

New Directions for our schools

Establishing a National Curriculum to improve our children's educational outcomes



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Executive Summary

For Australia to succeed in a highly competitive global economy our children need to have the best education possible. Better education outcomes deliver a real and tangible benefit to our nation's economy, lifting productivity and allowing people to get better jobs that pay more.

The current Government sometimes talks about the merits of a national curriculum, but after a decade in office has delivered little by way of real progress in achieving national consistency of curricula for the benefit of our children.

As a relatively small country in a globalised economy, it makes sense to have a national curriculum that lifts the standards of all students across our nation. The fact that each year around 340,000 families, including 80,000 school age students, relocate across State and Territory borders underlines the need for a national curriculum.

While there is some agreement around the curriculum for some subjects in some years of schooling, the divergence between jurisdictions suggests we could make considerable gains by ensuring the best of each State system is available nationally.

A national curriculum will mean that a student moving from Western Australia to Queensland or New South Wales to Victoria will not be disadvantaged by differences in the curriculum in each of these States.

A national curriculum needs to be a clear and explicit agreement about the essentials all young Australians should know and what they should be able to do. All our children should be able to read with accuracy and confidence and write and speak articulately and fluently. They should also be able to manage the mathematics that underpins effective participation in adult life and the workforce.

Labor believes the starting point for a national curriculum is the core areas of maths, the sciences, english and history.

A national curriculum should enable States and Territories and local schools to identify the additional elements of knowledge which may also be valuable, but which are not essential for all Australian students. It also leaves scope for creativity and specialisation as well as sensible local, regional and State variations.

Working collaboratively with the States and Territories, Labor will establish a National Curriculum Board consisting of our nation's best educational experts and led by an eminent educationalist to develop a national curriculum for all our schools. It will cover our children's entire school career from Kindergarten to Year 12 and make sure our educational standards go up. Its key hallmark must be curriculum rigour – to produce the most rigorous curriculum by international standards so our children can compete in the world of tomorrow.

The National Curriculum Board will be made up of representatives of each of the States and Territories, and representatives nominated by the Catholic and Independent schooling sectors.

Funding of \$5 million per annum will be provided for the activities of the Board. The Board will be supported by the Curriculum Corporation.

In light of its valuable recent work and substantial expertise, the Australian Council for Educational Research will also have a significant supporting role in this work.

A Rudd Labor Government will ensure within its first term there is agreement between Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers as well as Catholic and Independent schools to a National Curriculum in the identified priority areas of maths, the sciences, english and history.

Introduction

Australia's future economic prosperity is tied to the skills and productivity of our workforce. For Australia to compete successfully in the global economy, we must invest in human capital and build a highly skilled workforce that can compete with the best of our neighbours. We do not want to end up becoming China's quarry and Japan's beach.

If our goal is for our children to enjoy similar economic dividends to those we have benefited from in recent years we must improve our educational outcomes. Teacher quality, school autonomy, local innovation and choice, assessment and reporting, syllabus and funding levels should all now feature in a sustained public policy discussion and concerted action, not be the target of cynical and short-sighted political posturing.

We must have as our mission the highest educational standards for our children. To be the world's best educated and trained nation, we must have rigorous education standards in place. Despite incremental gains, all too often the debate about educational standards and the outcomes achieved by our children has only succeeded in pitting teachers against politicians and Commonwealth against the States. We need a collaborative discussion and partnership with the States that produces substantial improvements in the quality of schooling our children receive.

Developing a national curriculum is not a new idea. As early as 1968 there was discussion surrounding a reduction in the unnecessary differences in the various State curricula and the difficulties faced by students moving interstate.¹

In 1988 the then Federal Education Minister, John Dawkins, spoke of the need for a curriculum relevant to our time and place in the world:

What is required is the development of a common framework that sets out the major areas of knowledge and the most appropriate mix of skills and experience for students in all the years of schooling, but accommodates the different or specific curriculum needs of different parts of Australia.²

Now, almost two decades on, we have not progressed significantly beyond this point. It is simply not good enough to have an open-ended debate, as the Howard Government does six months before each Federal Election, that achieves little of substance for Australian students.

In contrast to the Australian situation, our international competitors, countries like Japan and Singapore, are making substantial investments in education as a means of driving the quality of children's educational outcomes. The absence of collaboration between levels of Government, the blame game, is a major threat to our future economic prosperity and international competitiveness.

A recent international study found that countries able to attain literacy scores 1 per cent higher than the international average will achieve living standards – measured by GDP per capita – that are 1.5 per cent higher than other countries.³ Given curriculum is one of the factors which may explain divergent literacy and other educational outcomes

¹ Reid (2003), *Towards a national curriculum*, http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/research/fellowship/docs/Alan_Reid/AlanReid_July03.rtf.

² *ibid.*

³ Coulombe, Tremblay and Marchand, (2004) *Literacy scores, human capital and growth across 14 OECD countries*, Statistics Canada.

between States and Territories it is incumbent on us to work together to ensure all Australian children benefit from the best each jurisdiction has to offer.

Today, Australians are much more likely to move to take up work opportunities, and the significant internal migration of families within our nation provides another argument for greater consistency in what our schools teach.

A national curriculum is not a panacea for all our concerns about the quality of our education system. In fact, we would be unwise to remove from parents and local schools the ability to choose selective or innovative educational options for their children.

A national curriculum should define a core set of skills and knowledge, including those things we agree all young Australians are entitled to. It cannot and should not be an all encompassing directive. It is also important to recognise that schools are a vital part of local communities and as such they must be free to inform their students with a sense of the place in which they are growing up and equally, equip them for the world they will enter upon graduating.

The current Government has recently advocated a national curriculum. For example, the former Minister for Education expressed a wish that a national curriculum be adopted in 2002.⁴ Since then, movement in this area has been limited by the Howard Government's failure to translate its rhetoric into a workable partnership with State and Territory Governments who deliver education to our children. It is only through collaboration and cooperation that real progress can be made in this area. We will work in collaboration with the States to achieve a sensible outcome for the benefit of young Australian students.

