

CASPA NATIONAL CONFERENCE, Canberra 12 July 2022:
THE NEW AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM AND NATIONAL ASSESSMENT REFORM

Thank you for that welcome. Andrew. Thank you also to the President of CaSPA, Ann Regbetz, for the invitation to address you today, and all the members of the CaSPA Board. I note, Andrew, that the motto of your school is “*Tenete Traditiones*”, meaning “Hold fast to your traditions”. While tradition sometimes gets a bad rap, traditions are essential to community, and without traditions we don’t have community. But traditions evolve as community evolves in response to new situations.

Which is an appropriate segue as I would like to begin by paying my respects to the elders of the Nggunawal people, as they have been, are, and will continue to be, true educators, passing on traditions and knowledge for thousands of years, from generation to generation, and offering the wisdom of those traditions to the wider Australian people.

I also acknowledge the other speakers at this conference, in particular Father Frank Brennan, Sally Egan and Dyonne Anderson and my AITSL colleague, Danny Pinchas.

I particularly want to acknowledge the work of Dyonne Anderson in her role as president of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association. Dyonne’s own school, Cabbage Tree Primary School, in the middle of the Richmond River just south of Ballina, was severely tested, as was the whole community, earlier this year with the floods in that part of NSW. It is a wonderful school, which I visited a couple of years ago before COVID, keeping culture alive.

I was privileged, a few weeks ago, to attend the funeral of Sir Gerard Brennan, Frank’s father, at which Sir William Deane, Pat Dodson and Pat Turner spoke so eloquently about the wonderful legacy left by Sir Gerard to our nation. Frank, in his sermon, stated the following about his father:

Famously in his *Mabo* judgment, he observed that ‘no case can command unquestioning adherence if the rule it expresses seriously offends the values of justice and human rights (especially equality before the law) which are aspirations of the contemporary Australian legal system.’

And in his dissent in *Marion’s case*, he said: ‘The law will protect equally the dignity of the hale and hearty and the dignity of the weak and lame; of the frail baby and of the frail aged; of the intellectually able and of the intellectually disabled. ...Our law admits of no discrimination against the weak and disadvantaged in their human dignity.’

It is obvious to anyone that knew him that Sir Gerard’s commitment to upholding the human dignity of the most disadvantaged in our community was the fruit of his Catholic faith, taught to him by his parents and through his attendance at Catholic schools.

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The positive influence of Catholic schools, and Catholic principals who lead those schools, on our nation, has been overshadowed in recent years, and needs to be constantly reaffirmed. So I acknowledge all of you and give you every encouragement in the difficult, rewarding work that you do for our young people.

Which brings me to the topic of my address.

Hopefully you see ACARA as an ally in this work, most recently through the Review of the Australian Curriculum, approved by all education ministers earlier this year.

The review has resulted in important revisions to improve the curriculum.

Among those changes are those that have given greater prominence to the role played by Christianity the Christian churches in furthering democracy and human rights in this country, including the rights of our First Nations peoples. But it does this without glossing over the devastating impacts on their way of life experienced since 1788. As Noel Pearson stated last year, recognition of our country's Indigenous heritage does not require the repudiation of its British heritage:

They both tenure for the memory and advantage of all Australians, even as we face the truths of our colonial past for our history is replete with shame and pride, failure and achievement, fear and love, cruelty and kindness, conflict and comity, mistake and brilliance, folly and glory. We should never shy from the truth. Our Australian storylines entwine further each generation and we should ever strive to leave our country better for our children.

This is what you, as Catholic school principals, are trying to do. This is what ACARA is trying to do.

Australian Curriculum – Version 9.0

When we released a consultation draft of the Australian curriculum last April, it was the first time that such a draft had been open to the public as one document for feedback.

At the time I said in some published remarks: "I expect we will see a stirring of the passions. No doubt some will argue the proposed revisions don't go far enough, while others will say they go too far."

The ten week public consultation period closed in early July last year, but the public debate did not.

I was not dismayed by this. The truth is I would have been deeply disappointed if the release of the consultation draft had not triggered passionate discussion about what we teach our children. That would have been an indication that our society no longer cared about the education our children receive.

