in children and young people.

4.4 Modernise the curriculum

The world is changing at a rapid pace with new technologies constantly emerging. For the NSW curriculum to remain relevant, it will need to be reviewed more regularly. There

⁹ Baker, J. November 2018. The Sydney Morning Herald. 'Sterile and technical': the problem with primary school report cards. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sterile-and-technical-the-problem-with-primary-school-report-cards-20181116-p50gl5.html>. Accessed November 2018.

¹⁰ Henebery, B. November 2018. The Educator Online. Student anxiety highlighted in latest PISA report. <https://www.theeducatoronline.com.au/breaking-news/student-anxiety-highlighted-in-latest-pisa-report/257877>. Accessed November 2018.

¹¹ Mission Australia. November 2018. Immediate action needed as concerns around mental health rise by 10% in one year. <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/news-blog/news-media/immediate-action-needed-as-concerns-around-mental-health-rise-by-10-in-one-year>. Accessed November 2018.

should be a focus on teaching real life skills, such as financial literacy, because everyone should learn how to prepare and manage a household budget and do their taxes. With stores starting to emerge that are cashless, how do students learn to determine what they can and cannot afford using only a debit card or in some cases a credit card? Making the content relevant to their everyday lives gives students a genuine interest in what they are learning.

The majority of what children learn is at school during the hours of 9am to 3pm, Monday through to Friday; but many also engage in extra-curricular activities such as sport, languages, music, drama etc. outside of those hours and off school grounds. In 2018, it is common for Australian children to be raised in a two-income household and with parents often working, there could be an increasing demand and/or need for school grounds to be used more broadly and accessed for extra-curricular activities after 3pm. Offering extra-curricular activities onsite after school is another way to broaden the experiences of children and potentially increase parent interest in extra-curricular activities for their children due to easy access.