This paper sets out a plan for a national curriculum delivered in partnership with State and Territory Governments and our educational experts, that is informed by the needs of students and their parents.

It builds on Federal Labor's Education Revolution. Labor has already released three education policy directions papers:

- ***The Australian economy needs an education revolution: New Directions Paper on the critical link between long term prosperity, productivity growth and human capital investment*** which argues that we cannot take our current prosperity for granted. Not only is productivity growth beginning to slow, but resource prices are likely to unwind over the coming years, the ageing of the population will place significant pressure on public finances and reduce workforce participation, and the global marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive as China and India continue their transformation into economic superpowers.
- ***New Directions for Early Childhood Education: Universal Access to Early Learning for Four Year Olds*** which sets out a \$450 million plan to give a universal right of access for all four year olds to fifteen hours a week of high quality early childhood education delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.
- ***New Directions for Maths and Science*** which provides financial incentives totalling \$111 million for students to study maths and science at university and then use their degrees within the maths and science professions, particularly teaching.

It is time to take real and effective practical action on a national curriculum by establishing a National Curriculum Board that will develop and drive greater

⁴ Cook (2002), *Nelson Seeks one Curriculum*, The Age 28 May 2002.

consistency and coherence in what young Australians learn, with sensible local, regional and State variations.

Australia has a rich talent in the dedication and professionalism of its teacher workforce. Our teachers should be supported by the best curriculum in the world and with the resources necessary to teach that curriculum in the classroom. Our teachers are the engine room of our nation's future economy.

The case for a national curriculum

Australia's education landscape comprises eight State and Territory based systems. As part of the development of local education systems in the 19th and 20th centuries, each of the States created school curricula that reflected the needs and aspirations of the communities within their borders. Today, these systems have considerable strengths and State and Territory government's have applied themselves to the task of continuous improvement in what they teach for the benefit of our children. However, because of this, curricula across the States and Territories, while relatively common in some areas, nonetheless diverge considerably in many others.

This reality continues today, despite the fact that we now have a national, integrated economy that depends on a highly educated and mobile workforce. The fact that Australia is a relatively small country within a global economy should be the reference point against which we make judgements on the sort of curriculum best suited to our schools in the 21st century.

The economic research suggests that technological innovations, improving public infrastructure and building human capital are where the greatest opportunities for further productivity growth lie. Chairman of the Productivity Commission, Gary Banks has argued the best opportunities for improving productivity are in "getting the best out of Australia's 'social infrastructure' – health, aged care and other community services" and "raising the performance and accessibility of our education and training systems – primary, secondary and tertiary – particularly given their importance in deepening Australia's human capital, on which innovation and economic growth will increasingly depend".⁵ As Banks' analysis makes clear, what is needed is not just a higher *level* of investment in education, but an assurance that our investment in education is used efficiently.

Countries such as Singapore, which have made significant investments in education and pursued a national approach that locates education squarely within a broader economic policy framework, are reaping considerable benefits. Put simply, there is a national interest argument for Australia to ensure the best aspects of State and Territory curricula are shared between jurisdictions for the benefit of all children.

Consistency of curriculum is also a significant issue for the many Australians who relocate from one jurisdiction to another each year. In excess of 340,000 Australians crossed State and Territory borders in 2005-06 and although this was lower than for the preceding five years, it marks a growing trend (Chart 1). Of this group nearly 100,000 are children and young people aged between 0 and 19 years.⁶ The Department of Education, Science and Training estimates around 80,000 are of school age.⁷ This

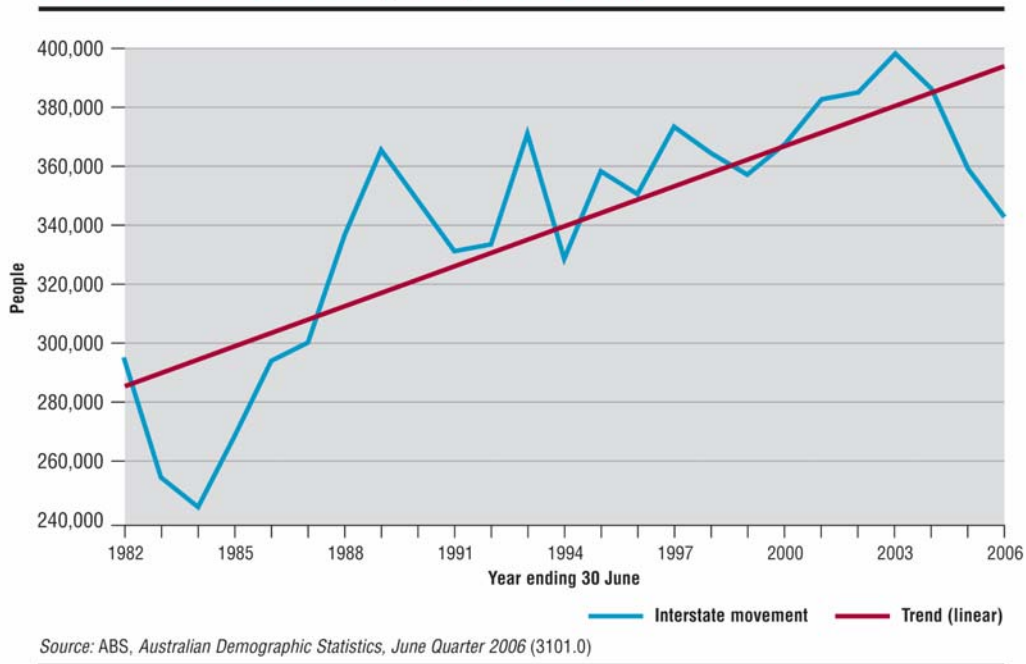
⁵ Banks (2003) *Australia's economic 'miracle'*, An address to the 'welcome dinner' for the *Forum on Postgraduate Economics*, National Institute of Economics and Business, ANU, Canberra.

