

NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A BIPARTISAN BAD IDEA

A national curriculum involves more risks than benefits, argues **Ross Farrelly**

Irrespective of which party wins the next federal election, it looks as if Australia is in for a national curriculum. Education Minister Julie Bishop has taken her predecessor's proposal for a national leaving certificate one step further and is now pushing for a national curriculum. Labor under Kevin Rudd issued a policy document supporting a national curriculum, creating a bipartisan consensus at federal level.

In April this year Bishop persuaded the Labor state and territory education ministers on the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to set up working groups to consider models for national curricula.¹

In the same month the Council for the Australian Federation released a report entitled *The Future of Schooling in Australia*, which outlines the collective vision of the states and territories for future directions in school reform. This report also endorses a more uniform approach to reporting student achievement and a national curriculum which sets 'core content and achievement standards'.²

In general terms the states and territories will not be obliged to teach a single national curriculum but they will be expected to show that their curricula comply with a national framework. They will also be obliged to report student performance on a nationally consistent scale so comparison between states and territories will be possible. Other measures put forward in the proposal include replacing society and environment studies with the more traditional subjects of history, geography and economics.

Reasons for a national curriculum

Julie Bishop gives a number of reasons as to why she supports moves towards a national curriculum. Her first and most compelling reason is that a national curriculum would eliminate unnecessary replication under the current system whereby each state develops its own curriculum. In a speech to the National Press Club in February this year, Ms Bishop said, 'In a country of 20 million people, why do we need to develop eight curricula in eight jurisdictions?'³

As evidence for this argument, she cites the findings in the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) report *Year 12 Curriculum Content and Achievement Standards*, which concludes that many of the state and territory curricula (particularly the sciences) already have a large percentage of common material.⁴ Bishop's argument is, if the curricula already have much in common, why not have one comprising all that is common and then choose the best of those parts which are different to make up the rest?

There seems to be a prima facie financial case for eliminating replication among state curricula. However, any saving would depend on how the

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centralised body administered the curriculum in each state. Since all states would have to be consulted on the content of a national curriculum and it would have to be delivered and administered in each state, the resulting costs may be similar to the current system. No detailed proposal for these arrangements has been done, nor have detailed costings been prepared. It is therefore difficult to say what, if any, savings would be achieved.

The second reason Ms Bishop gives for a national curriculum is that it will raise standards across the country. This appears to be her strongest motivation for introducing these measures. Her reasoning is that by selecting the best of all the state curricula and combining the cream of the crop into a single national curriculum, all students in every state would be better off. Again, at first glance, this seems to be a reasonable argument.

However, this line of reasoning ignores one very important fact. Consolidating the eight different state and territory curricula into a single national curriculum changes the curriculum development environment from one which has some scope for competition, comparison and diversity into a monoculture in which there is a single solution imposed on every school in the country. This consolidation of decision-making is a recipe for the lowering of standards, not for raising them. At least with eight different state curricula, curriculum developers can easily compare their work with other states and debate the relative merits of various approaches. Under a national curriculum this ability to compare would be lost.

Here we can learn from the experience of a national curriculum in England and Wales. In those countries a national curriculum was introduced in 1998 with the promise that it would raise standards. But it failed to do so. Starting in 1983, the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre at Durham University ran a detailed analysis of A-level students' performance. Their results showed that the abilities of biology, English literature, French, geography, history and mathematics students fell between 1988 and 2001 and increased slightly thereafter.⁵

The decline in maths was particularly significant and prompted the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, The London Mathematical Society and the Engineering Council to conduct an enquiry in 1999 into how to combat the problem.

The enquiry found a 'serious decline in students' mastery of basic mathematical skills and level of preparation for mathematics-based degree courses. This decline is well established and affects students at all levels.'⁶

By 2002, Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of Schools, wrote that the national curriculum had failed to deliver and should be abolished.⁷

The third reason Julie Bishop gives for the introduction of a national curriculum is that it will assist families which move interstate with school-aged children. However, this argument does not hold water for two reasons. Firstly, the percentage of school-aged children who move interstate each year is very low. In 2006 approximately 80,000⁸ out of a total school population of 3.3 million⁹ moved interstate. That is 2.4% of the school population. The introduction of a measure which will disadvantage all students through lowering standards cannot be justified on the grounds of making things a little easier for such a small number. Furthermore, since the curricula are already very similar in many areas, the difficulties experienced when moving from state to state would be minimal.

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The fourth justification put forward for a single national curriculum is that it is fairer because no child will be in a state with an inferior curriculum. However uniformity is not synonymous with fairness. Replacing a system of eight state and territory curricula, some of which are better than others, with a single national curriculum, which could well end up being worse than them all, is not fair to any Australian child.

