



24 May 2007

Mr John Carter
Committee Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Carter

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to a submission (no.27) to the current Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education. This submission, by Kevin Wheldall, Max Coltheart and Molly de Lemos, makes comments critical of Curriculum Corporation, and in particular its role in the Reading Assistance Voucher programme.

Curriculum Corporation is an independent, limited by guarantee, not-for-profit company, whose members are the State, Territory and Commonwealth education ministers of education. Curriculum Corporation was established to assist education systems improve student learning outcomes. Curriculum Corporation competes in the open market in response to requests for tender. The same procurement rules apply for the awarding of tenders to Curriculum Corporation as to any other organisation. As such the awarding of government tenders to Curriculum Corporation is not open to question.

Curriculum Corporation is contracted by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training to act as the National Programme Manager for the Reading Assistance Voucher programme. The program provides one-on-one tuition for students who did not meet the Year 3 national reading benchmark, or who were formally exempted. Responsibilities of the National Programme Manager include delivery of tuition in accordance with arrangements with each jurisdiction. Tuition is now successfully under way in many schools.

Under a separate contract, Curriculum Corporation has developed a Reading Assistance Kit (Kit) as a resource for tutors in the Reading Assistance Voucher programme.

The two major criticisms of the Corporation that I wish to address are that: (i) the Kit does not implement the findings of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Inquiry) and therefore does not reflect best practice in the teaching of literacy, in particular that it places insufficient emphasis on systematic phonics instruction; and (ii) Curriculum Corporation does not have the expertise to develop such a kit.

With respect to the first criticism, from the outset Curriculum Corporation has been committed to implementing the findings of the Inquiry. Every aspect of the development

of the Kit was designed to address the findings of the Inquiry – including the Tender proposal put to the Department of Education, Science and Training, the writers chosen, the composition of the expert reference group, and the structuring of each module to address the five strategies recommended in the Reading report.

The Kit aligns in particular with Recommendations 2 and 11 of the Inquiry:

*Teachers (should) provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetical code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. **Equally**, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies. [Recommendation 2]*

The Committee recommended 'an integrated approach to reading including instruction on how to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, knowledge and text comprehension (the five strategies) [Recommendation 11]

The Tutor Guide section of the Kit provides detailed information about each of the five key reading strategies identified by the Inquiry, including phonics and phonemic awareness. Each module within the Kit provides teaching activities which are overtly related to the five key strategies using both a *direct and explicit approach to teaching phonics* and an *integrated approach*.

It would seem that the Corporation is being criticised for taking the recommendations of the Inquiry at face value, and providing direct and explicit phonics instruction within an integrated approach to reading that supports the five strategies. Curriculum Corporation can only implement the recommendations as the Inquiry made them – if Wheldall and colleagues do not subscribe to them in full, then they should have had these arguments with the Committee, not those who try to implement its recommendations in good faith.

During the development of the Kit, Curriculum Corporation's expert reference group included two external literacy experts, Professors Bill Loudon and Alan Rice, who were both members of the Committee which undertook the Inquiry. They provided ongoing advice during development of the Kit and feedback on each draft to ensure its alignment with recommendations of the Report.

Professor Rice has made the following comments about the Kit following media criticisms of it:

- *The (media) criticisms address the perceived lesser emphasis given in the program to phonics and phonemic awareness. Whilst these are included prominently, the kit is based on an integrated approach of the five important skill areas that the Inquiry Report recommended as required for the development of literacy.*
- *The interaction in each session between the teacher and the student which is fundamental to the provision of explicit and systematic instruction is focused on letter-symbol recognition, letter-sound rules (phonemic awareness) and the ability to derive meaning from written text. ...*
- *Teachers are the key to the success of the program and I consider that the materials guide them to work in a way that is in accord with the Report.*

Apart from a misrepresentation of the Kit, the criticisms made by Wheldall and colleagues reveal a lack of understanding of the nature and genesis of the Kit. As Professor Rice says, *'The context for instruction must be considered in relation to the impact of the materials. The student continues to receive planned regular classroom instruction in reading, both as a member of the class group and as a student with special needs in learning to read. Good teaching in the classroom is the key in making the break through to literacy. This program with its outline of sixteen lessons complements the regular, ongoing classroom learning.'*

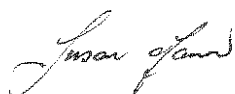
Feedback from schools, principals, teachers and tutors who have received the Kit has been positive. Mr Tom Croker (Past President and Representative of the Australian Primary Principals Association on the Reading Assistance Voucher Reference Group and Principal of Metalla Public School) describes it as a 'very useful support document for the teaching of reading'. He also commented that his practising teachers see the Kit as an excellent resource package, especially for working with children experiencing difficulty with their reading.

The second criticism, that Curriculum Corporation does not have the necessary expertise to develop such a kit, ignores Curriculum Corporation's internal literacy, measurement and project management expertise and the expertise of Professors Rice and Loudon. Professor Rice had this to say about his experience working with Curriculum Corporation:

I took note during my contact with the Curriculum Corporation of the expertise in both theory and practice that existed among team members. The line of literacy thinking of this team was in accord with the position of the Report.

I hope that the committee will give due consideration to these comments in reviewing the submission by Wheldall and colleagues.

Yours sincerely



Susan Mann
Chief Executive Officer