⁶ ABS (2004-05) Migration Australia 3412.0.

⁷ Department of Education, Science and Training (2007) [Changing Schools website](#).

represents a significant challenge for students, their parents and teachers and a potential impediment to their education.

Chart 1: Total interstate migration, 1982 to 2006



Given the current trajectory of interstate migration and the growing importance of successful educational outcomes for both our children and our national economy there is a substantial case for greater consistency of curriculum between States and Territories.

In many areas there is already considerable curriculum consistency between the States and Territories. The Australian Council for Educational Research recently released a paper *Year 12 Curriculum Content and Achievement Standards* which assessed what is taught in five senior secondary subjects across Australia: maths, chemistry, physics, english and Australian history.⁸

In mathematics, the study found that while there are a large number of maths courses on offer, there is nonetheless a high degree of consistency across all jurisdictions for high-level mathematics curricula.

In the subject areas of physics and chemistry, the report assessed that there is a high degree of national consistency across the different curricula. An analysis of these subjects shows that 85 to 95 per cent of curriculum content and the knowledge and understanding students are expected to attain, is common to each of the State and Territory jurisdictions (Chart 2).

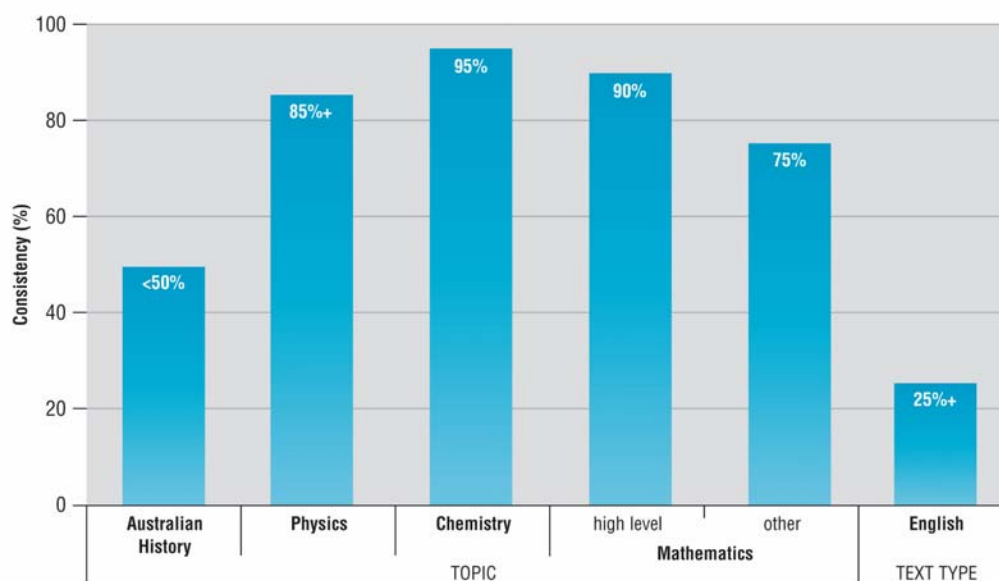
However, this level of consistency was not replicated in other areas of the curriculum. Lower-level maths courses have varying levels of consistency across jurisdictions, while in the study of english and history, the report found significant divergence in the subject matter.

⁸ Australian Council for Educational Research (2007), *Year 12 Curriculum Content and Achievement Standards*.

The report did find, however, that across each of the jurisdictions there is broad agreement as to the purpose of studying the subjects concerned. In these areas, greater value is placed on the students' skills of inquiry and critical analysis than what subject information is studied.

In English, the purpose was broadly identified as the correct spelling and appropriate application of punctuation and grammar and interpretation of texts. In history, this focused on the development of skills in historical inquiry, critical analysis and approaches to the study of history.

Chart 2: Subject Matter



Source: Year 12 Curriculum content and achievement standards, 2007: p.31

The report also found that although there are broadly similar criteria for assessment, there is a difference in how performance is actually assessed. Assessment across each of the States and Territories varies considerably, ranging from external examination to school-based assessment and scaling tests. There is also a high degree of variation in the compilation of Year 12 results for reporting on school certificates and in the standards that are applied to deliver those assessments.

This report described the situation for the final year of schooling, where curriculum is tightly controlled and subject to formal assessment. Although information is not readily available for earlier years it is likely that greater differences occur, not only between States and Territories but between schools, since curriculum is often set only within broad guidelines.

A national curriculum would represent a significant advance on the current arrangements in terms of achieving consistency across State and Territory borders, and in some areas the degree of commonality of what is being taught may reduce the challenge of harmonisation.

Ultimately, the threshold for whether a national curriculum is warranted in these circumstances is this: would taking such an approach enhance the educational outcomes students receive? In doing so, should this mean that students around the nation are required to learn the same things, whether they be a body of concepts or an array of skills arising from the study of those subjects?

International comparisons of educational attainment levels reveal mixed outcomes for Australian students. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), for instance, demonstrates that on average Australian 15-year-olds perform well when it comes to careful reading, logical thinking, and the application of reading skills and mathematical and scientific understandings to everyday problems.

In reading literacy we rank fourth among 41 participating countries, behind Finland, Korea and Canada, with only Finland significantly outperforming Australia.

In mathematical literacy, we rank eleventh, with only Hong Kong, Finland, Korea and Netherlands significantly outperforming Australia.

In scientific literacy, we rank sixth, significantly below Finland, Japan and Korea.

This assessment, however, is not universal. These national results disguise the differences between States and Territories where there is some divergence, particularly in the case of maths and science attainment levels.

Recent PISA studies have demonstrated that in areas of core competencies – mathematical literacy, scientific literacy, reading literacy and problem solving – differences in educational attainment levels were apparent between the States and Territories.

Similarly, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's 2002 *International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) found a range of differing results.

