

David de Carvalho address to Sydney Morning Herald Schools Summit, 17 February 2021

Thank you, Lisa and Jordan, for inviting me to join you today, and Paul, for that insight into the NSW Curriculum Review. It was great to hear from Minister Mitchell this morning too and to have everyone here today – whether in person or online.

I am standing today on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and so I pay my respects to the Gadigal Elders of past, the present and the future, who for tens of thousands of years have been, are now, and will continue to be true educators, handing on the memories, traditions and hopes of their people.

I am sometimes tempted to roll my eyes whenever I hear someone at an education conference say something like, “We live in a fast-paced ever-changing world and education needs to change with it!”

It seems to me to be quite a lazy argument for changing a system to simply point to inevitable changes in the system’s external context and imply that this fact alone meant one need not argue too strenuously, or with evidence, for the merits of any proposed change. It also seems to assume that any change introduced into a system in response to shifting contextual factors must necessarily lead to improvement.

I am still occasionally tempted to indulge in that kind of metaphorical eye-roll, but 2020 has reminded me that clichés usually have an element of truth: COVID is the greatest disruptive phenomenon we’ve experienced for decades, and we do need to adapt in order to be able to achieve our overarching goals, much like a sailing boat crew has to change the way the sails are trimmed when the winds or the currents change, if they want to stay on course and reach their desired destination.

The pandemic has hijacked life as we knew it and pitched us into rough and uncharted waters. This time last year we didn’t know it, but we were on the cusp of the COVID-19 era.

2021 is going to be the second year of that era, and who knows how long it will go on. It will be another significant year for Australia and the world, as we continue to digest what has happened and what is still happening, and discern and make the adaptations and adjustments we need to make for the longer term with respect to the way we live and educate the next generation.

2021 will be a particularly noteworthy year when it comes to education, and this morning I want to talk briefly about three items on the national education agenda for 2021 that fall within ACARA’s responsibilities:

First, the review of the Australian Curriculum – and I should note at this point that ACARA and NESA have kept in close touch to ensure that, as far as possible, we are taking similar approaches.

Second, the running of this year’s NAPLAN assessments; and

Third, the task we have been given by education ministers to make recommendations for changes to NAPLAN.

To help us think about the context in which we will be doing this work, ACARA recently undertook some research with parent focus groups about their views on education in the wake of COVID-19. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has given parents new perspectives on their children's education.

While experiences differed from school to school and family to family, the experiences of remote learning gave many parents a unique (and often frustrating) insight into the mechanics of schooling and education, with many finding a new appreciation for teachers and their skills, and taking a greater interest in the curriculum and how their children's progress is measured. Primary school parents were particularly interested in literacy and numeracy.

Parents reported that pre-COVID, they generally relied on the information they got from conversations with teachers to determine how their child is progressing, but as a result of the pandemic, some parents now feel more empowered to bring their own observations of their child to those conversations, and they are more interested how assessment results can inform those discussions.

We expect that now that parents have had first-hand, up-close experience into the schooling system, there will be a greater level of parental interest in this year's NAPLAN results. And we also hope they may be encouraged to get involved in public consultations on the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum Review when it opens in late April.

Ministers have given ACARA the task of improving the Australian Curriculum by refining, updating and decluttering the curriculum to make it more helpful for teachers, which then makes it more accessible for students.

But what do we mean by decluttering? Obviously, it will entail some reduction in content, but that is not the only focus, and arguably not the main one. I've heard some stakeholders say that we should be "taking a chainsaw to the curriculum", but chainsaws are not particularly subtle and can leave an awful mess behind.

I prefer to use the analogy of a hedge-trimmer and pruning secateurs, which not only cut back, but also tidy up, reshape and clear out old and redundant branches to make room for new growth or the grafting on of new elements.

Another way to describe what we are hoping to achieve is that we want to give the Australian Curriculum the Marie Kondo treatment, so that – regardless of how much content is left in the curriculum at the end of the process – it is properly organised, logical in its presentation and sequence, coherent, clear and easily accessible. We are hoping that teachers will 'find joy' when they see the new curriculum, and are very interested in getting their feedback through the consultation process.

As part of the review, we want to clarify the relationship between the three dimensions of the curriculum; that is, the learning areas, the cross-curriculum priorities, and the general capabilities.

We need to be clear that learning areas have primacy of place in the curriculum and that the cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities are best taught in the context of the learning areas, not separately.

Furthermore, not every cross-curriculum priority and general capability can be addressed in every learning area. Some learning areas are better suited to the development of particular general capabilities than others, and each of the three cross-curriculum priorities find more natural homes in certain learning areas.

Clearer expectations will give back time to teachers – so they don't have to spend so much time planning and trying to interpret the curriculum to work out exactly what they are expected to teach. We want them to have more time to linger longer on topics, to make sure students understand what they are taught and are given the opportunity to deepen their understanding of core concepts.

The review has highlighted that some learning areas need more revision than others. Maths is a classic example of an area in need of more improvement and updating than some other areas of the curriculum, and this is supported by the history of our PISA results.

In terms of Civics and Citizenship, “the Australian Curriculum exemplifies a shared commitment to ... respectful and rational discussion of different perspectives, values and beliefs, and to democratic processes as the means of promoting the common good of all”. This is particularly important in our current context.