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The issue of what we teach to the younger generation is always going to be value laden to some extent. That's because a national curriculum is an expression of the community's aspirations for its children. It's a self-expression of the community's values. But our community is increasingly diverse, and so it was to be expected that a great diversity of views would be aired through the process. But though we may be more diverse, this doesn't mean we will inevitably be more divided.

This is why the community consultation was essential. The Australian Curriculum must represent broad community consensus and be based on well-informed and researched evidence.

Thousands of online surveys were completed and email submissions received, with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority, English and Mathematics receiving the most attention and detailed written feedback from all jurisdictions and sectors.

Our driving focus through the consultation was the direction from the terms of reference, which asked us to **refine, realign and declutter** the curriculum to make it easier for teachers to teach.

Feedback on the consultation draft confirmed that the proposed revisions for each learning area were an improvement on the current Australian Curriculum, Version 8.4:

- the introductory sections were more helpful,
- the content had been reduced, and
- achievement standards and content descriptions had improved in their clarity across all learning areas.

But - it wasn't all positive. There was **further** work to be done to reduce and refine curriculum content, especially in the primary years.

Feedback

There was also a high level of feedback and public comment in relation to specific aspects that required further attention. These were:

- in English, being clearer about the importance of phonics for learning how to read
- in Mathematics, there was concern with respect to the year levels at which certain concepts were introduced and the view that some changes could be seen to be advocating particular pedagogical approaches
- in History and in Civics and Citizenship, there was concern as to whether the religious, cultural and historical roots of Australia's success as a prosperous and democratic nation were adequately recognised

We listened carefully to that feedback to hear what the community and especially what the teaching profession had to say.

Key Changes

In response to this extensive feedback, we made further changes:

- **Decluttering:** the removal and reduction of content so the curriculum can be taught with depth and rigour, including a 21% overall reduction in the number of content descriptions, which describe what is to be taught and what students are expected to learn
- **English:** a stronger focus on phonics – this means a strengthening of phonics in reading
- **Maths:** a stronger focus on students mastering the essential mathematical facts, skills, concepts and processes, and being introduced to these at the right time
- making clear what mathematical computations need to be done without a calculator, reinforcing the importance of becoming proficient in foundational skills
- a revision of the sequencing of content in Mathematics, in particular, telling time, introduction of fractions, recall of multiplication facts and the solution of linear equations
- **History:** prioritising Australian history in Year 9 and 10 within a global context
- deepening students' understanding of First Nations Australian histories and cultures, the impact on First Nations Australians of the arrival of British settlers as well as their contribution to the building of modern Australia
- **Civics and Citizenship:** strengthening teaching about the origins and heritage of Australia's democracy and the diversity of Australian communities, with specific reference to the role of Christianity
- **Technologies:** addition of privacy and security in the Digital Technologies curriculum
- **Health and Physical Education:** strengthening the teaching of consent and respectful relationships from F–10 in age-appropriate ways
- strengthening the focus on students being physically active and content with a focus on activity in natural and outdoor settings.
- We're also doing some more work in the important area of mental health for young Australians, however this won't be an occasion for re-cluttering the HPE curriculum or imposing on teachers the expectation that should be quasi mental health professionals, or that schools must solve all the social pathologies and problems that have been caused by developments beyond the school gate.

Meeting the aims of the review

So, a year on from the end of the consultation window the result is the Australian Curriculum Version 9.0 which:

- sets a high standard and expectations for what all students should know and be able to every student, regardless of where they live.
- supports deeper conceptual understanding and improvement in educational performance,
- is a stripped-back and teachable curriculum that identifies the essential content our children should learn

- the content was revised and realigned to ensure it is up-to-date, has a strong evidence base and matches the high standards expected in other high-performing countries.

Ministerial endorsement is not the end of the story. In fact, it really only the beginning. It set out the intended curriculum, but as teachers all know, the intended curriculum has to be effectively delivered in the classroom, which means it has to be presented in a way that is useful for teachers.

