



Council of Catholic School Parents
Submission
Interim Report
NSW Curriculum Review
December 2019

Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT
02 9287 1514

office@ccsp.catholic.edu.au

Preamble

This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) on behalf of the parents of over 250,000 students in Catholic schools in NSW. CCSP appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on Professor Masters' Interim Report on the Review of the NSW Curriculum.

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 provides leadership, advocacy and support to the parents of children in all NSW Catholic schools, both systemic and non-systemic, and is a founding member of the national body, Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA).

This submission provides feedback in response to the Interim Report's major proposals by way of its Reform Directions and follows the structure of the Consultation Workbook.

CCSP notes that this feedback is provided in the context of the review into NAPLAN currently being conducted in NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

In addition to providing this feedback, CCSP has encouraged local parent groups within the dioceses to submit their own responses to the reform directions proposed in the Interim Report. Further, in addition to this feedback, representatives from CCSP have been fortunate in being able to meet with Professor Masters since the Interim Report's release to deliver initial feedback. In addition to thanking Professor Masters himself, CCSP thanks NESAs and Catholic Schools NSW for helping to facilitate feedback opportunities.

Feedback

CCSP is generally supportive of the directions outlined in the Interim Report. Parents want a curriculum that best enables their children to live fulfilling lives while also providing opportunities for further study and employment. CCSP welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Interim Report's major proposals on behalf of the more than 160,000 families who choose to send one or more of their children to a NSW Catholic school.

The aspirational direction of the Interim Report in proposing a curriculum as 'nurturing wonder and igniting passion' is well-received by parents. This is what parents want for their children. Just *how* this is to be achieved, however, is still to be made clear – this will be addressed further below. Even so, parents agree that what is required is a curriculum that drives the deep understanding of the curriculum's content and capabilities such that they can be transferred and applied to a variety of settings.

Parents choose to send their children to Catholic schools for many reasons. One of these is that they believe Catholic schools are able to form children and young people in ways that enable them to transform the world. By providing students with the best possible education in the context of pursuing truth, beauty and goodness, Catholic schools make an invaluable contribution to our social capital and the common good. Such a view characterises the way in which Catholic schools are viewed by members of the NSW Catholic school sector, including its many parents. In this context, the curriculum is seen not merely as the cumulation of the subjects studied, but the entire experience school provides. This extends to the intellectual, physical, spiritual, cultural, social and emotional outcomes of schooling.

CCSP notes that the various components that constitute the curriculum will receive differing levels of emphasis across the different education sectors and their schools. Mindful of this diversity, CCSP acknowledges that any reform of the curriculum needs to be respectful of and accommodate the diverse approaches taken by different schools and the diversity of views that exist amongst the families from which children and young people come. In this respect, CCSP looks forward to a NSW curriculum that continues to accommodate the education and formation of children and young people in the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church in the setting of the Catholic school.

REFORMING THE CONTENT OF THE CURRICULUM

Reform Direction 1: Creating a less crowded curriculum

CCSP agrees with the main idea presented here that an unnecessarily cluttered curriculum is not in the best interests of students. For all students' needs to be met, syllabus content should not be so heavily prescribed, and teachers should have the flexibility to explore areas that best meet the needs and interests of their students. CCSP notes the Interim Report's observation that what is mandatory and what is optional is not clear to teachers. This is even more so the case for parents. A current example is NESA's K-10 Personal Development, Health and Physical Education syllabus in which there is a lack of consistency between the K-6 and 7-10 parts of the syllabus in terms of how mandatory/optional content is presented.

CCSP is not making any recommendation or suggestion regarding which syllabuses require a reduction of content and/or by what percentage. We do, however, suggest that greater clarity is required in terms of identifying what is mandatory content. While it is important for extra-curricular topics to be addressed by schools, these should not be prescribed. There should be scope for schools to determine what fits best with the ethos of their school and with the needs and interests of the students and their families.

A reduction in the mandatory content is likely to have a corresponding effect on compliance requirements, which, therefore, can be reduced without compromising effective accountability and oversight. There is merit in attempting to reduce the time teachers spend on compliance activities as these activities take time and energy that could be better focused on learning activities.