Our democratic way of life is underpinned by a belief in the dignity of each person, bequeathed to us by the heritage of Western civilisation. Grasping this requires a deeper understanding of our history and is in no way at odds with the importance of deepening our understanding of the histories and cultures of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the history of the interaction between those two traditions.

As Senior Australian of the Year, Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann stated in her acceptance speech, “We learnt to speak your English fluently, walked on a one-way street to learn the white people’s way. Now is the time to come closer to understand us and to understand how we live and to listen to what needs are in our communities”.

Until now we have been working with 18 new teacher and curriculum reference groups we have established, made up of 360 teachers and curriculum authority representatives from across Australia, as well as consulting with our peak national subject bodies and key academics.

I've also had discussions with the staff from 24 primary school across the country. At the end of April, we are throwing open the fruit of that work to the public for 10 weeks, and we are calling for feedback.

We look forward to hearing views to help us improve the curriculum and ensure it is serving our children and young people, equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need to live, fulfilling lives and to shape the future Australia.

After COVID led to NAPLAN's cancellation in 2020, the tests will again be run as usual in May. The cancellation left a gap in the data set, the data from this year's NAPLAN assessment will be particularly important in helping to show the impact COVID has had in terms of learning gain (or loss) in literacy and numeracy.

In fact, ACARA was approached by some school systems asking what we could do to help them find out how their students are tracking. In response, we published answers to all the NAPLAN tests up to 2016, and we linked the equivalence tables so that once the tests are

marked, schools could work out where students sat on the NAPLAN scale. Nearly 50,000 users visited the tests and answers page between now and last May when they were published. We also contributed a large number of NAPLAN items to the NSW 'check-in' assessment.

This year around 70 per cent of schools will undertake NAPLAN online, and next year it will be 100 per cent.

We have implemented new technology, governance and readiness testing, which give us confidence that the causes of the technical problems in 2019 that disrupted tests for about 10 per cent of students have been addressed, and that if any unforeseen issues do arise, we have much better processes in place to manage them.

The last 12 months have given administrators the opportunity to learn a lot about how to manage our new pandemic world and so even if the pandemic persists into May, ministers have agreed that assessments will proceed in all schools with the exception of those that might be closed for health reasons at the time, and we sincerely hope there will be none in that category.

Despite the hiatus for NAPLAN itself, there was no rest, however, for the ever-present NAPLAN debate.

Ministers have asked ACARA to develop some options for changes to the writing assessment, as well other potential changes to NAPLAN more broadly. They have asked that in undertaking this task we take account of the findings of the Independent Review of NAPLAN commissioned by NSW, Victoria, Queensland and the ACT.

We have to provide recommendations to ministers in the middle of the year, and we're busy consulting with key stakeholder groups at this moment on a number of key issues including:

- Are there alternative ways to achieve NAPLAN's purpose as a point-in-time, objective measure of student progress as well as school and system performance?
- What is the best way for writing to be assessed?
- When – in terms of which year levels and which term – is the best time to run the tests?
- Should an additional domain be assessed? If so, which one?

These are all important issues to consider but we need to keep in mind that any proposals for change will entail trade-offs and interdependencies between these various elements of the program, and it is unlikely, if ministers do agree to changes, that all stakeholders will agree with all aspects of any new set of arrangements.

However, there is one thing I think we all agree on when it comes to NAPLAN, namely that it does not and cannot measure the overall quality of education provided in a school. Ministers have been very clear on this point.

Ministers have also been clear, through the Mparntwe Declaration, that the overall purpose of our education system is to ensure our young people are confident and creative, life-long learners, and active and informed members of the community.

This is not a process that is easily reducible to a mechanism that can be manipulated and fine-tuned through rationalistic analysis of data and associated managerial techniques.

There are many aspects of schooling that arguably cannot or should not be captured as quantitative data. Schooling should be data-informed, but not be data-driven.

This is because the essential nature of education is that it involves a sense of historic continuity and conversation between generations, between teachers and their students, where a learner is engaged in the process of becoming a well-rounded human being; that is, a person who recognises themselves to be related to others in virtue of participation in, and enjoyment of, multiple systems of meaning, feeling, imagination, desire, recognition, intellectual pursuits and collective actions, moral and religious beliefs, customs and conventions, principles of conduct and rules that denote rights and responsibilities.

To imagine that the effectiveness of this process in its totality can somehow be captured in numbers is to indulge in the worst kind of scientific and managerial hubris. But to argue the other extreme, that nothing about education can or should be subject to measurement and quantitative analysis, is equally hubristic.

Fortunately, I have not actually come across anyone who takes up either of these polar positions, but I have met many who are too willing to attribute such extreme views to those on the opposite side of the debate about the appropriate role of standardised testing.

We all recognise that it is particularly important that the fundamental capabilities of literacy and numeracy that allow students from all backgrounds to access powerful knowledge across all learning areas should be the subject of critical attention. For this, data is necessary, but it needs to be kept in perspective.

So as we begin another school year, we are also embarking on a new era – A COVID-19 era where parents are now armed with new insights and a renewed curiosity, where we have a modernised national curriculum review that will help empower our students into their future, and a return to NAPLAN as we take another step forward to moving completely online and potentially a new-look NAPLAN.

By this time next year, when we all gather again, education in Australia will have gone through two of the most challenging years in its history. We are all involved in a collective process of resetting our sails to ensure we can meet these challenges with confidence.