



DEVELOPING ADVICE TO THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM BOARD

Australia is now developing a national curriculum. The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) supports this initiative of the Australian Government and has prepared this advice for the National Curriculum Board (NCB) to help ensure that the national curriculum supports primary schools in delivering the best education possible to all young Australians.

APPA represents over 7200 primary school principals across Australia. The draft advice was distributed to all members of the association for comment. Almost 800 school sites responded, representing the views of over 5000 individuals including principals, leadership teams and some teachers. The respondents came from government schools (60%), Catholic schools (25%) and independent schools (15%). All states and territories were represented.

The most striking outcome of the member consultation was the extraordinarily positive response to the draft document. Responses showed 96% support for the advice as a whole (rating 'strongly support' or 'support'). Only 3% ranked the whole advice negatively ('oppose' or 'strongly oppose'). All sections received support ratings of well above 90%. The lowest level of support was 93% for the section entitled 'The Nature of the National Curriculum'. Even in this section, only 3% of respondents rated the section negatively. Comments received in the consultation have contributed to the final version.

These are remarkable levels of support. They suggest that even in the draft document, APPA struck almost exactly the right note with Australian teachers and school leaders. This was reflected in the large number of comments supporting a national curriculum:

- *Long overdue and I hope it happens soon; and*
- *It is essential that consistency is established across all states and sectors.*

Many respondents thanked APPA for the initiative to provide advice to the NCB:

- *We are pleased that a body such as APPA is taking a lead role in making sure the needs of primary schools are heard;*
- *APPA is to be congratulated on presenting such a detailed and succinct submission; and*
- *Congratulations and thank you for representing us so well.*

Many also congratulated the association on the quality of the draft advice:

- *We (the leadership team) fully agree with APPA's stance in all areas; and*
- *Excellent paper...congratulations.*

These results also suggest that the advice to the National Curriculum Board clearly and directly reflects the views of principals and teachers in primary schools.

One issue prompting many comments was the document's focus on uncrowding the curriculum. There was a clear consensus that the national curriculum should assist in sharpening the focus on literacy and numeracy and reducing the wide range of curricular and extra-curricular matters for which primary schools are asked to take responsibility. One respondent spoke for many:

- *It is vital that the primary curriculum is reduced and focuses on depth and rich knowledge.*

Similarly, many respondents endorsed the document's argument that the national curriculum documents should be brief, clear and easy to use:

- *...a clear, simple and cohesive document...is the only way to go;*
- *(the) document needs to be brief and specific...'*

There was overwhelming support for ensuring that the full range of primary personnel should be involved in the development and trialling of the national curriculum and in consultation on drafts. This reflected a widespread concern that the national curriculum for the primary years should be designed with primary classrooms in mind, rather than being shaped by the needs of secondary schools and the senior secondary years.

Many respondents commented on the level of resourcing available for implementation once the national curriculum is completed. They referred to the need for early and substantial professional development, additional financial resources to assist implementation, the development of web-based and print support materials and changes to pre-service education to reflect the national curriculum.

There was strong support for the view that the value of a national curriculum and achievement standards will be greatly enhanced if school starting ages and school structures across the nation are harmonised. Many respondents argued that 'starting ages should be uniform'.

There was support for the development of curriculum and standards for each year level. While some respondents supported development at phases or stages of schooling, the majority argued that curriculum expectations and, in particular, standards should be developed for each year of schooling:

- *...there should be...quality standardised assessments for each grade...;* and
- *Expectations for each year level are essential...a two year stage is far too broad at this stage of a child's cognitive development.*

Respondents generally supported the idea that the national curriculum should be mandatory for all schools, but a number of respondents argued for variations applying to some schools (eg special schools, remote schools, small schools) or some students (eg indigenous students), or noted that schools should be able to add local content to a national core.

Probably the strongest suggestion for change to the document came from a collection of respondents who argued for a greater emphasis on pedagogy and broader skills. There were references by a number of respondents to generic skills, thinking skills, cross-disciplinary or integrated studies, play-based learning, social and interpersonal learning, intercultural understanding and a small number of suggestions that the national curriculum as now conceived is too narrow. The document has been amended to reflect these views.

Many respondents felt a need to know more. A number of respondents asked questions, or explicitly requested more information about the process of developing national curriculum or its products. This demand is now reflected in the advice.