

**Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards
of School Education**

**Submission from the NSW Education and
Training Portfolio**

May 2007

Introduction

NSW has a world class system of school education, underpinned by high academic standards and a rigorous curriculum. The quality of NSW schooling and curriculum has been widely recognised and proven against national and international benchmarks.

NSW efforts to maintain our standards while extending opportunity to all students are briefly outlined in this submission. In order to further lift academic standards there are a number of complementary steps that the Commonwealth Government can take. These steps are summarised below.

Recommendations:

1. That the Commonwealth Government commit to a substantial additional investment in early childhood education in support of State and Territory programs and initiatives.
2. That the Commonwealth government provide Government primary schools with the same proportional level of support as Government secondary schools.
3. That the Commonwealth government make a commitment to maintaining high standards in its approach to national curricula.
4. That the Commonwealth increase investment in higher education and vocational education and training to ensure that improvements in school education are not wasted by inadequate supply of, and lower quality, post-school education.
5. That the Commonwealth pursue co-operative approaches to schooling as the best method of lifting education outcomes across Australia.

1 Stages of Schooling

1. ***Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:***
 - a. ***the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage;***

NSW has a rigorous, discipline-based curriculum, with syllabuses designed to ensure successful transition through the stages of schooling.

The school curriculum provides the framework for specific Department of Education and Training support programs. Three specific DET stages of learning strategies have been implemented to ensure that students are best prepared to progress successfully to the next level of education. These strategies are for Early Years, Middle Years and 15-19 Year Olds.

The high quality standards put in place by NSW can only be maintained by excellence in the classroom. NSW made a submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Teacher Education. The emphasis on quality teaching in that submission remains, but will not be repeated here.

1.1 Early years strategies

International evidence overwhelmingly identifies a strong start to school as a critical factor in later success. A successful transition to school promotes early literacy and numeracy achievement which strongly correlates to successful school completion and further education and training opportunities.

NSW has demonstrated national leadership with significant investment in the early years:

- Class size reduction program, a \$710 million program to reduce the state-wide average for class sizes in years Kindergarten (the year before Year 1) to Year 2.
- Twenty-one new preschools established since 2005
- An additional \$77.2 million over 2006-2010 to strengthen and expand the community-based preschool sector in NSW by 10,500 places
- More than \$193 million since 1998 for a whole-of-Government prevention and early intervention strategy to improve outcomes for children aged 0 to 8 and their families.

Under the *Literacy - The Best Start* program, Kindergarten students will be assessed for literacy and numeracy and expert help will be provided to those

who need it. To be developed with teachers and principals, the new assessment will give a more accurate measure of the reading, writing and counting abilities of children when they start school.

Other specific programs to support learners in the early years include:

- *Reading Recovery*, an early intervention remedial program.
- *Literacy on Track*, a professional learning program.
- *Count Me in Too*, an early numeracy professional development program.

In order for all Australian children to have the best chance at early success, investment is needed from all levels of Government. This is particularly relevant in the early years when the majority of cognitive development occurs.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth government commit to a substantial additional investment in early childhood education in support of State and Territory programs and initiatives.

1.2 Adequacy of Primary School Funding

While NSW has been significantly increasing investment in primary schooling, there are anomalies in Commonwealth funding that disadvantage Government primary schools.

Commonwealth funding for Government school secondary students is provided at a flat rate of 10 per cent of Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC) (\$9,319 in 2006). However, funding for primary students is provided at only 8.9 per cent of AGSRC (\$7,216 in 2006).

This discrepancy between primary and secondary schools was eliminated for non-government schools in the move to the SES funding system.

There is no rationale for the discrepancy in treatment, particularly given that Government schools educate the majority of students in communities most of need of additional support – such as Aboriginal students.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth government provide Government primary schools with the same proportional level of support as Government secondary schools.

1.3 Middle Years Strategies

Students in the middle years are experiencing a transition from childhood to adolescence. They are undergoing significant intellectual, social, physical and emotional development.

The Middle Years are crucial to schooling because in these years the relationships students develop, their engagement with learning and their development of self-esteem have a major and lasting impact.

Specific DET programs for middle years students include:

- *Literacy in the middle years*, clusters of schools for action research
- *Counting on*, professional knowledge for teachers of middle years

1.4 Senior Secondary Schooling

The NSW Government recognises the importance of completing Year 12 in the context of an economy that is increasingly based on skilled work. A key target in the NSW State Plan is to lift the rate of students completing Year 12 or the vocational equivalent to 90 percent.