Reform Direction 2: Promoting deep understanding

CCSP notes the Interim Report's push to focus more on essential disciplinary knowledge, skills, concepts and principles that develop progressively over time. However, there is some concern as to how this core content is to be identified and by whom. Such an initiative risks being dominated by self-serving interest groups concerned only with promoting their own particular agenda. Any approach taken needs to be evidence-based and objective, not biased. CCSP recommends a balanced approach to identifying core content (that will remove some of the undue emphasis placed on multitudinous syllabus dot-points) and giving teachers scope to introduce more flexible and creative approaches to delivering content and providing students with opportunities to go into greater depth.

Reform Direction 3: Building skills in applying knowledge

CCSP agrees with the importance placed on transferring and applying knowledge but warns against promoting these skills over learning the content knowledge itself. Students first learn and then transfer and apply their knowledge. As the Interim Reports states, these transfer and apply skills are to be developed in the context of engaging with disciplinary knowledge rather than attempting to be standalone. 21st century or soft skills are fine and need to be addressed, but they cannot exist in a vacuum.

There is no reason why the proposed approach should not occur across all subject areas. CCSP suspects that the importance of these kinds of skills will rise and fall as students move through the various stages of schooling. Curriculum designers will need to be mindful of this.

Reform Direction 4: A common entitlement

A 'common entitlement' is an agreeable concept so long as it is based on core content that has not been overly influenced by any special interest groups. While there is merit in prioritising literacy and numeracy and social and emotional development for children who require this, greater clarity is needed around what is meant by 'social and emotional development', and, how 'children who require this' is determined. CCSP recommends retention of the Key Learning Areas as part of the basic structure of the curriculum – they cannot merely be optional adornments serving a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy.

All students should be expected to develop a basic knowledge about, and appreciation of, Aboriginal languages, cultures and histories. As a feature of all Key Learning Areas, this will both enhance learning and promote reconciliation, which should be a goal of the curriculum. Such an inclusion will be of benefit to all students, but in particular, is likely to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who often face barriers of educational disadvantage.

The study of a language other than English by every student is supported on the assumption that it increases students' understandings of their first language. However, for this to occur effectively, creative approaches will need to be developed to deal with the dearth of teaching expertise in this area. The capacity of generalist teachers will need to be bolstered to facilitate the learning of languages other than English by every student.

To focus too much on the social, political and economic benefits to NSW would be a mistake. Such a focus risks schools and systems trying to predict which languages should be taught because they are deemed to be most useful or profitable. This is prone to fads and risks compromising the enjoyable enterprise that learning should be.

Senior students should be expected to undertake rigorous, high quality learning in areas of personal strength and interest, they should be expected to apply their learning to real-world problems and meaningful projects where it is appropriate to do so. For some areas in some subjects, however, this may not be appropriate. This issue will be touched on again in response to Reform Direction 13.

REFORMING THE STRUCTURE OF THE CURRICULUM

Reform Direction 5: Creating a more flexible curriculum

CCSP supports re-structuring the curriculum to give teachers greater flexibility to exercise their professional judgement. There is, however, the question of teacher capacity in taking such an approach. It cannot be assumed that every teacher is equipped with the knowledge and skills to manage this successfully. The proposed greater individualisation of learning has implications for teacher practice, particularly in the area of student assessments – does this Reform Direction suggest that common assessments are a thing of the past? While CCSP agrees with raising expectations for every student, just how this is to occur remains unclear. Accountability risks being compromised unless appropriate, although not burdensome, measures are put in place.

Reform Direction 6: Restructuring the curriculum

The re-organisation of the curriculum into levels of attainment rather than particular years of school has merit, but just how feasible this would be in the setting of the classroom is unclear. How many 'levels' are likely to exist in a class? What is manageable? The range of abilities among students of the same age is vast – how the curriculum can be structured to accommodate this presents a challenge. It is unclear whether the proposed re-structure is more feasible in some learning areas than others. The present reality is that teachers already have students working at different levels of attainment – they differentiate the learning to accommodate the diversity that exists and they cater for individual needs. This, however, is not necessarily as formalised as what is being proposed in the Interim Report. Nor is it necessarily the current practice of every teacher. Again, the topic of teacher capacity is an issue. Significant teacher professional learning will need to be available for this to work.