TIMSS surveyed student achievement in mathematics and science for Year 4 and Year 8 students. Although the 2002 results showed that Australia had remained statistically similar to the 1994/95 test results, we fall behind a number of our competitor countries, which had made substantial improvements over the same period.⁹

Australia's performance fell against our international competitors in the following areas in the space of 8 years:

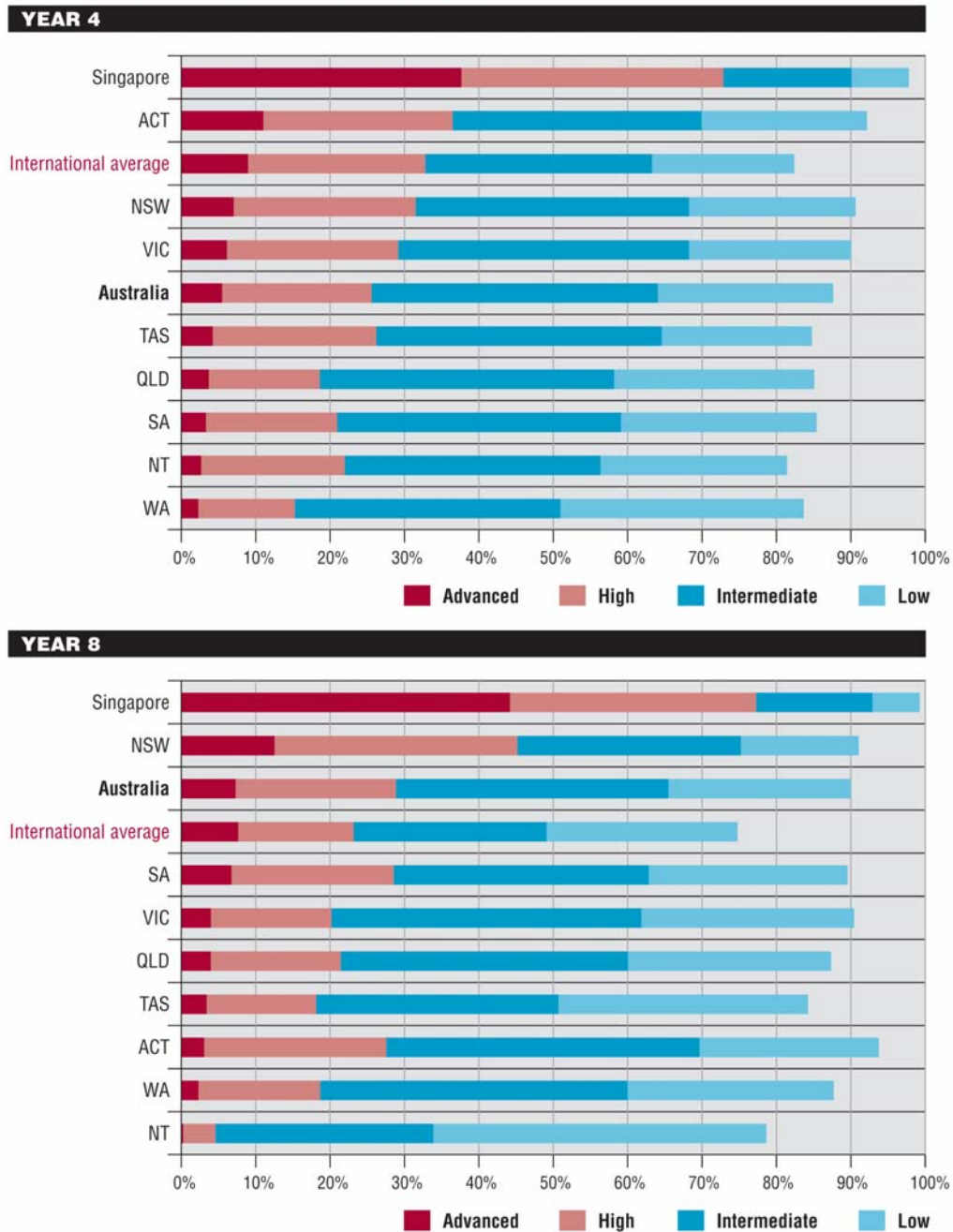
- Year 4 mathematics: outperformed by 13 countries in 2002 compared to six in 1994/95;
- Year 4 science: outperformed by seven countries in 2002 compared to two in 1994/95;
- Year 8 mathematics: outperformed by nine countries compared to eight in 1994/95; and
- Year 8 science: outperformed by eight countries compared to only four in 1994/95.

Importantly the TIMSS data found that Australian Year 8 students performed poorly compared to the top five countries in reaching the top two TIMSS benchmarks, identified as:

- High – students can apply their understanding and knowledge in a wide variety of relatively complex situations; and
- Advanced – students can organise information, make generalisations, solve non-routine problems, and draw and justify conclusions from data.

⁹ Australian Council for Educational Research (2002), Highlights from TIMSS from Australia's Perspective.

Chart 3: The proportion of students reaching the international benchmarks in mathematics Comparison between Australia, the highest achieving country, the international average and by State



Source: Australian Council for Educational Research (2002), *Highlights from TIMSS from Australia's Perspective: 8*

Significantly, the survey found that there were differences amongst the States and Territories:

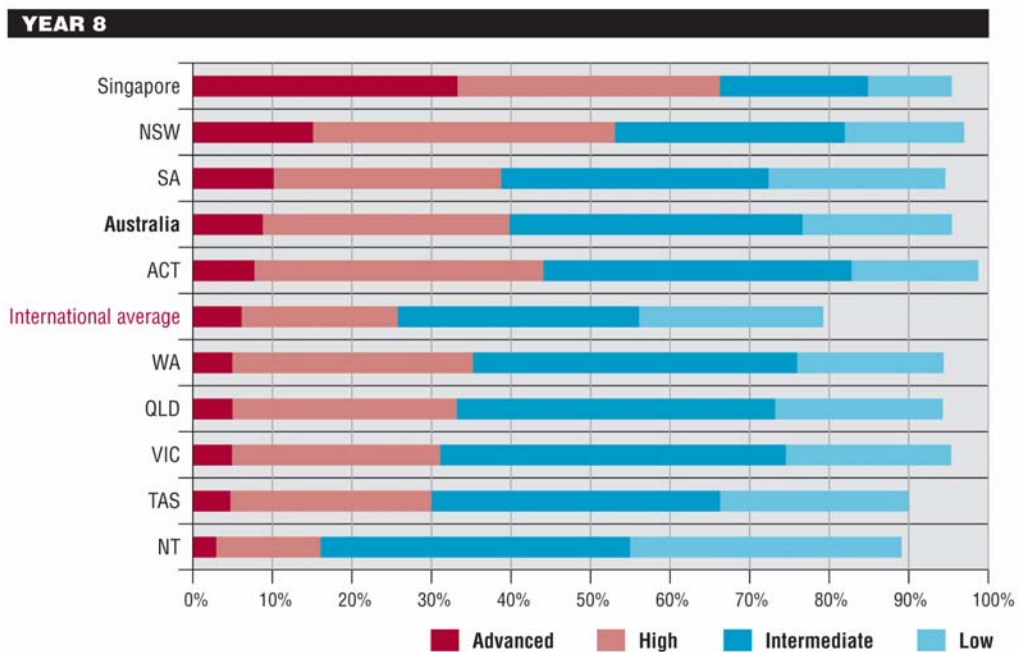
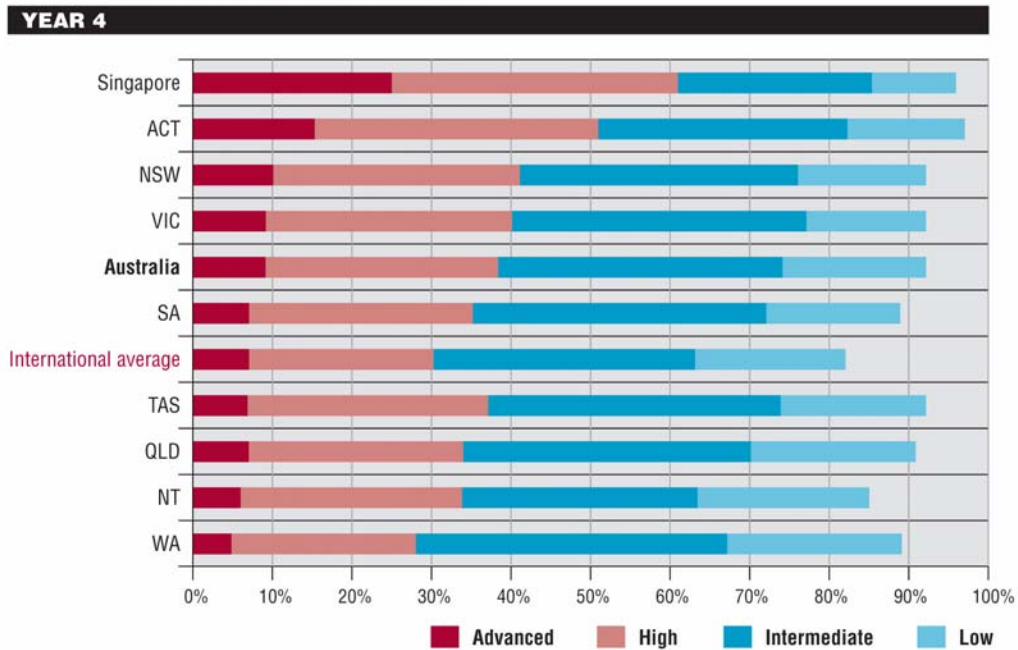
- The Australian Capital Territory had the highest proportion of Year 4 students attaining each of the international benchmarks in mathematics, compared with the Northern Territory which had the lowest;
- Western Australia and the Northern Territory had the lowest proportion of Year 4 students attaining the highest international benchmark in mathematics at less than 5%;

- The proportion of Year 4 students in all States other than the ACT reaching the highest international benchmark in mathematics remained below the international average of approximately 8%;
- The Australian Capital Territory had the highest proportion of Year 4 students reaching each of the international benchmarks in science, while the Northern Territory had the lowest;
- There has been a decline compared with the 1994/95 TIMSS survey of the proportion of Year 4 students achieving the advanced international benchmark in science;
- All States and Territories fell considerably short of results attained for Singapore in both mathematics and science.

Looking at the results for Year 8 students, a similar pattern is clear:

- New South Wales had the highest proportion of Year 8 students reaching the advanced international benchmark in both maths and science (12% and 16% respectively), while the ACT had the highest proportion of Year 8 students reaching the lowest international benchmark for both subjects (Approximately 24% and 17% respectively);
- South Australia, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, ACT, Western Australia and the Northern Territory all rated below the international average for the advanced international benchmark in maths;
- Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania and the Northern Territory all rated below the average for the advanced international benchmark in science (approximately 5% with an international comparison of 7%);
- All States and Territories fell considerably short of the highest achieving country, Singapore, in terms of the proportion of students reaching each of the international benchmarks in both maths and science.

Chart 4: The proportion of students reaching the international benchmarks in science Comparison between Australia, the highest achieving country, the international average and by State



Source: Australian Council for Educational Research (2002), *Highlights from TIMSS from Australia's Perspective: 8*

In subject areas where there is clearly a common conceptual framework, like maths and science, and for which the underlying principles governing their study do not alter from state to state or city to city, these TIMSS results indicate that clear differences in educational outcomes remain.

As these results attest, more work needs to be done to ensure greater national consistency, across all levels of study in maths and the sciences.

In curriculum focused on a core conceptual framework, such as maths and the sciences, and for which a high level of consistency already exists between the various State and Territory curricula, introducing a national curriculum makes sense.