In order to support a near universal completion of schooling there is a need to provide an appropriate range of options that will suit a broader mix of students.

To expand the options available for students initiatives such as Connected Classes and Trade Schools have been introduced. The Connected Classes program uses ICT to link schools, allowing more students to access low-candidature subjects.

Twenty-five Trade Schools will be established in locations with identified skills shortages. Trade Schools specialise in vocational training, allowing students to enrol as school-based apprenticeships simultaneously working, gaining credit towards an apprenticeship and receiving the HSC. The Trade School initiative builds on the highly successful VET in schools program that is now a component of the HSC for many students.

The senior school years are not necessarily the best option for all students, so young people in NSW are supported if they choose to find other pathways to work. Under the *Learn or Earn* program, every young person is guaranteed a training place in TAFE. Students under 18 who have left school and are not working will be eligible under the program.

Other specific programs for 15-19 year-olds include:

- Multi-campus colleges, involving schools, TAFE and universities, which provide senior secondary students more diverse subject choices.
- The *School to Work* program that provides vocational and enterprise learning programs and assists students to plan their careers.

- Industry- and university-recognised VET courses in the HSC.

1.5 Assessment and Reporting

The primary purpose of assessing students is to gain information that assists each child's further learning and development. The comprehensive system of assessment and reporting in NSW is designed to support the education of students at all stages of learning.

The addition of early assessment to the full-cohort tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, the School Certificate in Year 10 and the HSC in Year 12 will provide a full set of data on how students are progressing from the beginning of school until the end.

With the NSW School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit (SMART) schools and teachers have a comprehensive package that assists them to analyse and compare student performance data in full-cohort tests and exams.

Information on progress is provided to parents and the community. NSW parents receive plain English reports on their child's progress. After Basic Skills Tests, Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program and English Language and Literacy Assessment tests parents receive a report that includes an indication of whether their child achieved the national benchmark standard for their year level.

1.6 Special needs and Equity programs

Across all years of schooling there are a number of specific programs that help to achieve the best possible results for every child. Programs provide additional resources to high need groups and individuals so they can achieve as well as more advantaged students. There are also opportunities for children to excel in areas of strength and greatest personal interest.

Examples of the range of programs include:

- *Gifted and talented* – Selective high schools, selective classes and opportunity classes allow gifted and talented students to access developmentally appropriate curriculum. All comprehensive high schools are required to introduce and develop extensions programs for gifted students including appropriate teaching strategies, grouping options and accelerated progression.
- *Disability programs* – The Department's \$134 million *Learning Assistance Program (LAP)* supports students in regular classes who are experiencing difficulties in basic areas of learning such as literacy and numeracy. Almost 1,400 support teachers are employed in primary and secondary schools to assist teachers to meet the special learning needs of students with difficulties in literacy or numeracy.

Support classes (early intervention) provide educational programs for children with disabilities who are below school age. Itinerant support teachers (early intervention) support students with disabilities or significant additional learning needs who are moving from early childhood settings into Government schools. In addition, itinerant support teachers (for vision and hearing) support the families and schools of students with a vision or hearing impairment.

- *Equity programs* – The Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) provides additional assistance to school communities to reduce the achievement gap for students in identified schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

The English as a second language (ESL) Program improves the educational opportunities and outcomes of students from language backgrounds other than English.

2 Participation in Further Education and Training

- b. the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.***

NSW has a rigorous and comprehensive framework of curriculum and credentials to ensure students acquire essential knowledge and skills at school.

The NSW State Plan has set a high priority on lifting achievement across the scale. Targets have been set for reducing the number of students failing to meet basic standards.

2.1 NSW Curriculum

NSW offers the most comprehensive and discipline-based curriculum in Australia. NSW syllabuses are developed against defined quality standards, with input from academics, classroom teachers and the community.

The *Education Act 1990* sets out the minimum school curriculum requirements. From Kindergarten to Year 6, all NSW students in all schools study the mandatory curriculum in:

- English
- Mathematics
- Human Society and its Environment
- Science and Technology
- Creative Arts
- Personal Development, Health and Physical Education

From Year 7 to Year 10, all NSW students in all schools study the mandatory curriculum in:

- English
- Mathematics
- Science
- Technology
- History (including mandatory Australian History)
- Geography (including mandatory Australian Geography)
- Languages
- Music
- Personal Development, Health and Physical education
- Visual Arts

Key learning in Australian Civics and Citizenship is integrated into the History and Geography courses in Years 7-10 and tested with these subjects at School Certificate level (Year 10). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is integrated across the whole curriculum from K-12.