Assuming this re-structure would result in a move away from A to E reporting, and, leaving aside for now reporting requirements as legislated by the Commonwealth, CCSP advises that parents are keen to receive reports on their children that are easy to read and understand. Any move away from the current regime would need to be handled very well. For instance, the communication that has been provided to parents around the current use of learning progressions has, in many respects, been ineffective and inadequate. Most parents (and even some teachers) do not fully understand what learning progressions are. Communication around levels of attainment and embedding this concept into the broader educational discourse is likely to be a challenge that should not be taken lightly.

Reform Direction 7: Setting high expectations

CCSP supports the view that expectations should be set high and that minimum standards should be established for every student as an identified level of attainment. These should apply in the areas of literacy and numeracy as a minimum. It is important, however, that these benchmarks not act as a barrier, particularly for students with disability. Whether they apply to all or only some Key Learning Areas is a matter for further debate.

Reform Direction 8: Monitoring whether learning is on track

The concept of a student being 'on track' is useful as it will more readily point to any interventions needed as the student progresses through school – this appears to be its greatest strength – the teacher/school's ability to see a student's history and the degree to which that informs current strategies. What it does not reveal, however, is just *how* the teacher/school can get the student back on track. CCSP notes that the Interim Report seems to suggest that this measure is not necessarily expected to be a useful idea for *every* student. Undoubtedly, there are significant resource implications for supporting students who are 'off

track’ – this will be most evident in locations where large proportions of the student enrolment are deemed to be ‘off track’.

Reform Direction 9: Ensuring continuity of learning

A ‘levels of achievement’ approach might be a way to structure the curriculum so as to minimise disruptions that occur between stages or years, but, as mentioned above, just what this would look like and whether issues of teacher capacity could be addressed adequately, remain to be seen. The ‘levels of achievement’ approach not only presents administrative challenges, it will also be conceptually challenging for some teachers in terms of how they might manage a curriculum structure of this kind.

Given the proposed structure places less emphasis on years of schooling, CCSP notes and supports the Interim Report’s assertion that acknowledging milestones will continue to be important.

Ensuring the continuity of learning raises a number of issues, including how the culture is to be re-shaped to accommodate this new approach. Part of this entails the embedding of new professional language to accompany the new culture. For instance, how are the levels of attainment to be labelled? Will there be consultation around this?

Reform Direction 10: Assessing and communicating learning

As addressed above, critical to the success of any reform in the NSW curriculum is the extent to which parents and carers understand how their children are progressing through their schooling. Just how easily understood as a frame of reference will be the proposed sequence of levels of increasing attainment? How many levels of attainment will there be? One per subject, per unit of work, or one per syllabus outcome as they are currently understood?

While reporting should be focused on communicating the points individual students have reached in their long-term progress in an area of learning, in order to get continuity/reliability from one year the next, this approach requires even greater consistency of practice by teachers than currently exists. Information on the progress students have made over time should become a greater focus for reporting if it can be done with clarity. It would be useful for parents and carers to know whether students are ‘on track’ to achieve the standards expected of them by the completion of their schooling, but this is not to say that, to some extent, A to E reporting does not already achieve this. The degree to which the proposed approach can address the seeming inconsistency that sometimes exists between school reports and external measures, such as NAPLAN, is not known. This is an area that would benefit from further investigation.

It will be necessary to engage with parents via their representative bodies in order to ensure that the goals around assessing and communicating learning are both achievable and of value.

REFORMING THE SENIOR SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Reform Direction 11: Monitoring whether learning is on track

CCSP supports the move towards a more integrated curriculum and away from the dichotomous academic-vocational nature of the present reality. At the same time, CCSP warns against a one-size-fits-all approach. While there may be merit in reducing the total number of subjects, the question of who would be determining which subjects remain and in what form is a serious consideration. Also, how would such a curriculum continue to cater for large numbers of students wishing to study various languages? Currently, languages make up a huge proportion of the total number of senior school subjects.

