

The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation 2006

Report to the Board of Trustees and Staff of St Paul's College

Introduction:

The Curriculum Planning Group met to discuss how best to address the day set aside for staff consultation on this document. The staff had been in possession of the document for some time, and the consultation was set for 20th Oct 2006. This was advertised to the parent community as a Teacher-Only Day.

Background:

An historical sketch was provided of the various legislative and curriculum changes over the period from 1877 to the present. The thrust of that sketch was to show how New Zealand's education provision has shifted from a focus on *equality and access* (ie *all children* should be able to get the *same education*) to a focus on *equity and outcomes* (ie all children should get the same opportunity to get the *same results*). These developments are also to be seen in the light of dramatic changes to New Zealand political and economic life since the mid-1980s.

What is presented to us now is a document that sets out a *national* vision of a curriculum that will be different for *each school*. This means that each school, in consultation with its teachers, board, students and parents, will decide how best to implement this curriculum, following the guidelines set in that document.

The Key Elements of the National Curriculum:

Working in small groups, the teachers progressed from an instinctive 'gut response' of each element, to looking more closely at the whole element, finally examining just

one or two aspects of these elements. The collated results of those discussions is summarised here.

- Vision:

This statement was found to be expressed broadly, but has a clearly economic basis, suggesting the growing commercialisation of education in New Zealand. There was a suggestion of social engineering (possibly the idea that education is the 'key' to New Zealand's 'successful transformation into a knowledge-based society'). There was a critical questioning of whether there was still a vision of a 'free' education for all New Zealanders.

- Principles:

These were found to be vague and almost meaningless (especially 'connections' and 'coherence'). The principle of 'excellence' was found to be used loosely. Whereas the term should refer to a standard (of attainment) it is used in the curriculum document to mean students working to their full potential. Therefore, the term loses any general value and becomes linked to each and every student who works to full potential.

- Values:

Some degree of 'fit' was found to exist between the curriculum document 'values' and those of St Paul's College. There was a concern however that at a national level, there is a lack of understanding of 'New Zealand values' amongst certain sectors of society which will be evident in the children from those sectors.

- Key Competencies:

Some scepticism was expressed that these statements are in any real way different from what has gone before (the 'skills'). Some suggested that these statements are ambivalent (students should learn to be 'enterprising' (ie be competitive and take risks) yet at the same time will need to learn to 'relate to others' and 'participate and

contribute' (both descriptions suggest high levels of working with others in a non-competitive way)).

- Effective Pedagogy:

Achieving all of the above depends on a good teaching and learning experience and the staff believed that we could create a supportive learning environment at St Paul's by creating positive parent-school relationships. While they value and want to see the spread of ICT across the curriculum, they expressed a concern at the cost associated with making ICT more widely available at St Paul's. Another major factor is the NCEA which, while providing more choice and flexibility, is also so assessment-driven, that it is very difficult to nurture a love of learning in our students.

Considerations When Designing a School Curriculum:

The following summary highlights those factors that schools are required to think about when putting their own curriculum in place. The summary of staff responses is collated here:

- Designing a School Curriculum:

This task looks to be a massive and complex one that will have serious work-load issues for a small school. Concern was expressed that schools could 'hijack' the curriculum to create a very narrow product. The requirement that 'enterprise' be built into the curriculum leads to serious resourcing problems, namely the availability or re-training of teaching staff with appropriate skills and knowledge, and the provision of courses and course materials.

Overall, it seems that there is an ever-increasing shift to vocationalism and away from academic subject teaching. This leads to the question: 'what has happened to a general school education?'

- Planning with a Focus on Outcomes:

The trend in New Zealand education is away from content to outcomes, and this document accepts that trend without question. The focus in this document seems to be on performance. The teachers involved in this discussion want to see a move to broader outcomes and students success, away from the present stress on narrow outcomes and assessment.

- Planning for the Development of Key Competencies:

A high degree of scepticism was expressed by those who see the 'key competencies' as old wine in new bottles. In addition, some saw these as vague and irrelevant unless the most important competency, 'using language, symbols, and texts' was mastered. Essentially, this is the '3 Rs', without which all other 'competencies' are largely unattainable.

- Planning for Purposeful Assessment:

A concern was expressed that the senior (yr 11 - 13) assessment programme is taking a dominant role in all curriculum planning. Furthermore, the moderation process is unworkable and inconsistent, and there is a suggestion that this will become more so as each school designs its own curriculum.

- Planning for Coherent Pathways:

The concept of 'coherence' implies a seamlessness that does not exist, and some expressed concerns for transient students moving from school to school, each one having its own curriculum. For greater consistency and coherence, some believe that Yr 1 - 10 should be more publicly accountable for its results.

The Learning Areas:

The curriculum document provides both a brief overview of the learning areas and provides a detailed set of pull-outs showing the Achievement Objectives by level. Of some value is the placement in one book of these AO's that up until now have each been in separate curriculum statement handbooks. An important addition to the learning areas has been made by including languages. There is thus a national expectation that all schools above Yr 7 will offer a language or languages other than English (LOTE).

For purposes of this discussion, teachers moved into broad curriculum groups to analyse the learning areas. A summary of those viewpoints follows:

- English:

Not much change from the present. Of concern is that students are seen to progress year to year regardless of whether they have attained the AO for that level.