The achievement of students from Year 1 to Year 10 is graded on a five point scale of A-E or its equivalent, which was developed by the Board of Studies (BOS) in consultation with school sectors. Graded student work samples are available on the BOS website (<http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/>).

Plain English 'Foundation Statements' have been developed by the Board to emphasise what students from Kindergarten to Year 6 are expected to learn.

With its emphasis on subject content and rigour, moves towards a national curriculum holds risks for the integrity of NSW curriculum. The Commonwealth's approach of dictating requirements rather than working from current State strengths risks a 'dumbing down' of NSW curriculum.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth government make a commitment to maintaining high standards in its approach to national curricula.

2.2 Well Rounded Students

NSW schools provide a rigorous curriculum, but they also give students the knowledge, experiences and confidence to be active and responsible members of the community.

The *Premier's Community Service Award* is a community service program for Year 9 and 10 students in NSW Government schools that encourages teenagers to get involved in community service and learn new skills. Under the program all students who complete a minimum of 20 hours community service will receive the award alongside their Year 10 School Certificate. The program includes 10 annual education scholarships of \$2000 each for the most outstanding young volunteers and one annual school grant of \$5000 to the school with the best volunteering record.

The *Premier's Sporting Challenge* initiative includes \$50 million over four years for improvements including the upgrading of playing facilities, providing new sports equipment and improving facilities at specialist sports high schools. Under the program primary school students will be rewarded for participating in a range of activities every week for 25 weeks, and high school students will be encouraged to participate in physical activity such as walking, running or inter-school sports.

The *Taking the Pledge* program, to be offered to all primary schools in NSW, will teach young children about good sporting behaviour. A Sports Leadership

Program will build links between schools and sporting organisations so more students train as coaches, umpires, referees or officials.

The DET *Values in NSW public schools* policy identifies nine core values that guide student welfare and discipline, effective learning, communication with parents, and opportunities for staff, students and parents to participate in the life of the school.

The values are: Integrity, Excellence, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Democracy, Cooperation, Participation and Care. The document aligns with the Australian Government's *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (2005).

2.3 Adequate Funding for Further Education

As 70% of school leavers go on to the higher education and training sectors, the momentum created by schools' efforts in preparing students is in danger of being dissipated unless the higher education and training sectors receive proper Commonwealth funding support.

The proportion of total university funds sourced from the Commonwealth has declined from 57 per cent in 1996 to 42 per cent in 2005. The latest OECD figures show that public investment in tertiary education in Australia declined by 7 per cent between 1995 and 2003, while the OECD average was an increase of 48 per cent. An increase in direct Commonwealth investment in the sector is essential if Australian universities are to remain at the forefront of standards internationally.

The Commonwealth's funding for vocational education and training for 2005 to 2008 represents only 2.6 per cent growth in financial resources. This does not allow for sufficient growth in training places to meet the pressures of significant skill shortages.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth improve investments in higher education and vocational education and training to ensure that improvements in school education are not wasted by inadequate supply of, and lower quality, post-school education.

3 Senior Secondary School Certificate

2. The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for the senior secondary school certificate in each state and territory.

3.1 NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC)

The NSW HSC is highly regarded in Australia and overseas.

The objectives of the NSW HSC are set out in legislation. They include providing a structure within which student can prepare for “(i) further education and training, and (ii) employment, and (iii) full and active participation as members of the community.”

The NSW HSC now offers many choices to students – from subjects that lead to university entry, to subjects that give students a head start on training.

Courses are based on strong subject content and the latest research in Australia and internationally. Benchmarking against quality standards ensures that the HSC reflects standards comparable with those associated with other credentials such as the International Baccalaureate, and that international universities recognise the HSC.

Student performance in the HSC is reported against standards that allow for the reporting of student achievement in terms of what they know and can do. External exam marks and school assessment are used to place students in one of six performance bands, where placement in Band 2 or above means that the student has met the minimum standard expected. Extension courses have four performance bands. The NSW Board of Studies monitors the proportions of students achieving results at each level of performance annually to ensure that standards are being rigorously and consistently applied.