While there are a number of factors that could contribute to the disparities between the performance of different States and Territories, a national curriculum would be a positive step towards helping to bridge these gaps.

A consistent national curriculum with the purpose of lifting all educational standards across each of the States and Territories in the study of maths and science should therefore be a focus of any work undertaken in this area.

The situation is less clear cut for the study of english and history.

The ACER *Year 12 Curriculum Content and Achievement Standards* report found that measuring common curriculum standards and outcomes in areas other than maths and science is difficult because

*...it is not possible to be certain about the existence of commonality. That is, differences in approaches to defining the curriculum might actually signal differences in practice or it might be the case that the apparently different prescriptions of content actually converge into common learnings across the country.*¹⁰

This is an important point that needs to be addressed appropriately. In the different State and Territory curricula, the study of both history and english has often been one which is contextualised to the relevant local circumstance of the school and students. This applies not just to Year 12 students but across the school curriculum.

In history, for instance, students in Tasmania may study the history of convict settlement, while in NSW students focus on early settlement at Botany Bay. Equally, within each State and Territory variations on curriculum may also be prevalent. Students studying European settlement in Victoria assess the impact of settlement on the local aboriginal communities around Melbourne or Ballarat, while students in Gladstone in Queensland may look at the growth of the minerals industry and the impact that has on their community.

The study of each of these subjects is legitimate. It helps contextualise and 'make real' the study of history for many students. However, in addition to particular local history, all Australian students should be familiar with the story of the development of the nation. No Australian student should be unaware, for example, of the significance of the two World Wars, or of the experience of indigenous Australians on the Australian continent. There are also skills and competences which history develops, to which all young Australians should have access, and the development of which should be monitored and measured.

A similar approach can be seen with the study of english.

The ACER report identified that there are clear apparent differences in curriculum content and structure in the study of english for Year 12 students. To an extent these differences are also reflected at the more junior years of high school education.

Depending on which State or Territory english is studied in, the report identified differences in the approaches taken in curriculum content. This varied from set texts to set categories of text, such as recommended lists or specific set lists, to an open choice taken either by students or teachers or a combination.

¹⁰ Australian Council for Educational Research (2007), *op cit*, 32.

Despite these differences, the study found that the skills and understandings that are trying to be developed through the different methods of study are broadly similar across the different curricula, ranging from the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, to the interpretation of texts and literature studied.

While recognising there need to be sensible local, regional and State variations in the study of history and english, there is nonetheless merit in having a curriculum that sets down a clear and common set of themes that should be studied and the skills set students should attain.

With an escalating need for our educational outcomes to remain competitive in a globalised economy and a growth in internal migration, increased consistency in what young people learn across Australia is necessary. There is therefore a clear cut case for the development of a national curriculum.

The current architecture of curriculum and school bodies

Between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories there is a patchwork quilt of bodies, councils and advisory structures which touch upon the curriculum standards and content provided to our children.

Across the States and Territories, there are 34 separate organisations that contribute to the development of curricula, along with several national bodies and research associations (See Appendix).

Within most jurisdictions, education departments are separated from the authorities charged with the development of curricula. In Victoria, for instance, the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, the Department of Education and Training, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the Victorian Qualifications Authority are all involved in developing the State's curriculum. Multiply this structure across each State and Territory and it becomes clear that there is a massive duplication of effort and a dissipation of quality.

At a national level, the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) has sponsored a range of curriculum-related activities. Systemic bodies, such as the National Catholic Education Commission are also involved in the process.

Finally, there are also a number of research and advisory bodies which have completed or are completing Government-sponsored projects aimed at improving curriculum.

Curriculum Corporation is owned by all Australian Ministers for Education. It was established in 1990 by the former Australian Education Council (AEC) to support national collaborative approaches to the improvement of school education in Australia. As Australia's key school curriculum organisation, the corporation works on curriculum development and the provision of information and advice appropriate for all States and Territories on the development and delivery of curricula across the nation.

Curriculum Corporation has also completed major mapping and modelling activities to determine the extent to which individual State and Territory curriculum frameworks differed from the nationally developed Statements and Profiles in order to achieve greater curriculum consistency.

This vast infrastructure surrounding the development of curricula means that there is a high level of expertise across the country, but also a lack of consistency and coherence.

What does everyone agree on?

Notwithstanding the significant differences and plethora of curriculum bodies at a State and Territory level, some progress has been made towards national consistency and this can be built upon to form the basis of a national curriculum.

In the late 1980's then Federal Education Minister John Dawkins, working with the States and Territories gained agreement for the development of a common national framework for the curriculum, which resulted in the construction of Statements and Profiles in eight learning areas, published at the start of 1994.

Building on this work, Ministers at the July 2003 meeting of MCEETYA requested that *Statements of Learning* be developed in english, mathematics, science and civics and citizenship. It was agreed that the *Statements of Learning* would describe essential skills, knowledge, understandings and capacities that all young Australians should have the opportunity to learn by the end of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. These statements were developed with the intention of guiding the future development of relevant curriculum documents.

Ministers requested that the *Statements of Learning for English* be developed first, with other domains to follow, depending on the success of the work on english. The Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) has overseen the development of this work, and the work has been project-managed by Curriculum Corporation.

At the May 2005 meeting of MCEETYA, Ministers re-confirmed the original purpose of the *Statements of Learning* and agreed to proceed with the development of the additional areas as outlined above, and to add Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) as a further area in light of the Australian Government's quadrennium funding legislation, *Schools Assistance (Learning Together – achievement through choice and opportunity) Act 2004*.

The *Statements of Learning* for mathematics, science, civics and citizenship and ICT were approved by MCEETYA in August 2006. These statements are a step forward in the development of a national curriculum.

The *Statements of Learning* are only one of the tools available to educators when developing curricula and deciding on appropriate curriculum standards – what students are expected to know and be able to do at each point in their schooling.