The curriculum, at the end of the day, should be seen as a tool for the profession, a document that specifies what to teach and how well students are expected to learn this content. Teachers have to use this information to create the enacted curriculum which includes contextualizing and sequencing the content, whilst also selecting the best pedagogical approaches.

To that end, ACARA has completely revamped the Australian Curriculum website to present the curriculum digitally, with features that teachers have asked for.

It has been designed with the needs of teachers in mind and teachers from across Australia have been involved in user experience testing.

Our new Australian Curriculum, Version 9.0 website is not just the host for the updated curriculum but is one of the few digitalised curriculum websites in the world, with interactivity and features that will make it easier for teachers to plan their work and teach.

Website

There is new functionality so a teacher can see how each statement in the achievement standard is aligned to the content descriptions. This makes it easier for teacher to connect what needs to be taught and how well a students should be expected to learn this.

Teachers can select how they want to view the curriculum, for example they can choose a simple view with only the content descriptions and achievement standard or they can have an advanced view with different learning areas side by side or view a single learning are but with three levels shown side by side. This helps teachers to design teaching and learning activities to address the diverse needs of students, or integrated units.

Teachers will find it easier to see the authentic connections between the 3 dimensions of the Australian Curriculum.

There is also an in-line glossary that allows teachers to see the meaning of key terms just by hovering over the text.

There is more functionality and resources to be added to the V9.0 AC website, including work samples. If you would like to keep up to date about when new functionality and/or content becomes available, or new opportunities become available to be involved in resource development, subscribe to the ACARA monthly newsletter.

NAPLAN REFORM

2022

As you can see there has been significant change in the Australian Curriculum - but we have also seen the shift in NAPLAN.

The NAPLAN test event just completed in May this year was an important milestone that marked the first year all schools took the test online and the last year that the test took place in May.

The test event went exceptionally well, with a record 4.3 million tests successfully submitted by more than 1.2 million students in 9,315 campuses and schools across Australia.

I thank the students, teachers and schools who helped make that happen, particularly those who grappled with the unique challenges of staffing and attendance impacted by COVID-19 and, in some cases, floods.

It was an important milestone for the program and for ACARA because we know NAPLAN online is a better, more precise assessment that is more engaging for students and the tailored testing means students are given questions that are better suited to their abilities, so they can show what they know and can do.

NAP Reform

Earlier this year we had more significant changes made to the National Assessment Program.

In July of last year Education Ministers asked ACARA to look into the feasibility of moving NAPLAN as early in the year as possible.

We worked with our partners in the states and territories and determined that it was possible – but not without various implementation risks - to hold NAPLAN in Term One, starting from 2023. Ministers were keen to implement this change, and it was announced in March this year.

For principals, this will have significant implications. You will need to work closely with your jurisdictional test administration authorities to ensure that all student registration data is 100% accurate at the point it is entered into the online assessment platform by early March.

You won't have the three-week coordinated test period to fix up any errors, such as duplicate records or misallocated disability access codes. It has to be absolutely accurate first time. Your diocesan education authorities should be providing you with the support necessary to make this happen.

Moving the assessments forward means the results will be in the hands of school systems earlier in the year and they'll be able to use that data to inform teaching and learning programs throughout the rest of the school year.

However, I want to be very clear about what is meant by this. NAPLAN is a useful tool for schools, education authorities and governments but it is not intended to be a test that is *diagnostic and formative at the individual student level*.

The results can be used to support teachers but not to inform *them as to immediate next steps in what to teach individual students who have just undertaken the tests*. That is the purpose of formative assessment and NAPLAN is NOT a formative assessment. It can be described as diagnostic only at the school and system level, or at the jurisdictional and national level.

NAPLAN gives parents and carers an important piece of information so they can see how their child is progressing against national standards and over time.

But that piece of information is just that – one part of a bigger, richer picture. It doesn't replace ongoing assessments made by teachers about student performance, but it can provide them with important additional information about students' progress.

Results will be with school systems in May in 2023, which may give you time to adjust programs in those years, depending on your planning cycle. We're continuing to look for ways to bring that time down without compromising the required assurance and data analysis processes that we undertake to ensure the accuracy and quality of results.