One of the least plausible reasons put forward by Ms Bishop for her proposal is that a national curriculum will be more accountable to public opinion than the state and territory curricula. In an address to the History Teachers' Association in late 2006 she said, 'A common model curriculum would (by virtue of being on the national stage) result in curriculum being made more accountable

through greater public scrutiny at the bar of public opinion.¹⁰ I have argued previously that input into state curricula by anyone other than education professionals is virtually nil.¹¹ Public submissions are called for and curriculum review documents are available on the internet but because parents lack any real mechanism to influence curriculum content they become disengaged from the curriculum development process. It is hard to see how removing the curriculum one step further from the parental level is going to make it more accountable. I predict that it would have exactly the opposite effect.

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The final and most misguided reason put forward for the national curriculum is, in Ms Bishop's own words, that it will counter the 'ideologues who have hijacked [the] school curriculum'¹². In her History Teachers' Association speech she said, 'We ... need to improve the quality of what is actually taught [in schools] ... We need to take school curriculum out of the hands of ideologues in the state and territory education bureaucracies and give it to say a national board of studies.'¹³

The thinking here is completely muddled. If the 'ideologues' can hijack a state school curriculum they can also hijack a national one and wreak their havoc not on a state-wide level but on a national level. It is the centralised state curricula which allow the state-wide hijacking. A centralised national curriculum will set the scene for a nation-wide hijacking. The solution is not to further centralise decision-making at the federal level but to decentralise to an open market. Centralising has caused the problem. More of the same will not solve it. In her criticism of the states, Ms Bishop acknowledges that centralisation at the state level does not work. She told the National Press Club that 'Notwithstanding the billions of dollars invested in schools in Australia, there is evidence that standards have declined.'¹⁴ Having identified the failure of centralisation, Ms

Bishop would be better advised to push for a less centralised, competitive curriculum marketplace rather than trying to fix the problem with further consolidation.

Labor's policy

In February this year, Labor set out its case for a national curriculum in a document entitled *New Directions for our schools: Establishing a National Curriculum to improve our children's educational outcomes*.¹⁵ The reasoning in this document is similar to the case put forward by Julie Bishop. While paying lip service to 'school autonomy, local innovation and choice' as important aspects to a healthy school system, the authors list assistance for those who move interstate and increased national consistency as the main justifications for a national curriculum. There is no substantial evidence to support the assertion that more consistency leads to higher standards. This is taken as a given.

The authors also mention in passing that a national curriculum would promote 'collaboration between levels of Government' and end 'the blame game' which currently occurs on educational matters, with the Commonwealth blaming the states for curriculum deficiencies. However, a national curriculum may lead to the blame game working the other way, with state and territory education ministers blaming the national curriculum body for falling educational standards.

A better way to raise educational standards

I have argued elsewhere that the best way to raise educational standards in Australia is to introduce two reforms.¹⁶ Firstly, the state based monopoly on curricula should be abolished and replaced with an open market for curriculum development. Individual schools, groups of schools, corporations and state education departments should be free to develop and market their curricula, and schools should be free to adopt whichever best suits the needs of their students. Jennifer Buckingham¹⁷ and more recently Kevin Donnelly¹⁸ have both argued that there may even be a place for a national curriculum in such a competitive environment as long as it is offered on a voluntary basis.

The second reform should be to introduce a school voucher or tax credit thereby putting the

power of choice into the hands of parents. The consequence of these two reforms would be a surge of innovation and meaningful educational improvement driven by genuine competition of curricula and real consequences for failure. Poor curricula would die a quick and natural death in such an environment and the hijacking of school curricula against the wishes of parents would become impossible.

While Brendan Nelson was Minister for Education and Training, he explicitly ruled out the possibility of school vouchers under his watch, though the present Commonwealth policy on private schools, which amounts to a quasi-voucher system, has certainly increased the educational choices open to many families.¹⁹ In the light of this policy it is disappointing that Ms Bishop is moving to centralise the school curriculum system rather than introducing as much choice as possible.

By way of contrast with the Liberal's education curriculum policy, consider these comments on superannuation by the then Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer, Mal Brough, in Parliament in December 2005:

Today we are here to talk about choice ... This side of the House actually believes [the Australian people] have the capability to choose for themselves, and they have done so ... It was interesting to read [in] the *Financial Review* today ... the headline: 'Everyone's a winner in transition to choice era'. That is the *Financial Review* giving it the thumbs up. Why are they a winner? They are a winner because people have lower fees, better service, greater choice and a greater return on their savings ... As the Australian people head into Christmas time, they will know that this government will continue to provide choice.²⁰

Here we have a vigorous defence of the efficacy of choice and the ability of citizens to make informed decisions concerning complex matters. My question is, why do these arguments not also apply to school choice? The answer is that they do apply, and it would be beneficial to all Australian school students if at least one party recognised this fact.