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## **Responding to the National Curriculum Development Paper**

Dear Mr McGaw

Many thanks for the invitation to attend the National Curriculum Board Forum *Into the Future* on 27 June. I was pleased to have an opportunity to represent the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) at this seminal event.

Here, I am taking up the invitation given at the Forum to communicate particular issues to the NCB. I have circulated the National Curriculum Development Paper to AAEE members throughout Australia. This letter draws together concerns and ideas into five key points. Please accept this letter as an indication of AAEE's desire to continue to be engaged in the communication and consultation processes over the national curriculum.

I need to state here that, at this stage, there appears to be no consensus within the AAEE membership about the establishment of the NCB and the value of a national curriculum. Discussion internally continues. AAEE, however, wishes to stay at the table of negotiation. At this time, I wish to submit the following thoughts:

### ***1. The Role of Curriculum***

Members expressed some desire that the Development Paper begin with an articulation of the role of curriculum per se before describing the role of national curriculum in building Australia's future. Here, members indicated that a section on this topic might refer to such documents as the Adelaide Declaration and the National Action Plan on Education for Sustainability when it is released. It might also – with sustainability in mind – identify the role schools and teachers play in society to achieve cultural change.

Attachment 3 states that the “national curriculum has a significant focus as part of COAG’s broader productivity agenda and its drive to sustain Australia's prosperity and productivity. In this context, the national curriculum has a key role to play in increasing Australia's international competitiveness, both in terms of its economic competition and its educational performance”. As an environmental education organization, AAEE is deeply concerned about the direct link between the orientation towards consumer-driven lifestyles (associated with economic productivity) and the socio-environmental crises that are being experienced. The purpose of education is not to enhance international competitiveness or economic competition. In the view of our members, the main purpose of education is to enable children to grow to reach their potential and to provide the basis for rich, fulfilling lives. It is also to ensure that children have a strong foundation for contribution towards a sustainable future. Thus, we urge that the curriculum focus on economic productivity and competitiveness be tempered and supplemented with a statement on the vital importance of environmental health.

## ***2. Integration and Sustainability***

As a member country of the United Nations, Australia has agreed to focus on the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), 2005 -2014. Australia has agreed to develop forms of education that support the goal of the Decade:

*The overall goal of the DESD is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all.*

DESD Draft International Implementation Scheme, January 2005

The Development Paper needs to reflect the current pressing environmental and social realities faced by Australians in a global context. In fact, with the development time and shelf-life of curricula, it needs to be forward thinking and creative in order to maintain its relevance over the desired time span. To be credible it needs to reflect such realities as climate change and the need for more sustainable lifestyles.

The Forum’s title, *Into the Future*, implies the need for a forward-looking curriculum. AAEE believes the present and future realities of our existing socio-ecological crises need very specific attention. Asimov got it right when he said,

*No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be.*

The National Curriculum must be framed with the future in mind. It must be designed not with the view of integrating environmental/sustainability into the curriculum. AAEE believes it is vital to get integration the right way ‘round! It is the curriculum that must be integrated into the environment: the curriculum must emanate from environmental imperatives and educate for shifting towards sustainability. Indeed, to be visionary and to guide education *into the future*, the new national curriculum should begin from a declared

position of sustainability at social, personal and ecological levels and let this inform decisions about content and practice, as well as school and school system management.

It must also be underpinned by understandings – and values – that do not separate or isolate humans from the world in which they live. We are a part of the environment and natural systems, not apart from them. Ecological understanding needs to be central to education, to curriculum and to schools. And, as per Asimov’s point above, ecological understanding needs to become central in the decision making of school authorities and boards and fundamental to policy making and management procedures.

### **3. What do our students need?**

AAEE would argue strongly that curriculum can no longer afford to continue to be reproductive, reflecting community expectations and paradigms of today. Instead curriculum must become *transformative*, able to respond to change with sustainability as a core organizing idea.

*Here’s one thing we do know about the future: surprise, instability and extraordinary change will be regular features of our lives. Some events... will be like massive social earthquakes, rupturing the order of things... and transform our outlooks forever.*

(Homer-Dixon, The Upside of Down, p.29).

Change is happening and will continue to happen. Our students will need to be able to learn along the way and have what Homer-Dixon calls, a *prospective mind* – one that engages with uncertainty and risk, one that applies creative thinking and imagination as we engage with the flux of the current situation. Students will need to learn ideas and concepts from the past that enable them to create dynamic stability in a changing future.

Humans are problem solvers. Given that the problems keep changing, students will also need to be adaptive learners – nimble, smart, alert, prepared, creative and flexible. Their teachers will need the expertise to scaffold these skills. And the schools will need the capacity to support teachers to learn and use these skills.

