

## Unprecedented curriculum calm?

Although primary teachers may find it difficult to believe, NSW is currently undergoing a period of curriculum stability. The NSW Board of Studies has very little on its agenda for curriculum development and schools are enjoying a period in which they are able to focus on implementation. Secondary teachers will appreciate the opportunity to further embed new Years 7-10 syllabuses and to continue with the current HSC syllabuses.

Primary teachers may be finding this unprecedented calm less relaxing. They are already discussing the issue of reporting to parents using the A to E scale, which is the subject of the TCFNSW meeting on 27 May (see enclosed brochure) and being asked to review their primary curriculum after the 2005 NSW BOS Foundation Statements. The impact of this document is likely to be different in the government and non-government sectors.

### Non-government schools

In the non-government sector changes to the Education Act 1990 have made the implementation of the BOS syllabuses mandatory in all non-government primary schools. Until now, these schools were able to deal with minimal curriculum requirements in each learning area. But now the Foundation Statements define a much greater minimal curriculum within a broader syllabus context.

There is still considerable latitude for the non-government sector as they can choose the outcomes and content relevant to their students to achieve the Foundation Statements. The implication here is that not all the syllabus components have to be met which raises an interesting question about what the syllabus standards are, whether non-government schools have to meet them and how they are reflected in the general A to E descriptors of achievement and the work samples that are being gathered to illustrate them.

### Government schools

In Government primary schools, teachers are facing the same issues around reporting A to E and are coming to terms with both a new curriculum implementation policy *Curriculum planning and programming, and assessing and reporting to parents K-12* and an attempt to address perceptions about the overcrowded curriculum known as Connected Outcomes Groups (COGs). The new policy *Curriculum planning and programming and assessing and reporting to parents K-12* provides teachers in both primary and secondary schools with clear expectations about what Government schools are to do in these areas. The policy is supported by an implementation document on policy standards which can be used to monitor school implementation.

In the area of planning and programming the requirements are for primary schools to program each KLA in each year to meet the syllabus standards which are described as the outcomes, content and indicators of the syllabus and not only the Foundation Statements. In response the Curriculum Directorate of the department has developed Connected Outcomes Groups (COGs) to illustrate one way that the primary curriculum, including all outcomes and syllabus requirements can be put together for the learning areas of Science and Technology, Human Society and Its Environment, Creative Arts and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education.

### COGs

The COGs link outcomes from different learning areas around a series of content headings that were chosen at a particular time as a set of coat hangers that could hold the curriculum standards and embrace the entire curriculum. If this exercise was done at a different time and by different people there would be other COG titles and a different arrangement of the syllabus standards. In fact, the COGs are not mandatory and are provided to assist schools to organise the primary curriculum. Schools could develop their own COGs, but in doing this they would need to ensure coverage of all the components of the syllabus standard in all stages.

If the COGs are not mandatory then the COG units are certainly not mandatory. Teachers can ensure that the standards are maintained by using the COGs, but changing the COG units to substitute subject matter that is suited to the students and the resources of the school is both possible and permissible. In making this substitution, teachers need to ensure that the same syllabus standards embedded into the COG units are achieved and that such changes are done as part of a whole school approach so that the integrity of the school's scope and sequence is maintained and that students are not unnecessarily repeating subject matter within or across stages.

#### **What are the changes trying to achieve**

The changes to primary curriculum are all in response to the 2004 report *Time to teach, Time to learn* in which the main issue was that teachers were feeling overwhelmed by attempting to report on student achievement on all of the outcomes within each stage of learning in all of the syllabuses. The enquiry was driven by the workload issues for teachers in attempting this form of reporting. While the Department had argued that it had never required this form of reporting, the lack of advice on reporting was criticised in the Report. The Department's response is the new policy *Curriculum planning and programming and assessing and reporting to parents K-12*.

In the report *Time to teach, Time to learn* were some recommendations about the curriculum and questions were raised about what is mandatory and the perception by teachers of an overcrowded curriculum. This perception was fed by both the expectation that many schools had accepted about reporting on all outcomes and that teachers had only had a full set of primary syllabuses since 2002 and were still coming to terms with this full set.

The NSW BOS was given the task of recommending on curriculum change and in its first attempt designated some outcomes as mandatory. This created the perception of a reduced curriculum where teachers would be likely teach subject matter related to the mandatory outcomes and the others would get little attention. Within the wider education community, both the concept of mandatory as a selection of existing outcomes and the choice of outcomes to be mandated were heavily criticised and the proposal was abandoned.

In the mandatory outcomes proposal the BOS was looking for a way to establish the same curriculum requirements for both government and non-government schools. Up until 2004, the Education Act 1990 provided considerable freedom for non-government primary schools and strict requirements for Government schools regarding the primary curriculum. To assist the Board of Studies in its registration of non-government schools, the Act was to be changed to require their compliance with the mandatory outcomes. In this context the Foundation Statements were developed to broadly cover the entire syllabuses and to give some freedom about the selection of outcomes and subject matter.

There have been some different interpretations about the use of the Foundation Statements within the Government sector. Rather than reporting on outcomes, the Foundation Statements may provide some assistance to teachers for reporting student achievement, but they may not be all that useful for planning and programming where the detail of the syllabus outcomes and subject matter provide a better focus.

As a result and because of the need for the Government to assure the community about what is actually taught in Government schools, the Department developed both the policy *Curriculum planning and programming and assessing and reporting to parents K-12* and the COGs and their associated units to show schools how they can have their cake and eat it to. That is, schools can provide their students with the full curriculum set of knowledge and understanding, skills and values outlined in the syllabuses of the key learning areas. To achieve this important learning for students in Government schools a new form of planning and programming was needed, hence the development by the Curriculum Directorate of the Department of COGs and sample COG units for all the COGs to help teachers to achieve this goal.

What Government schools now have access to is a full primary curriculum where they can modify by substitution some of the content to suit their resources and provide teaching to meet the policy standards. As a result students will have access to the full curriculum. As a web document the COGs are being continually updated so that new and emerging curriculum needs, like financial literacy, can be addressed.

Currently, the COGs are not available to non-government schools, after all they did not contribute to the cost of producing them. However, this exclusion of other interested schools is not necessarily in the best interests of the Government as the COGs are of interest to other education systems nationally. If NSW wishes to influence the national curriculum agenda it might be in the Government's interest to make this material freely available.

So that is where we are with planning and programming, but what about assessing and reporting? Perhaps our meeting on 27 May with Carol Taylor will help to address these issues.

John Gore