- Languages:

There is repetitive wording (probably overlapping ideas) and some confusing terminology. Getting into the detail, a school like St Paul's with a significant Pacific Island content, will have trouble dealing with the choice of language (Tongan or Samoan?), suggesting it may be preferable to steer clear of a PI language altogether. Other problems relate to fitting a language option into an already crowded timetable, staffing, and resourcing. There has to be greater clarity regarding the compulsion on schools to offer LOTE and if so, to what level.

- Social Sciences:

The emphasis on New Zealand context is at odds with the stated vision of educating for a globalised world.

- Science:

There does not seem to be much that is new in the padded terminology. Problems related to transcience were highlighted here, especially when different schools are pursuing different curricula. 'Science for science sake' is sacrificed for science that is social engineering.

- Mathematics:

Some major structural changes are evident, with a greater emphasis on statistics. It is suggested by the maths Dept that there needs to be a streamlining of the number of standards.

- Health/Phys Ed(& RE):

The RE Dept was included here as although RE does not figure as a learning area, it fits best in this area, due to the strong emphasis on values in the Health area. A major concern here was the massive breadth of the Health/PE learning area, and the implications for that when planning.

- Arts:

With specific reference to Visual Art, there appears to be little change. The four strands that are suggested have some implications for St Paul's:

- Research is difficult for our teacher-dependent students;
- The 'managing self' key competency in the 'Developing Ideas' strand is al a challenge for our students;
- The arts curriculum relies heavily on past student experience, which for our students is limited.

- Technology:

Of greatest concern is the emphasis on the 'nature of technology' that requires high levels of reflection by students serving to make technology more philosophical and less 'technological'.

Conclusions:

As a final activity, the teaching staff considered the draft Curriculum in terms of what might work well and what was less likely to work well, and what was both negative and positive in the Curriculum.

- Good Potential:

The Religious Education programme was likely to make a very strong contribution because of the placing of 'values' education in the Draft Curriculum. This provides schools like St Paul's with an advantage that regular state schools will not have.

The concept that schools will design their own curriculum will allow St Paul's to develop a 'niche' in which our students will have more room to succeed, assisted by the broader outcomes that permit greater flexibility.

- Limited Potential:

The successful development of the Key Competencies is going to be hampered by the demands of the NCEA. On a related note, the onerous nature of moderation will be amplified in a system that will encourage extreme diversity.

- Positives:

The Draft Curriculum attempts to reflect the changes taking place in 21st Century New Zealand society. It attempts to outline how the whole person can be prepared for that

society and the wider world through the Key Competencies. This preparation is made more complete by the inclusion of Values, especially integrity.

Schools are able to better the chances of success for their particular student communities through the creation of community-driven curricula that will be tailored to meet the needs of their students.

The strong role that ICT is given to play across subject areas is important in light of the increasingly technological age students live in. The subject areas have, in some cases, been simplified, and the document itself provides a single resource, bringing together into one place the Achievement Objectives of all Learning Areas.

- Negatives:

There was an overriding sense of 'here we go again' when presented with a document that proposes what seems to be a reinvention of the wheel in language that is often vague and platitudinous. It is questionable whether new is better and whether the proposed benefits of constant change justify the added burden required by these changes, particularly when these changes seem to detract from the business of teaching.

The creation of an eighth Learning Area, namely Languages, is considered an imposition, particularly on a small school. The existing Curriculum is already overcrowded, and the inclusion of a LOTE will merely exacerbate this situation, putting pressure on timetabling and teaching resources. There appears, at this stage, no indication that schools will be given any assistance to resource Languages.

The Draft Curriculum conceptualises dramatic shifts in practice in the establishment phase, and schools that do not have extensive community support will find that it is left to the teachers to steer most of these changes. Further pressure will be placed on resources in order to bring to life new features of the Curriculum, such as enterprise and the widening of ICT.

There is a prospect that there will be little national uniformity as each school creates its own unique curriculum that will not serve transient students well. Whilst many schools may follow a broadly similar path, some school communities could, conceivably, use this opportunity to develop curricula that may have aspects inimical to the historical aims and intentions of New Zealand education.

- Final Notes:

The feedback survey is expressed in terms that assume an acceptance of the Draft Curriculum by asking the wrong questions and reducing critique to a tick box and a few lines of comment. To ask

How much impact do you think that the direction set out in this document will have on the ongoing development of the curriculum in your school (or in New Zealand schools)?

is not the same as asking whether one agrees with the direction set out in the document. Thus, if one's response is 'Considerable Impact' this is a statement of opinion that relates to the technical implementation of these directions, not their underlying value.

A later question that relates to the Values, Key Competencies, etc, asks

How useful will each of the following parts of the document be to your school (or to New Zealand schools) when designing a curriculum?

which assumes both that these concepts are set in stone and that schools *will be* designing their own curricula in the near future.

Several teachers felt they could not satisfactorily convey their critique of the Draft Curriculum without appearing to support it implicitly by their responses on the feedback. The framing of this survey leaves some doubt as to the authenticity or sincerity of the 'consultation' process.

In conclusion, there is more that is negative than is positive regarding the Draft Curriculum, however the likelihood that it will become a reality by the end of 2007 seems strong indeed.