

BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS AND THE NATIONAL (AUSTRALIAN) CURRICULUM

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STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS AND BIG PICTURE EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

Summary: The essential conclusion of this brief report is that the Australian Curriculum won't require compliance and accountability practices that are significantly different to those used at present. BP schools should be encouraged to share their existing practices in meeting existing curriculum requirements. Like most innovative pedagogy the model of BP learning in schools can be shown to be compliant. But there is a longer term problem for all schools which comes from school accountability which is narrowly driven by NAPLAN testing and subsequent My School comparisons. For all innovative schools this has the potential to undermine current initiatives and efforts to reengage young people.

The Australian Curriculum:

Details about the national curriculum can be obtained from http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum.pdf

Education ministers have agreed that substantial implementation of the Curriculum to Year 10 for English, mathematics, science and history will have been achieved by the end of 2013. Implementation paths and timelines, up to the end of 2013, are likely to vary by learning areas, depending on the extent of the differences between the new Australian Curriculum and existing State and territory curricula.

Statements about quality assurance and review of the Australian Curriculum are very vague in their current form, for example:

State and territory school and curriculum authorities are responsible for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. At the national level, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and Education Services Australia (ESA) will play a key role supporting State and territory authorities. Professional associations will also play a role in supporting the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

Problems in its development

Problems in the development of the Australian Curriculum are receiving considerable media coverage. These problems include the timeline (too rushed), content (too much), standards (too high or too low) and resourcing (too little). The most telling criticism seems to be about excessive content, with insufficient scope for learning in depth. This would concern Big Picture and all schools if students are forced to 'cover' content which is hastily driven by a turgid pedagogy, along with an anxiety about how schools might compare with others.

Problems with the Australian Curriculum will be resolved – if it is allowed to be amended over time, as occurs in the case of existing State curricula. The bigger problem in the interim is that schools will be pushed, or feel they should move, towards greater rigidity and be nervous about using the flexibility available to them. Principals may feel that they no longer have the same scope to respond to local differences in the learning needs of students. Deb Hayes has alluded to the fact that the Australian Curriculum may then just be serving those students for who conventional schools already work. BPEA needs to monitor this situation.



Compliance requirements and processes

As well as actively seeking out the scope for flexibility in the Australian Curriculum, schools should be reminded that the formal processes for ensuring compliance are not going to change and already have considerable existing flexibility.

The Australian Government will provide support for implementation but will not have any control (other than through grants) over compliance processes. It will have no additional processes or mechanisms to ensure compliance with syllabus requirements. That function will remain with the States and their existing curriculum authorities. Hence the requirements of the Australian Curriculum, together with the procedures to ensure compliance should not impact on schools in ways that are significantly different than at present.

What may happen is that State-level processes will be better aligned with those States regarded as implementing best practice. Schools looking for a guide as to future standards of compliance might refer to practice in the more centralised jurisdictions such as NSW or Western Australia. The NSW Board of Studies, for example, probably implements the most strict compliance regime in Australia and can be considered as a standard to which the other States may eventually have to comply.



Examples of current compliance practices

One of the suggested strategies below is for BPEA to facilitate the sharing of existing good practice. These would include learning plans, showing the way in which they intersect with curriculum areas and contribute to anticipated student outcomes. Vocational education requirements are probably the most demanding. As explained by Janet Austin, teachers at Ogilvie Girls HS make a professional judgment



Flexibility in practice

That being the case there are still many small and innovative schools with creative curriculum structures in NSW which are currently able to meet Board requirements without any great difficulty. Examples in the non-government sector (in which compliance is assessed school-by-school) include the Steiner schools, Key College, Dale Christian School, St Dominics, Penrith.



In the case of public and other systemic schools the system authority (e.g. Department of Education) is the body which provides assurance to the Board of Studies that its schools are meeting syllabus guidelines. At the school level this assurance is generally sought by local directors of schools; school principals usually have to sign-off a statement to the effect that all syllabuses are being implemented within Board requirements.



Under current arrangements in NSW, schools which are assessed directly by the Board of Studies might fall into a number of compliance categories. Most schools are substantially compliant. The Board uses a 150 point checklist but it is very common for schools to be working towards compliance in many areas. Under these circumstances a school is still considered to be substantially compliant.

Other traditional requirements in NSW are really only relevant in the context of specific awards, for example the teaching hours requirement for the award of a School Certificate. Such requirements are only broadly assessed - it is very difficult for small and innovative schools to strictly demonstrate teaching hour compliance, particularly in cases where their learning experiences are not defined by key learning area boundaries. The Board of Studies takes a very broad view in these situations.



Further information about existing compliance requirements is readily available in each State. In NSW schools are guided by the Assessment, Certification and Examination Manual, available at <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/acemanual.html>



Mandatory hours and Test-driven compliance

The curriculum development processes in each State are similar. Most curriculum authorities represent a range of community interests and views. At most stages in the process special interest groups and the media exert considerable pressure: public debates resonate with opinions about what schools should be doing, from compulsory driver training through to child rearing, consumer education and life saving. The draft national languages curriculum specifies 300 hours of study before Year 7.



Despite the current flexibility in compliance monitoring at the State level it is still feasible that Federal governments in future might link funds transfers to the States to more rigorous compliance monitoring, including hours of study in what are priority areas. It would only need a media-fed moral panic about aspects of the curriculum to (literacy, ANZAC, decline in science etc) to trigger this process.



The biggest problem for all schools, including Big Picture schools is the progressive enforcement of centralised curriculum, not through compliance processes but through high-stakes testing. Central authorities will increasingly use the results of external tests to drive accountability and to make judgments about the performance of schools and systems, and in many cases school funding and teacher salaries and progression. Even Big Picture schools in the USA have to place effective programs on hold while they subject students to drill and test routines. This was the subject of controversy within and between the Rhode Island schools around the time of the 2010 Big Bang.



The school-level response to NAPLAN testing and the My School website is going to be problematic for all types of schools. Comparing schools by using a narrow (spotlight) range of test scores will distort teaching and curriculum as schools try to raise these scores. Big Picture schools can be confident and should not feel disadvantaged by comparisons against other schools. Comparisons of BP schools against others should further improve as My School becomes more accurate and the schools continue to achieve success. Neil Day's research into outcomes of Big Picture schools in California should also provide schools in Australia with the confidence that they can do well in such comparisons.



CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

Big Picture Education Australia should

seek opportunities for Big Picture schools to share existing practice on curriculum compliance. This might include workshops, shared rubrics, models etc

advise schools that compliance will continue to be the responsibility of the States and that processes, along with existing scope for flexibility, should not significantly change.

advise schools not to over-react to published requirements of the Australian Curriculum and not to allow assumed constraints to distort implementation of BP learning.

progressively use results from school-based research and evaluation of Big Picture to publish and disseminate stories about the success of BP schools.

monitor and report on the progress and changing profile of BP schools in Australia, for example through the My School website. (focus on both cognitive and non-cognitive variables)

Encourage schools to keep BPEA informed of school-level impacts of external curriculum and/or testing – and/or add questions to this effect to future surveys

The publication of this interim report implements 2, 3 and 6 above.

Chris Bonnor, February 21st 2011.



