

14 June 2018

David de Carvalho
Chief Executive Officer
Level 4, 117 Clarence St
Sydney NSW 2000



By email: ceo@nesa.nsw.edu.au

Dear Mr de Carvalho

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into shaping the terms of reference ('TORs') for the NSW Curriculum Review.

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to see positive change in our communities and alleviate poverty in NSW. As the peak body representing the community sector in NSW, we hear from the community about the root causes of poverty, and the importance of getting it right from the start to better support vulnerable families and communities, to ensure no child grows up in poverty.

The important role school plays in our society necessitates community input and involvement in shaping the NSW curriculum. While NCOSS is pleased to be included in this consultation process, we are concerned to see that no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have been included in this stage of the consultation. NCOSS strongly recommends that the following Aboriginal controlled organisations are invited to participate in this process:

- NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC)
- NSW/ACT Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS)
- NSW Aboriginal Education Consultation Group (AECG)
- First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN)
- Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (NSW)
- Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Centre (AH&MRC)
- Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation (Link-Up)

It is vital that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included in the development of the NSW curriculum. Schools have the ability, and responsibility to close the gap in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal school attendance, to halve the gap for Aboriginal children in reading, writing and numeracy achievements and employment outcomes within a decade. To do this, the curriculum must allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see their culture and identity reflected in the curriculum so that they can fully participate in the education system. This cannot be done without meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

The voice of children and young people in this review process is also essential. Young people bring a unique perspective and lived experience and should be part of any future curriculum design. NCOSS recommends that the TORs stipulate that the review will meaningfully engage children and young people from diverse cultural, economic and geographical backgrounds in the NSW Curriculum Review process.

What is the most important question the NSW Curriculum Review should answer?

The role of the NSW curriculum is to adequately prepare students to be active participants in the community and the future economy. Never before has our society experienced such rapid social and global change. As our world changes the NSW curriculum must adequately adapt to reflect the cultural, social, ecological and technological shift in our community. Our curriculum must ensure students have the necessary knowledge and skills so that they can thrive as thought leaders, obtain skilled jobs and live a life free of poverty and inequality.

Knowledge and education are key factors that contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and promote sustainable development and economic growth. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have low educational attainment because they face significant barriers to participate in the curriculum. Barriers to participation come in various forms, for example, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may avoid school because their parents cannot afford a new school uniform or packed lunch every day; an Aboriginal child may feel that their culture and knowledge system is not reflected in what he or she is learning, making them feel like they do not belong; children from non-English speaking backgrounds may face various cultural, lingual and socio-economic challenges.

Low educational attainment has multiple implications, including: criminality, low economic participation, vulnerability to domestic or family violence and health issues, to name just a few. Schools are therefore a powerful and crucial function in our community to end intergenerational poverty and disadvantage. Therefore, the most important question the NSW Curriculum Review should answer is:

Does the NSW curriculum create opportunities for young people so that they can break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage?

In 10 years' time, what is the best thing the NSW K-12 curriculum will be known for?

In 10 years' time NCOSS would like the NSW K-12 curriculum to be best known for breaking the cycle of poverty for children and young people in NSW. Schools are dynamic places which are uniquely placed to move the needle on child poverty because they are structurally connected to children and their families, and are safe places where people can be supported and referred to the necessary services without being stigmatised, as is often the case with mainstream services. Schools are therefore well placed to identify early on when a student is at risk or vulnerable to violence. When we go out to communities we frequently hear about the important role schools play in identifying students at risk of violence, or other vulnerabilities, and intervening early before the risk escalates and the young person is in crisis.

The early intervention method has proved successful in early childhood education and care services. When we are out in communities we hear about the about the great work that schools are doing across NSW to tackle childhood obesity, which we know mainly effects children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. While outside the scope of this review,

NCOSS would nonetheless like to note the importance of early childhood education and care in breaking the cycle of poverty and enhancing a child's developmental outcomes. During NCOSS's regional consultations we heard that early childhood education and care services act as key hubs that connect vulnerable children and families to a variety of early childhood support. NCOSS would like the Government to continue to work with NCOSS and other stakeholders to improve access to early childhood education and care for all children in NSW.

What do you think are the 3 most important things the NSW Curriculum Review should achieve?

1. Develop a strong curriculum that prepares students for the social, cultural, ecological and technological challenges of the future

Technological advances in artificial intelligence and its increasing use across multiple fields and disciplines, including innovation for social change, means technology has never been more important for our future. Australia faces growing social and ecological challenges, including a growing aging population. These challenges require our future leaders to have a strong cross disciplinary skill set so they can deliver creative solutions in our rapidly changing world.