Prior to the development of the *Statements of Learning*, a revised set of agreed *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* were developed in 1999 by MCEETYA, providing national guidance on student capabilities and general curriculum content.

These general goals state that students should have high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding through a comprehensive and balanced curriculum in the compulsory years of schooling encompassing eight key agreed learning areas:

- the arts;
- english;
- health and physical education;
- languages other than english;
- mathematics;
- science;
- studies of society and environment; and
- technology.

These goals also state that students should have attained the skills of numeracy and english literacy and have had access to vocational education and training programs as part of their senior secondary studies.

These eight core learning areas, along with vocational education and training programs, should form the basis of any national curriculum over the longer term.

In addition to existing curriculum tools, there are also 'curriculum standards' referring to how well students can do the things they are expected to do at a point in schooling. Student assessment is closely linked to curriculum and performance standards that describe what kind of work would satisfy the requirements of the content standards.

The most useful form of curriculum standard consists of criteria for student achievement at a year level (whether one level of achievement or several) which are described in words and illustrated with student work. These can be assessed through teacher judgement, or by tests, or preferably by a combination of the two.

What should a national curriculum look like?

The present debate about curriculum has focused largely on content, and on the knowledge element of content. It has been about which parts of Australian history a student should be expected to know. For example, indigenous history, European settlement, the gold rushes, Federation, the World Wars, and so on. These subjects are important, because students need a chronological framework of factual knowledge in order to make sense of their world.

But the debate has largely stopped there. Factual knowledge by itself is necessary but not sufficient. The debate has not usually dealt with the other element of content: skills and capabilities, the ability to practice in a subject in a way that is characteristic of the subject. In history, for example, this means the ability to understand the nature of historical evidence, to make judgements about which evidence is most useful, to develop an argument using that evidence, to explain the relationship between a single event and a broader historical trend or theme. This is what historians do, and what makes history more than just a list of dates and names.

It is the combination of knowledge and skills that gives each subject its educational value. Someone who has a strong foundation of knowledge about history, but does not have the skills to undertake historical analysis or make considered judgements is simply learning by rote. Someone who has the skills of history but no framework of knowledge is unable to see the broader picture which gives meaning to a particular event.

This combination is especially important now. The kinds of advanced jobs that we want young Australians to gain require a combination of rich knowledge and a set of higher order skills. A young person who is to play a role in the knowledge economy needs a substantial framework of knowledge in areas like science, language, history, mathematics and social studies. It is also important that our young people are exposed to vocational education during their school years. With the economy increasingly in need of skilled workers, students should be exposed to this important educational avenue.

Each of these core areas also has a characteristic way of working, and young people need a grasp of those ways of working. It is in the combination of knowledge and skills that the disciplines give students power over their world.

Young Australians who are to prosper and make a significant social and economic contribution need to know how to spell and how the English language works. They also need to be skilled and articulate users of the oral and written language. Young people should be able to read an opinion piece in a newspaper with a sense of the intentions of the writer, and the way the writer's views have affected the language used and the evidence cited.

They need a framework of historical knowledge about how this nation came to be. They also need the capacity to recognise and handle evidence and arguments in the contemporary world. Young people working in small businesses, for example, may be called on to make judgements in the face of incomplete or conflicting evidence. The skills of an historian can help: skills in working with uncertainty and incomplete knowledge, skills in assembling and making judgements about an area where some information is missing.

Young people need a framework of scientific knowledge so they can recognise some of the science underlying important contemporary arguments about such matters as nuclear power and global warming. They also need the skill to recognise what counts as scientific evidence, and to make a judgement when they are confronted with arguments and evidence claiming to be scientific in support of particular social, economic and political positions.

They need a framework of knowledge about mathematics so that they can recognise the mathematical basis of information about the economy. They also need the skills which will enable them to use mathematics in their own work and understand the use and misuse of mathematics and statistics in public discussion.

Contemporary debate about curriculum has mostly ignored the distinctive role that the combination of knowledge and skills of each discipline should play in the life of an educated Australian. Without this combination, our young people will be poorly equipped to participate fully in the new economy. We can be certain that other nations in our region have moved well beyond a view of the curriculum based on lists of historical dates and scientific theories. They are also ensuring that their young citizens gain both a rich framework of knowledge across key disciplines and a broad set of those skills which are characteristic of each of the disciplines. It is this combination of breadth and depth which will ensure that all young Australians can make a substantial social and economic contribution to the nation and gain the benefits of social and economic change rather than being its victims.

A national curriculum should be explicit about both the common framework of knowledge and the core skills to which every young Australian is entitled. Many curriculum documents now are vague, non-specific and unclear about knowledge and skills. They are also much longer than they need to be. Teachers and students will benefit from documents which are simple, clear, explicit and written in plain language.

A national curriculum should be developed in each of the key disciplines. The disciplines are the best means we have found of understanding the world around us. Every student should gain a foundation of knowledge and skills in each of the central disciplines.

In addition, the way these subjects are taught should demonstrate the relationships between them. Students can benefit from cross-disciplinary studies which allow them to draw on the knowledge and skills characteristic of different disciplines. But these studies depend on students having already gained a foundation in each discipline. A student cannot take part effectively in cross-disciplinary studies until they have foundation of knowledge and skills in different disciplines on which to draw.

One area which has proved difficult in Australian education is the teaching of languages. Despite the establishment of targets and projects over the years, it remains the case that many young Australians miss out on learning a language. This occurs for many reasons, not least because the shortage of teachers means it is difficult for schools to offer a consistent, sustained program of teaching in a chosen language. The problem of languages has two dimensions: many young people gain little benefit from language learning because of weaknesses in provision; and those young Australians with exceptional talent in languages are not offered opportunities for richness, depth and continuity in their language learning. This is an area which needs a new policy approach, designed to ensure both that all students gain the benefits of effective language learning, and that our most capable young people are offered the opportunity to become expert in those languages which will be of the greatest cultural and economic value to the nation.