The expectation that every senior secondary course includes a balance of underpinning theory and transfer and application of knowledge would require some subjects to change only a little, while others might have to change substantially.

Reform Direction 12: Recognising progress and attainment

There may be merit in a 'modularised' approach to senior school, but without having any further detail of what this might entail, it is difficult to comment. CCSP is concerned that such an approach might be too open-ended and vague. Currently, it is quite clear from existing syllabuses what it is students need to learn. It may be advantageous to have teachers assess students' performances on each module, but given the predictable range of student abilities, just how the teacher manages to keep track of who is on track is likely to be a significant challenge. As a minimum, there will need to be a significant investment in teacher professional development. Unfortunately, the workload implications are unpredictable.

Because senior school is so high stakes, there has to be some kind of externally assessed component of every advanced course. This does not have to be in the form of a written examination, but there needs to be external assessment for the same reasons as exist now, including consistency and fairness. Concerns that end-of-school examinations promote the memorisation and 'regurgitation' of pre-prepared answers could be addressed by looking into how other jurisdictions, such as the Australian Capital Territory, assess senior students.

Reform Direction 13: Introducing a major project

CCSP does not have a definitive position on whether every student should be required to undertake a major project in senior school. Currently, some students steer away from subjects that include a major work because it does not suit how they learn or how they best cope with pressure. Others relish such challenges.

Undertaking such a project in the form of group collaboration would be a significant departure from senior school assessment as we currently know it and how this could be managed requires further explanation. Access to resources and expertise are major considerations – as this major project is likely to ‘count’ in the overall scheme of things, the playing field would need to be level, in both perception and reality. Unless externally assessed, how consistency of marking would be achieved also presents a huge challenge.

CCSP wonders how comparability across the different areas of learning would be ensured. It may be, however, that this is not deemed to be an important feature. More detail is needed before further comment can be made.

Reform Direction 14: Redefining learning areas

There is some overlap here with Reform Direction 11. The redefining of learning areas might reduce the current academic-vocational tension, although achieving this is a big challenge.

It is unclear the degree to which the grouping or integrating of subjects is to occur. For instance, would the reform result in an integrated approach to Science or would Physics, Chemistry and Biology remain, each in its own right? How would the plethora of languages that are currently included in the curriculum be dealt with? Much of the current variability exists to cater for a wide range of student abilities and interests – any reduction in the range of offerings is likely to have its own set of problems, including potential disengagement.

While there may be merit in improving collaboration between schools, universities, vocational education providers and industries, school should not be merely a preparatory phase for what comes next. Too great a focus on university or employment readiness risks detracting from the holistic experience that is (or should be) senior schooling.

Reform Direction 15: Reviewing ATAR

CCSP agrees that the calculating and reporting of the ATAR commands unnecessary and undeserved attention and energy. Contrary to media coverage, not all students are bound for, or seeking, a place at university. Yet, it seems to be touted as the only measure of success. The question of how feasible any of the ‘*ATAR alternatives*’ are is both pressing and material.

While ATARs provide some point of reference for parents, there is little understanding among parents around how they are calculated and for what purpose. They seem to drive the agenda for senior schooling and reduce thirteen years of learning down to one number. The school sector, including parent bodies, should offer to work with the university sector and UAC to explore alternatives to what is presently in place.

Conclusion

CCSP acknowledges the challenges NSW faces in delivering a curriculum that supports teachers to nurture wonder, ignite passion and provide every young person with knowledge, skills and attributes that will help prepare them for a lifetime of learning, meaningful adult employment and effective future citizenship. The parents of children and young people in Catholic schools look forward to a curriculum that achieves this noble goal in the context of a school education that sees schools continue to educate and form students in accordance with their own particular ethos and mission.

CCSP congratulates Professor Masters on this Interim Report and thanks him for providing the NSW community with a vision of how the NSW curriculum might look. CCSP acknowledges his wide consultation, research and his resultant vision.

As the community discerns the Interim Report's Reform Directions and the way forward, CCSP commits to remaining engaged in the Review process and to helping deliver a curriculum that is in the best interests of the children and young people of NSW, now and in the future.

CCSP is grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Interim Report and will happily contribute further to the work of the Review in an ongoing spirit of good will.