The NSW Curriculum Review must also consider the importance of the healthcare and community service sector, which has the highest job growth than any other sector. Since 2000 the healthcare and community service sector has grown by 730,000 jobs in eighteen years. This is in comparison to the manufacturing industry which has decreased by 130,000 jobs during this period.

Within the sector the biggest occupational group is aged care and disability care workers. The growth in this area can be explained by Australia's aging population and a shift to a customer directed care model in aged care and disability support services.

NCOSS is concerned that the significant gap in skilled health and community care workers will continue to grow and will only become harder to fill. NCOSS undertakes regional consultations every year with members of the social and community sector and we continue to hear about the growing challenges of finding skilled workers in the sector, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities. This gap requires a collaborative effort by government, schools, vocational training centres and universities to equip, train and encourage students to enter this vibrant and rewarding sector. It is essential that the NSW Curriculum Review consider our future challenges and where there will be job growth when scoping essential skills for all children and young people.

2. Ensure the NSW Curriculum Review applies an equity lens which takes into consideration that children and young people experience multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage

Equal treatment does not result in equal access when children and young people come from diverse socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and experience different gender. To ensure the curriculum is fair, inclusive, equitable and accessible to students from all backgrounds and locations across NSW, an equity lens should be applied to the NSW curriculum to ensure no child or young person experiences barriers to learning and opportunities. NCOSS recommend the NSW Curriculum Review apply an equity lens, so as to analyse the impact of current processes, teaching, lessons and foundational assumptions of the NSW curriculum.

This equity lens must take into consideration that different children and young people may experience multiple types of disadvantage and that this disadvantage intersects and compounds. We know that inequality is exacerbated by, and intersects with, other forms of disadvantage, such as gender, racism, and discrimination based on age, sex, disability and physical isolation. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities, children and young people with disability, children and young people living in regional, rural and remote areas and LGBTIQ communities.

An equity lens that takes into account multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage would assist in identifying where there is inadequate cultural representation or understanding. For example, an equity lens would ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity is reflected in the curriculum, which is vitally important to ensure the self-esteem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is nourished. It is also important for non-Aboriginal students who have so much to gain from learning about Aboriginal knowledge systems and culture.

An equity lens would be able to illuminate where negative gender norms hide in our education system and help end domestic and family violence and empower women and girls. K-12 is a critical period when young people develop culturally ingrained ideas about gender stereotypes which promotes inequity between the sexes. Accepting gender stereotypes can have significant consequences for young people in the future. It can set children up to accept power imbalances which may lead to violent and unhappy relationships and sustains structural inequality evidenced by the gender pay gap, women's lower workforce participation and the low number of women on boards or in positions of power.

3. Eliminate racism and fostering an environment where reconciliation can flourish

This review is timely as we finish celebrating National Reconciliation Week's theme: "Don't Keep History A Mystery: Learn. Share. Grow". The NSW curriculum has the ability and responsibility to meaningfully engage students and communities in reconciliation. NCOSS recommend that the NSW Curriculum Review ensure that reconciliation and the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is embedded across the NSW curriculum. Reconciliation is essential if we want to close the gap to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and a prerequisite for reconciliation is the process of uncovering our shared history, and learning about Aboriginal culture, history and traditions. Indigenous people's right to have their culture and history reflected in education is stipulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states:

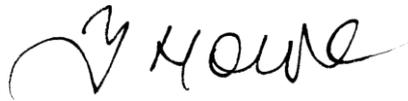
Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.¹

Recognising this right, we also have an obligation to all children in Australia to give them the opportunity to learn about the oldest living culture in the world. Australians are proud of First Nations people and it is important that all students have the opportunity to learn from them and their ancient history.

How would you judge the success of the NSW Curriculum Review?

NCOSS would like to see a measurement and assessment of the poverty and equity gap in schools in NSW and how the NSW Curriculum Review measures against these outcomes. We recommend measures to evaluate whether children and young people at risk of or experiencing poverty or disadvantage are achieving improved learning and education outcomes. NCOSS recommends engaging with advocacy bodies and people from vulnerable communities in designing the measurement and assessment framework.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tracy McLeod Howe'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'T' and 'M'.

Tracy McLeod Howe
Chief Executive Officer
NSW Council of Social Service

¹ United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, art 15.