AAEE members do not deny the importance of knowledge. But without purpose, future, values...importance becomes impotence. Knowledge is essential; knowledge for sustainable living is fundamental. However, while the subject disciplines, especially the sciences and social sciences, contribute essential knowledge, environmental/sustainability education is vital to:

- connecting and integrating that knowledge
- framing analysis and innovation
- generating and applying new knowledge.

Environmental/sustainability education and critical thinking together provide **relevance**, and they connect the (harsh) realities of our planet in crisis to the learning provided through school curriculum. Because we have to rethink the way we do things in every

sphere, we need to prepare young people (and their teachers) for new approaches to living and new occupations that will come out of a reorientation of our society to more sustainable lifestyles.

We appreciate that a national curriculum will be seeking to achieve quality education and would like to note the link between quality education and education for sustainable development listed below:

*Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) mirrors the concern for education of high quality, demonstrating characteristics such as:*

- **Interdisciplinary and holistic:** *learning for sustainable development embedded in the whole curriculum, not simply as a separate subject*
- **Values-driven:** *sharing the values and principles underpinning sustainable development*
- **Critical thinking and problem solving:** *leading to confidence in addressing the dilemmas and challenges of sustainable development*
- **Multi-method:** *word, art, drama, debate, experience, ... different pedagogies for modelling processes*
- **Participatory decision-making:** *learners participate in decisions on how they are to learn*
- **Applicability:** *learning experiences are integrated in day to day personal and professional life*
- **Locally relevant:** *addressing local as well as global issues and using the language(s) which learners most commonly use.*

Source: DESD Draft International Implementation Scheme, January 2005

#### **4. Research**

Participants at the Forum were invited to offer suggestions for research. AAEE believes there is a need for research into models of integration at school and teacher-training levels.

Despite its prominence in education department documents and in approaches to important social and cultural initiatives, the notion of integration is understood poorly, acted on in random ways and interpreted to the point that it can mean almost whatever one wants it to mean. Across the country, government and community priorities that are not specifically included in syllabus documents arrive at schools with the requirement that they be integrated. This is the fate of multicultural education, environmental education and a range of other important social elements.

Given the lack of consistent understanding of what it means to integrate and how to do it and support it, it's not surprising that many classroom teachers and many schools simply ignore these requirements, or they do them in tokenistic ways. Integration looks and feels like *more* work. Consequently, many speak of integration in disparaging ways.

Research into models of integration at classroom, teaching, whole-school and school-community levels would be valuable. The work of Kath Murdoch (University of Melbourne), for example, provides useful models of integration for primary schools. More needs to be done for secondary schools, especially since subject ‘silos’ fail to *explicitly connect* the learning or to connect it with real-life. Still more needs to be done for pre-service training.

The Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative also offers a model for whole school sustainability practice and organization.

Furthermore, research into education for key aspects: ecological understanding and critical environmental literacy in both primary and secondary sectors is essential.

### ***5. Development process from here***

The Development Paper says that national curriculum will be developed collaboratively. AAEE is very willing to contribute to the development of the national curriculum; the Association will participate in NCB processes as invited. AAEE would also like to see the establishment of a cross-disciplinary group as an integral part of the NCB process. The diagram on page 7 of the Development Paper indicates that groups will be set up as required. But, unless the cross-curricula perspectives are treated more seriously and given more support, they will (continue to) look like *cross-your-fingers* perspectives.

In the context of the world out there and the attendant crises, AAEE believes sustainability education is more than a perspective: it is a necessity. Explicit not random teaching is required. In addition, AAEE believes it needs to be the organizing logic of learning. The concept of sustainability needs to be the *organizing framework for* education, just as it is becoming the organizing framework for policies and programs at all government levels, here and overseas. The political, social and environmental importance of having sustainability as a foundational and organizational precept for a national curriculum should not be underestimated.

AAEE would, therefore, propose that the NCB establish a Sustainability Education Reference Group that ranks with the National Subject Reference Groups.

The global and national and state games in education have changed! If it is a given that the formal years of school education are to prepare students for the world in which they live – and will live – there is an urgent need to review curriculum in light of the widespread recognition of the need to live and act and make decisions in ways that support shifts towards sustainability. The national curriculum must not make the mistake of many other curriculum documents that presuppose that the socio-ecological conditions in which we live will be stable and continuing. The national curriculum must give more than lip service to learning for change and for creating healthy, sustainable societies. We will be doing the children of today no favours by subjecting them to curriculum that only references a past that has deliberately excluded socio-ecological considerations from proper consideration. Current environmental disturbances are now of such a scale that we

can now longer assume global or local stability. The national curriculum and its development process must reflect this situation.

AAEE trusts that the new national curriculum will be forward looking in content, values and approaches. I would welcome an opportunity for further discussion on these matters, and I would be pleased to do so with a small delegation of AAEE members.

Yours faithfully

**Phil Smith**

President Australian Association for Environmental Education