Performance descriptions have been written for Bands 2 and above that describe the characteristics of a typical performance of a student in each band. Standards packages, available on the BOS website, contain samples of student work produced in the relevant examination.

The rigour of the HSC is evident in the fact that it is accepted by all universities across Australia. It is also widely recognised by universities overseas.

The standing and reputation of the HSC has been acknowledged in the Commonwealth-commissioned *Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring a way forward* report by the Australian Council for Educational Research. The report recommended aspects of the HSC:

- The process used by the NSW Board of Studies to develop bands of achievement from an analysis of examination performances
- The information in standards packages
- The stated purposes of the current NSW certificate.

The requirements of the HSC and the standards they represent provide the blueprint for curriculum extending back to Kindergarten.

3.2 Vocational education

The VET in Schools curriculum for Year 11 and 12 allows students to gain Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) VET accreditation while studying for their HSC.

Courses that can be jointly accredited for the Higher School Certificate and for AQF purposes are available through nine industry curriculum frameworks: Business Services; Construction; Entertainment Industry; Hospitality; Information Technology; Metal and Engineering; Primary Industries; Retail Tourism. These courses can count towards tertiary entrance.

NSW arrangements to integrate vocational education and training as part of the senior secondary curriculum have been highly successful. An independent review conducted by the Chair of the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training Chair found that, for almost 70 per cent of participants, undertaking vocational programs while still at school was instrumental to further employment.

4 Comparison of Academic Standards

3. How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries.

4.1 High academic achievement by NSW students

The results of national and international tests demonstrate the high academic achievement of NSW students.

Our results include:

- Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2003 - NSW performed significantly above the Australian average.
- Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) (2002/03) - NSW performed strongly, ranking first in both mathematics and science in Year 8. Only Singapore performed significantly better than NSW in science in Year 8.
- Civics and Citizenship – Year 10 students ranked first in Australia, while Year 6 students came second.
- The results of NSW Year 7 and Year 8 tests for 2007 have shown the highest ever score for literacy.

International research has long demonstrated a link between student backgrounds and results. This can make comparisons between groups of populations difficult to make.

A recent article '*State differences in achievement among secondary school students in Australia*' in the *Australian Journal of Education* (volume 49, no 2, 2005) by Gary Marks from the University of Melbourne and John Cresswell from the OECD set out to see how well each State is performing once factors such as socio-economic background, the proportion of Indigenous students and regional distribution of students are taken into account.

The research found clear evidence that 15 year olds in New South Wales consistently outperform students in the other States and Territories once SES factors were taken into account:

'generally, student achievement in reading, mathematics and science are higher in New South Wales than the other states, once demographic and grade differences are taken into account'.

4.2 Cooperative work between States and Territories

Efforts to improve the education system in one State can lead to innovations that are taken up by other States, and nationally, to enhance to quality of schools across the country. For example NSW has taken the lead in a number of areas that have since been taken up nationally:

- Full-cohort testing in Years 3, 5 and 7.
- Mandatory annual school reports in a common format for government and non-government schools.
- The Schools In Partnership program for schools with high Aboriginal populations forms a blueprint for development across Australia.

States and Territories have also worked together cooperatively on a range of projects designed to achieve greater consistency in curriculum and standards.

- States and Territories have agreed to national Statements of Learning in English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship and ICT that set out what each child should have the opportunity to learn.
- AESOC is working on common standards for reporting of Year 12 subjects.
- The Council for the Australian Federation has agreed to work towards a national curriculum.

Importantly, all of the significant developments that have helped to give Australian schools a relatively high international ranking have come about as the result of State initiated actions or co-operative national efforts.

In pursuing an increasingly unilateral agenda, the Commonwealth is increasingly at risk of developing policy that is not workable and that does not lift the quality or equity of Australian schools.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth pursue co-operative approaches to schooling as the best method of lifting education outcomes across Australia.

5 Conclusion

The NSW system of schooling is based on long-standing principles of high standards and proven practice. NSW has led the way in educational reform, particularly in regard to curriculum, testing and reporting.

A diverse range of programs is designed to cater to the varied needs of learners throughout the different stages of schooling.

NSW is committed to high standards and emphasises that, in Australia's federalist system, the most enduring and tangible benefits for students and communities are to be gained through collaboration and cooperation between governments, based on best practice.

In this spirit NSW urges the Commonwealth to commit to working together with States and Territories to ensure that the best ideas in education are available to all of our young people, in order to prepare them for the new challenges of the twenty-first century.