



The Hon Alan Tudge MP

Minister for Education and Youth

Mr Norm Hart
Acting Chair
Australian Curriculum,
Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Board

By email: normhart53@outlook.com

Dear Mr Hart,

I understand that the ACARA Board will have a two day meeting later this week to discuss the next stage of the Australian Curriculum Review that ACARA is undertaking.

It is in this context that I wish to again make clear my expectations about the revised Australian Curriculum and in particular the need for a curriculum that lifts learning standards, incorporates evidence-based practices, and has an overall positive view of Australia's history and liberal democracy. It should also be simplified and decluttered as per the explicit terms of reference.

The current draft curriculum does not meet these conditions and I would not agree to it.

My expectation is that the revised draft that you present to Education Ministers will be significantly different to the present draft, taking into account these expectations, but also the feedback from our top mathematics associations, reading experts and historians, among others.

Some of these groups, such as Australia's peak mathematics association believe that the current draft will take Australian kids backwards.

If the current draft is simply tweaked, it will not be supported. It needs fundamental changes.

Let me expand on some of these points.

The lifting of learning standards.

While lifting learning standards was not explicitly within ACARA's terms of reference for the Review, it should be inherent in everything ACARA does.

As you would be aware, the OECD's PISA tests indicate that Australian learning standards have fallen significantly over the last twenty years despite a 60 percent real per capita increase in school funding.

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We have lost the equivalent of a year's worth of learning over the last two decades. In mathematics, it is even greater. The average 15 year old today is 14 months behind in their learning compared to the average 15 year old Australian in the year 2000. They are three years behind the average Singaporean 15 year old.

For the first time, Australia is no longer performing significantly above the OECD average in the three core domains of reading, mathematics and science.

The curriculum sets the achievement standard for each year of school and the revised Australian Curriculum should lift those standards so that Australian school students can regain lost ground.

We must be put on a pathway to be at least back to where we were twenty years ago.

Instead, in many cases, your draft revised curriculum takes us backwards. Learning the times tables is the clearest example where it is being pushed back to Year Four from Year Three. In Singapore, it starts in Year Two.

The Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute (AMSI) has identified 20 examples where standards have been weakened or delayed in your draft.

Embedding evidence-based practices

Like lifting learning standards, applying evidence-based practices was not explicitly in the Terms of Reference for the Review. But nor should it have to be. It should be inherent in everything ACARA does.

However, to my great frustration, evidence-based practices have not been consistently embedded in your current draft.

My concerns are particularly in the most important subjects of reading and mathematics.

There is still too much emphasis on whole-language learning of reading and insufficient emphasis on phonics. Thirty years ago, determining the best way to teach reading may have been a legitimate debate, but it is not now.

The evidence is crystal clear from national reading inquiries in the United States in 2000, the United Kingdom in 2006 and Australia in 2004 that the teaching of phonics is vital.

As the Education Director of the Grattan Institute said to me recently: "There are a lot of things we don't know in education, but how to teach reading is not one of them".

I intend to address the education faculties who fail to adopt evidence-based practices in the training of the student-teachers. However, I equally expect the curriculum to embed evidence-based practices.

Similarly, in mathematics, the peak mathematics associations and mathematics teachers across Australia have pointed out that there is insufficient focus on mastering the basic mathematical concepts. As AMSI has noted, "mastery of mathematical approaches is needed before student problem solving can be effective."

They also point out that concepts of “mathematising” will be confusing and ambiguous to teachers.

My expectation is that evidence-based practices are embedded throughout the revised Australian Curriculum. Failure to do so would be supporting ideology over the future of our children.

A balanced and a positive view of our nation

My third area of concern is that the history and civics content in your draft is not balanced and has an overly negative view of our nation.

We should expect our young people leaving school to have a good understanding of our liberal democracy and how it is that we are one of the wealthiest, most free countries on earth which millions of migrants have immigrated to.

If we fail to teach this properly, then future generations will not defend it as previous generations have done.

Your draft, however, diminishes Australia’s western, liberal, and democratic values.

The overarching impression from the curriculum is that the main feature of western civilisation is slavery, imperialism and colonisation.

Christianity, which our greatest historian Geoffrey Blainey describes as the greatest influence on modern Australia, is barely mentioned. When it is mentioned, it is often in the context of the “power of the Church”.

Important historical events are removed or reframed, such as the emphasis on invasion theory over Australia Day.

Even Anzac Day is presented as a contested idea, rather than the most sacred of all days where we honour the millions of men and women who have served in war, and the 100,000 who gave their lives for our freedom.

The word “contested” is introduced 19 times in your draft curriculum, compared to just two in the current one.

Students should leave school with a love of country and an understanding that we live in one of the great democracies of the world. We are not perfect, and children should learn of our faults, particularly some of the treatment of Indigenous people. But there is a reason why we are a magnet for millions of migrants.

My advice in redrafting the history and civics aspects of the curriculum is to listen to our great historians and reflect the views of mainstream Australians.

Decluttering the curriculum

Finally, I want to mention something that is explicit in your Terms of Reference and that is the need to declutter the curriculum.

My view is that there is still more work to be done here. The documents come to 3,500 pages and very difficult to penetrate.

Singapore's is one quarter the length and more simply written.

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Thank you for your work to date. What you are undertaking is incredibly important to our children's future and our nation.

The education landscape in Australia has been shaken in the last 18 months and tested by the COVID pandemic in ways we had never imagined necessary. The resilience and adaptability of each and every school system, each and every teacher and Principal is something to be applauded. I believe that the best way to serve the interests of our young people now is to seize every opportunity to lift educational standards. The draft of the Australian Curriculum is such an opportunity.

Yours sincerely



Alan Tudge

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