

## **National Curriculum again?**

Yes, we have seen it all before and will this one be any different? We all know the reasons and arguments for a national curriculum, but will there be the political will and goodwill to get one? And why would NSW, with a superior curriculum that has led to students scoring better on most national and international tests, want to give up what it has for a national compromise?

These are some of the questions currently being floated about the National Curriculum Board's efforts to achieve a national curriculum. For classroom teachers, they need to realize that the proposal is K-12 and that it affects them.

## **Will the politicians agree?**

As might be expected there are a number of political, administrative and educational forces driving this current move to a national curriculum.

Although the politicians of the time 1990-1994 have moved on, there are still some educational advisers and educational bureaucrats who have never forgotten the misadventures of the early 1990s when a national curriculum led by Ken Boston, the then Director-General of NSW DET, almost got up. Although highly controversial and lacking wide teacher and community support a proposal was brought forward to the ministers of education to adopt the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles. At the same time the ministers considered a proposal regarding Key Competencies some supporting both, others rejecting both and others accepting one only.

In 1994, the recently elected state governments in Victoria and Western Australia had not been committed to the process or the product and did not agree to implement the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles and other states opposed the focus on Key Competencies, especially any separate assessment of them. As a result, both proposals failed to gain unanimous support.

In NSW, the Board of Studies incorporated the Key Competencies into all syllabuses was very relieved that the National Profiles were defeated, despite the support for them by the NSW Minister for Education. The Board, and officers of the Board, had been resisting the inclusion of the National Profiles into NSW syllabuses and this resistance had been a major factor in the dismissal of the Board President.

Such tensions were duplicated around the states and territories and it was not a surprise that when the issue was forced for a decision at the meeting of ministers in 1994 the proposal was lost.

The statements and profiles remained influential in the curriculum of many states and territories but eventually their influence has declined as each state and territory again faced their own demands for a curriculum for their schools.

For some years the Howard Government had wanted to rekindle national curriculum and with further prompting from the Australian Council for Educational Research, promoted the idea of a national curriculum with a focus on an Australian Year 12 exit certificate. Part of the strategy was to ridicule the curriculum and examinations in other states and territories, especially NSW, which was seen as a major obstacle because of its successful curriculum and examination performances. With Labor governments in all states and territories this proved a poor strategy. The state ministers eventually rejected the Commonwealth and met separately to outline their agenda for education and a national curriculum. The advent of a Labor Federal Government has brought this group back into cooperation with the Federal Government.

National curriculum might become a reality while the Labor governments are dominant and in control. However, already Western Australia has changed and few would want to lay money on the NSW Government being returned at the next poll. The attitude of an increasing number of non-Labor states and territories could yet prove a stumbling block for a fully national curriculum.

## What will it look like?

One of the major issues with the 1990s version of a national curriculum was that it was to be inclusive and constructed around eight learning areas. This artificial construct caused great discontent amongst the subject disciplines who did not want their discipline being compromised by others. This was the case for the humanities being lumped together in *Studies of Society and Environment*, sciences in *Science* and visual and performing arts in *The Arts*.

The current proposal mainly avoids this issue by focusing initially on English, Mathematics, Science and History with an intention to expand this to languages and Geography. The obvious question is why these four subjects? Why are they valued above others? Why are the arts, health and economics and other cultural studies ignored? Will this focus on these four subjects eventually lead to them being a core curriculum for every student? As Christians, do we think that a narrow curriculum is the best way for students to learn about the God of all creation and his relationship with humans?

These questions are already pressuring the breadth of the history proposal:

*Historical inquiry also provides opportunities for the incorporation of ICT, languages, the creative arts, geography, and civics and citizenship. Accordingly, the national history curriculum should identify relevant elements of each of these cross-curriculum areas.* (Page 6 National History Curriculum: Framing Paper.)

It is difficult to see the historians liking this statement. However, what is said in a document like this and what actually is in the final product can be two different things. Given early drafts the historians may have nothing to worry about. However, everyone else with an interest in this area of the curriculum might have concerns and the *TCFNews* article on "[The history debates: Will they never end?](#)" takes up this matter.

Another area of concern is how some may view this proposal for four subjects as a perfect solution to the crowded curriculum. I am not so sure. Curriculum evolves and needs to be contextualised. Each school needs some autonomy in deciding the emphasis and time to be devoted to prescribed curriculum. In these ways, they can match the needs of students through innovative and engaging lessons. It is of concern to me that the mathematics framing paper has almost no mention, let alone intention, around financial literacy. One must ask what sort of mathematics is being proposed in this paper and what place real world contexts will play in ensuring that mathematics is relevant to all students.

## Where to from here?

There is a clear agenda to make the National Curriculum more than a series of outcome statements and the framing papers provide enough evidence that the end result will be very prescriptive. This is both good, in the sense that every one will do something similar, and scary in that it provides power to those who will decide what is to be taught. Therefore, the need to get involved in national curriculum is very important for both individuals and organizations.

Some will recognize the strong input from NSW into the existing framing documents. NSW curriculum people have been involved and Rod Randall, the NSWDET, Director of Curriculum has been appointed as General Manager of the Office of the Board. Rob's previous experience as a learning area officer in the 1990s attempt at a national curriculum and as director of curriculum in Western Australia and the NSW Board of Studies will give him the perfect background. NSW has made it clear that it does not want to compromise its curriculum so the other states may have to follow its lead if there is to be national agreement. While this is good for NSW it does cover up some issues within the NSW curriculum and perpetuate a strong focus on disciplines without regard for the benefits of curriculum integration and the emergence of new knowledge. These matters can only be addressed by individuals and organizations holding the developers to account for their

products. This will be difficult to do in the published time frames and the busyness of schooling. It will be even more difficult if teachers fail to take an interest at this stage and make their voices heard.

I hope TCFNSW can take up this matter and get some feedback to the National Curriculum Board. The proposed conference for May has secured Professor Barry McGaw the Chair of the National Curriculum Board. He has been Director for Education at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). He had earlier been Executive Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and Chair the Taskforce to develop the current NSW HSC. Although the conference is after the first deadlines for comment on the framing papers there will still be a lot of water to pass under the bridge regarding development after May 2009.

My final challenge is to get some feedback for publication in *TCFNews*. I invite you to write 150 words about your concerns or support for a national curriculum. I hope we can publish a number next time. Send your 150 words to [tcfnsw@pacific.net.au](mailto:tcfnsw@pacific.net.au) or to our mailing address.

John Gore