We have also been tasked by Ministers to develop new proficient and highly proficient standard for literacy and numeracy achievement in NAPLAN, to complement the National Minimum Standard and potentially replace the current 10-band structure for reporting NAPLAN results.

These changes need to be seen in the context of a restatement of the purpose of NAPLAN that was agreed by Ministers in September 2019 namely that:

- NAPLAN tests are one aspect of each school's assessment and reporting process and do not replace the extensive, ongoing assessments made by teachers about each student's performance. Each teacher will have the best insight into their students' educational progress. Parents/carers can use NAPLAN reports, along with other school assessment reports, to discuss their child's strengths and areas for improvement with their teacher.
- NAPLAN results do not measure overall school quality.

Despite this final clear statement, we continue to see media stories that purport to identify Australia's best school with reference to NAPLAN scores, despite it being common knowledge that average scores are highly correlated with the socio-

economic profile of the student community, which has nothing to do with the quality of the teaching taking place at the school.

In an attempt to combat this, Ministers agreed to an important change in the way NAPLAN results are reported on **My School**, doing away with the similar schools comparisons and having a much stronger focus on the amount of progress that students achieve between one test and the next, taking into account their initial starting score and their socio-educational background.

This approach helps identify those schools who are consistently achieving above expected progress. In December 2020 ACARA published profiles of 24 such schools, and identified some of the practices being implemented in those schools. These included

- explicit teaching, including the use of clear learning intentions and success criteria for lessons
- use of formative assessment to generate data on student progress
- analysis of that data to inform teaching strategies, which can include differentiated teaching depending on the level of support students need
- strong focus on sustained professional development, with more skilled teachers acting as instructional leaders and mentors; and
- collaborative approaches to planning and teaching, which build collective efficacy among teaching staff.

NAP Reform II - Opt-in tests

In terms of some other changes coming down the pipeline, Education Ministers also agreed that from 2024 schools will be able to opt-in to assessments for Years 6 and 10, in the NAP Sample domains of science, civics and citizenship and digital literacy. The assessments will be phased in, so science will become available in 2024, followed by civics and citizenship in 2025, and digital literacy in 2026.

It will be up to schools and systems if they choose to opt-in to the assessments and how they do that.

For example, a school may choose only to do the digital literacy tests in year 6 every two years, while another school may choose only to do the science test in year 10 for five years in a row.

Whole systems can also opt-in if they wish, so for example, a minister in a jurisdiction may mandate participation for all government schools in particular tests. Catholic system authorities may also choose to opt-in.

We aren't going to publish the results of these opt-in assessments – they will be purely for the benefit of the schools and systems which choose to participate in them, to provide additional information on how well students are acquiring critical knowledge and skills in these key areas of the curriculum. Reports will be provided to the schools showing how they are performing compared to the national proficient standard.

The NAP Sample program, and the opt-in tests, will also move forward in the year. They'll take place in term two.

These are big changes, and we understand they will be potentially challenging for schools. Education jurisdictions and sectors, and ACARA, will be providing transition support to schools and teachers to make this as seamless as possible.

These decisions by the Education Ministers are the next step in the evolution of the National Assessment Program. It's critical we continue to evolve NAPLAN and these new improvements enhance the program by providing the results earlier in the year, and expanding the options for assessments available to schools.

Of course, the release of the Version 9.0 Australian Curriculum will have implications for NAP assessments in the future as there are new curriculum content descriptions and standards.

ACARA is currently considering the implications of these changes and will take account of the implementation plans of jurisdictions in determining our approach to the timing of the introduction of new assessment items, aligned to the new curriculum.

As test items are developed many years in advance of their use in test events, we have started the procurement of additional items aligned to new curriculum content. These items will be trialled in 2024. One of the issues that we need to be crystal clear about is the relationship between the achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum and the new proficient and highly proficient standards in NAPLAN, to which I referred a few moments ago, that we are looking to introduce next year, pending Ministerial approval later this year.

