

## Devil's in the details on standards

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**As politicians squabble over credit for the idea of a national school curriculum, details of how it would work are scarce, writes Anna Patty.**

JOHN DAWKINS may want to send Julie Bishop and Kevin Rudd to the naughty corner for copying his plans for a national school curriculum. During his term as the federal minister for education in the Hawke government, Mr Dawkins worked towards developing a similar plan.

And while the minister and the Opposition Leader squabble about who should take credit for the idea, they still haven't explained how they are going to make it work. Nor have they learnt any lessons from the failed Dawkins experiment, the main one being that without the support and co-operation of the states the idea is dead in the water.

It is no easy task. NSW and Queensland are among those that continue to dig in their heels, jealously guarding control over their existing curriculum standards, which they fear could be lowered within a national framework. They are only too happy to co-operate in the national push, just as long as standards are raised to meet theirs.

Barry McGaw, the architect of the NSW Higher School Certificate in its present form, introduced in 2000, supports the idea of a national curriculum. "It won't work if there is some kind of central office in Canberra that tries to prescribe it all," he says. "It will only work if you keep the states on side."

The founding president of the NSW Board of Studies, John Lambert, pulled the pin on the Dawkins plan for a national curriculum during the early 1990s. Interestingly, Mr Lambert, who now works as a full-time consultant for the Sydney Anglican Schools Corporation, is singing a different tune.

Mr Lambert withdrew his support from the model discussed from the late 1980s to the early 1990s because he believed it was impractical for teachers to implement the high level of detail it demanded. "There were too many outcomes that teachers were expected to meet," he recalls. "The issue at the moment is a different one."

Both the Government and the Opposition are talking about a national curriculum in terms of common outcomes and probably common content. "I am quite supportive of that. I think it is time that we had a national curriculum that identified common outcomes, common content and common skills," he says.

Education experts, the teaching profession and both sides of government agree national consistency is needed, with 80,000 families moving from state to state and school to school each year. There is also a push to lift education standards around the country.

When the Federal Government announced its plans in October for a national certificate of education - to replace the existing state and territory year 12 leaving certificates - it released a report from the Australian Council for Educational Research.

The report by the council's chief executive officer, Geoff Masters, identified unnecessary duplication and differences in assessment between the states.

Professor Masters found the curriculums for chemistry, physics and advanced maths were very similar. For example, the states and territories shared 95 per cent of the chemistry course, 85 per cent of physics and 90 per cent of advanced mathematics.

While the maths curriculum was found to be largely common, the method of assessment differed. In accounting, a mark of 85 in one state did not represent the same level in another. This made it impossible for employers to compare a mark gained in one state with that in another state. And when it came to subjects such as Australian history, less than half the content was in common; in English it was about a quarter.

"There was fairly good agreement on skills, but little agreement on the type of English texts or particular periods of history that were studied," Professor Masters says.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, and Ms Bishop have been critical of the content of English and history courses around the country, insisting that history be taught as a stand-alone subject, as it is in NSW.

SCEGGS Darlinghurst earned a special gong for daring to incorporate feminist and race readings of Shakespeare's *Othello* into its syllabus, despite the central characters being a feisty female and a black foreigner.

While NSW English teachers argue their syllabus is of high quality, with an emphasis on a personal reading of the classics, Western Australia's syllabus has been more difficult to defend. The WA Premier, Alan Carpenter, was forced to dump his education minister, Ljiljana Ravlich, after a series of gaffes she made, including her failed introduction of a system of "outcomes-based" courses into years 11 and 12.

History courses were criticised for their lack of rigour, English students were reportedly asked to study posters and SMS messages, and music students were not required to play instruments.

Ms Bishop points out that the Queensland Government's decision to exempt selective schools from the official State Government curriculum so that students at these schools will study the International Baccalaureate, is a clear admission that the Beattie Government "has no faith in the quality of its curriculum".

Declaring an obvious bias, Mr Lambert says that "as founding president of the NSW Board of Studies from 1990 to 1994, I would say the NSW certificate is the best one".

"The HSC is an outstanding credential with international recognition and will get students entering just about any university in the world," he says. "It has also been very well tested in the sense that it has been around many years and has been through many revisions and has been refined so that it works very well.

"Given that it seems we will have a national curriculum, because the Coalition and Opposition have said they both want it, the NSW HSC should be held up as the model on whatever is decided on. I think NSW should take the initiative in making it happen."

Ms Bishop doesn't rule out lifting national standards to match those in NSW, but the state shouldn't be so sure that it has best practice for all subjects.

Her spokesman said that if NSW was so sure it had the best system, it should put its cards on the table and allow an independent body to judge its merits against its other counterparts. That way, the best of what each state has to offer can be included in a gold-standard curriculum.

The NSW Minister for Education, Carmel Tebbutt, has been consistent in her wariness of the national proposal, regardless of whether it is being spouted from the Coalition or federal Labor.

She says NSW is one of the only states to have an external exam for its year 12 certificate and to make the study of English compulsory. "NSW HSC students are required as a minimum to spend 65 per cent more time in the classroom than their Victorian peers - that's an extra 520 hours of face-to-face teaching time," she says.

"In NSW the minimum requirement for tertiary entry courses includes 200 hours more classroom time than is the case in Victoria. And unlike the situation in some states, including Victoria, NSW students must successfully complete the School Certificate [or year 10] before being allowed to commence the HSC." Ms Tebbutt also insists that practising teachers should be represented on any national curriculum board.

Ms Bishop says it would be appropriate for any national curriculum development organisation to include teachers as representatives of the profession.

The president of the NSW Teachers Federation, Maree O'Halloran, says the NSW Board of Studies includes representatives from the independent schools and public school teacher unions.

"That way ensures you have the practising teachers on the board and that they reflect more than their own viewpoint," she says.

But Mr Rudd has made a point of excluding teacher union representatives on his plan for a new national curriculum board, charged with designing common content in maths, English, history and science as soon as 2010.

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