Labor's Plan for a National Curriculum

Australia needs a national curriculum. This is one of the conditions for higher standards of achievement for young Australians.

A national curriculum needs to be a clear and explicit agreement about the essentials that all young Australians should know and what they should be able to do. All our children should be able to read with accuracy and confidence and write and speak articulately and fluently. They should be able to manage the mathematics that underpins effective participation in adult life and the workforce. Equally, we should be able to say what our children need to know about science, history, geography, the arts, languages, their health and physical activity, and old and new technologies. In all these areas, we should be able to define the entitlements of all our children, without exception.

Labor believes the starting point for a national curriculum is the core areas of maths, the sciences, english and history.

These will be our first priority.

Labor recognises that implementing a national curriculum in the different bands of schooling (primary, secondary, senior) in the four core subject areas will require different approaches. For example, in senior school, the sciences are taught in specific subjects such as chemistry and physics. In the secondary years, mathematics may be divided into advanced and intermediate levels. And in primary, the four core subjects are domains of teaching, rather than subjects in their own right. Labor's national

curriculum will take account of these differences across the schooling years. Labor has previously articulated a separate framework for early childhood education for four year olds, which uses play-based learning to address pre-literacy and numeracy levels.

A national curriculum should enable States and Territories and local schools to identify the additional elements of knowledge which may also be valuable, but which do not necessarily need to be part of a core national curriculum for all Australian students. It also leaves scope for creativity and specialisation as well as sensible local, regional, State and system variations. Narrowing the scope of the national curriculum priorities would also assist students in achieving greater depth of understanding. This is consistent with research on learning which holds that it is more valuable to learn a core body of knowledge in depth than to gain a superficial understanding of a much wider range of areas.

A National Curriculum Board

Labor will establish a board of our best educational experts to develop a national curriculum for all our schools.

Labor's National Curriculum Board will be led by an eminent educationalist, appointed by the Commonwealth. The appointee will be required to have a commitment to educational rigour and a determination to equip students with the knowledge and skills to compete effectively the workplaces of the 21st century.

State and Territory Governments will each nominate a representative to the Board. It will also comprise three representatives nominated by the Catholic and Independent schooling sectors.

The Board will receive \$5 million per annum to support its work and activities developing a national curriculum.

The Curriculum Corporation will assist the Board in this work. In light of its recent valuable work and substantial expertise, the Australian Council for Educational Research will also have a significant supporting role in this work.

Labor recognises the development and implementation of a National Curriculum may impact on future education funding needs. This will be negotiated with State and Territory Governments as required at the time.

A timetable for action

Labor believes it is vital that action is taken to put in place a curriculum for the benefit of our children. For this reason a Rudd Labor Government will ensure there is agreement by Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers to a National Curriculum in the identified priority areas of maths, the sciences, english and history by 2010.

Notwithstanding the need to achieve national consistency through a national curriculum as a matter of priority, the National Curriculum Board will be required to publicly release exposure drafts of its work for consultation with parents and teachers to ensure their work is concise, practical and understandable.

Progress on development of the National Curriculum will be a standing priority agenda item for consideration by the Council of Australian Governments. This major exercise of national reform must be done on a collaborative and cooperative basis. A new National Curriculum in these four subject areas will only be implemented with the endorsement of State, Territory and non-government educational systems.

Core Principles

The following core principles will guide the development of a National Curriculum that will:

- build on the best aspects of our current State and Territory curricula, not reduce standards, to produce the best and most rigorous internationally competitive curriculum;
- see a nationally agreed curriculum by States and Territories and non-government systems, not one imposed by the Commonwealth;
- represent a national guarantee of quality educational content for all students;
- be concise, in plain English and understandable by both parents and teachers;
- be developed with input from our best teachers, educationalists and parents;
- determine core content across key subjects while allowing for innovation and sensible variations in local, regional, State and non-government system content;
- not limit the flexibility of teachers to use different instructional methods in recognition of the fact that children learn in different ways; and
- recognise that students require both academic and vocational instruction if they are to successfully participate as citizens and workers.

Further Work

A National Curriculum is not the only area where work needs to be done.

We need to address other key areas which have a bearing on the educational attainment levels of our school children.

These include, but are not limited to, nationally consistent school starting and completion ages, encouraging young Australians to enter the teaching profession, retaining teachers in the profession and in the classroom, better rewarding quality teaching in the classroom, secondary school retention rates, the relationship school curriculum has with the workforce needs of our nation, assessment and reporting standards, Commonwealth funding for schools, and the resources made available to local schools and teachers.

These will be the subject of further policy consideration.

Appendix

State and Territory organisations that contribute to the development of curricula:

Australian Capital Territory

- ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies
- Association of Independent Schools of the ACT Inc (AISACT)
- Catholic Education Office
- Department of Education and Training

New South Wales

- Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales (AISNSW)
- Board of Studies, NSW
- Catholic Education Commission, NSW
- NSW Department of Education and Training

Northern Territory

- Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory (AISNT)
- Catholic Education NT
- Northern Territory Board of Studies
- Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET)

Queensland

- Association of Independent Schools of Queensland (AISQ)
- Education Queensland
- Queensland Catholic Education Commission
- Queensland Studies Authority

South Australia

- Association of Independent Schools of SA (AISSA)
- Catholic Education South Australia
- Department of Education and Children's Services
- Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA)

Tasmania

- Association of Independent Schools of Tasmania (AIST)
- Catholic Education Office, Tasmania
- Department of Education
- Tasmanian Qualifications Authority (TQA)
- Tasmanian Secondary Assessment Board

Victoria

- Association of Independent Schools of Victoria Inc (AISV)
- Catholic Education Commission of Victoria
- Department of Education and Training (DE&T)
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)
- Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA)

Western Australia

- Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia Inc (AISWA)
- Catholic Education Office of Western Australia
- Curriculum Council of Western Australia
- Department of Education and Training