We need to avoid the situation where teachers are tempted to use NAPLAN scores in literacy and numeracy as a substitute for their own professional judgement, based on a broad range of classroom assessments, about a student's achievement in relation to the achievement standards in the English and Mathematics curricula.

More broadly, the effective implementation of the AC is largely reliant on a common understanding of core and essential educational concepts that underpin the assessment issues in Australian school education. While the AC seeks to **explicitly** define the **core knowledge, skills and understandings, the assessment concepts** associated with monitoring the effectiveness of implementation of the curriculum are often **implied**.

The effective understanding and application of these assessment concepts is often reliant on other concepts that are not themselves included in the formal curriculum, concepts such as validity, reliability and moderation. These are critical to teachers being able to understand the qualitative and quantitative information that is gathered through assessment.

Relationship to Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

So I'm going to take the opportunity with my colleague Danny Pinchas from AITSL following me on the program, to make some observations about the importance of improving the understanding of core assessment concepts, principles and practices among the teaching profession.

A requirement of the APST is that teachers can effectively assess and use evidence to inform their practice. Standard 5 requires graduate and practising teachers to know and be able to apply concepts such as diagnostic, formative and summative.

Proficient teachers are expected to consistently demonstrate the application of these concepts and HALTs are expected to analyse results and lead improvements across the school.

But the expectations relating to understanding technical concepts such as validity and reliability are not included in the broad standard statements. Perhaps that is appropriate, but some understanding of such concepts however is necessary for the expectations of the standards to be viable.

Assessment in ITE

Teacher pre-service education curriculum varies a lot in Australia as HE in our country entails independent and varied institutional approaches. Inclusion of assessment in the APST suggests that all ITE courses should include some assessment, but ITE accreditation processes cannot assure the specific inclusion of these core concepts or the depth to which they are taught.

It is generally agreed that there are advantages to Australia's approach of varied and independent higher education, including with regard to initial teacher education.

On the other hand, there are also advantages that would accrue from having a level of commonality, and many internationally effective educational jurisdictions – such as Singapore for example, seek uniformity in ITE curriculum.

It is worth asking the question as to why, if we have a national curriculum for school education, why we shouldn't have a national curriculum for initial teacher education also.

In this context, arguably assessment is the most crucial domain of teacher expertise.

Confident curriculum expertise is crucial, as are basic and varied pedagogical approaches. Assessment is the third point of this foundational triangle of teacher effectiveness and is therefore inherent

- in understanding student needs at the individual and class level,
- in determining the extent of content acquisition and understanding;
- in determining the appropriateness of pedagogies;
- in making judgments that are reported to parents; and
- in analysing common approaches across classes and schools.

Assessment is generative of continuing improvements for teachers and for students. It allows teachers to exercise independent and informed professional judgment, as well as coordinate with colleagues on a substantive basis.

The relative lack of confidence in key concepts or generally understood definitions is therefore an acute problem for teaching, or put in more positive terms, an obvious point of leverage for constructively building the capacity of the teaching profession.

With the development of important national initiatives as the new Australian Curriculum, and the literacy and numeracy progressions which have been aligned to it, it is now more important than ever that there is confidence and capacity built in the profession in assessing achievement, analysing student needs and sharing judgements.

In Conclusion, the last two years of COVID have been a time of change for schooling in Australia, where everyone has had to adapt to a new working environment. For ACARA, it has also been a time of delivering, on behalf of all education ministers, a work program of innovation, improvement and evolution in providing world-class curriculum, assessment and reporting with the objective of inspiring improvement in the learning of all young Australians.

I hope you can see how our work is helping to drive that learning and help prepare young Australians for the world they will inherit, for the jobs, challenges and opportunities of the future. We see ourselves as your partners in your educational mission.

Pope Francis has said that Catholic education and formation are more important than ever in “an age awash in information often transmitted without wisdom or critical sense.”

“As educators, you are called to nurture the desire for truth, goodness and beauty that lies in the heart of each individual, so that all may learn how to love life and be open to the fullness of life.”

"This means forming the head, hands and heart together: preserving and enhancing the link between learning, doing and feeling in the noblest sense."

I wish you all the best in these endeavours, and wish you to know that ACARA is at your service.