



## How to demolish the Donnelly review

*Commit to diversity and truth telling*

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# Australian curriculum review: strengthened but still a long way from an amazing curriculum for all Australian students

By Stewart Riddle

There is much to admire in the proposed revisions to the Australian Curriculum, which were released for public consultation this week. I'd give it a B+.

□ The curriculum content organisers and core ideas have been revised to ensure that they are more closely aligned, with some trimming of content to enable greater depth of study. There is also less prescription to enable a broader range of curriculum opportunities within the framework of the Australian Curriculum.

However, perhaps the most remarkable shift is the clear break from Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire's 2014 curriculum review, which called for greater emphasis on Australia's Western cultural canon and Judeo-Christian heritage. The proposed changes have a clear commitment to cultural diversity, plurality and inclusion of multiple perspectives, which is embedded throughout multiple aspects of the revised curriculum.

This can be most clearly observed in the revisions to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority, which emphasise 'truth telling' and deeper, more honest engagement with the complex and confronting histories and experiences of First Nations Australians.

Terms such as 'occupation', 'colonisation' and 'invasion' are embedded into the conceptual bedrock of the curriculum, which sits in stark contrast to the recommendations posed by the Donnelly-Wiltshire review.

Cue outrage from the conservative commentariat.

Almost immediately, the Institute for Public Affairs [decried the changes](#) as demoting the values of Western civilisation and Christianity, while also forcing the curriculum to become 'monocultural', with the Director of the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program, Dr Bella d'Abrera, claiming that 'children will be taught the historical lie that Australia was invaded by the British'.

Donnelly also quickly sprang into action, [criticising the proposed changes](#) as being 'politically correct' and enforcing a 'cultural-left interpretation of the nation'.

Even the federal education minister, Alan Tudge, was quick to express concern that the proposed curriculum changes came at the risk of 'dishonouring our Western heritage'.

The culture wars are far from dead and we can expect to hear more public proclamations of the calamity that will surely befall society if Australian students learn the truth about the histories and cultures of First Nations Australians in the classroom.

Another concern about the 'decluttered' curriculum revisions is the emphasis, yet again, on increasing the focus on literacy and numeracy in the early primary years. Schools already emphasise the 'basics' in the first years of schooling, with many public schools timetabling only one or two lessons each week for the arts.

Any curriculum that focuses on literacy and numeracy at the expense of the arts, humanities and social sciences is an impoverished curriculum.

□ The perennial argument that we need to go 'back to the basics' to fix declining performance on standardised tests misunderstands the problem. Take the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for example, which is a triennial test of 15-year-old students' performance in reading, mathematics and science. While the national aggregated data demonstrate a small decline in performance over the past couple of decades, when the data are disaggregated, a much more nuanced picture appears.

Australia has one of the world's most segregated and inequitable schooling systems. Performance on PISA is intimately tied to socioeconomic status and geolocation. The basic correlation is that the closer to the city and the more money and education that your parents have, the better your chances of performing well on PISA.

NAPLAN is much the same.

The MySchool website includes a series of technical reports that explain the correlation between school performance on NAPLAN and its Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), which is based on parental education and occupation, geolocation and percentage of Indigenous student enrolments. The annual ICSEA technical reports consistently demonstrate approximately four-fifths of the variance in schools' performance on NAPLAN is accounted for by ICSEA.

In plain language: what happens in the lives of young people has a much bigger effect on their success on NAPLAN and PISA tests than the curriculum or pedagogy they experience in school.

Australian schooling is starkly divided into those who can afford independent school fees and/or to supplement school learning with extra-curricular activities such as music lessons, dance and art clubs, sporting teams and the like.

However, for young Australians living in poverty and complex situations, including those in out-of-home care, or who do not have access to rich extra-curricular opportunities, the school curriculum is the only place where they have an opportunity to be exposed to the rich diversity of culture and creativity that is available through the arts, humanities and social sciences.

A greater emphasis on the basics in the curriculum might produce a small bump in test results, but the effects of an impoverished curriculum will be much longer lasting, especially for those students who are most marginalised and disadvantaged.

As such, we need to shift the debate away from one that engages in endless cultural and ideological dispute, or one which focuses on the lowest denominators of basic literacy and numeracy, to one that asks how we can meaningfully ensure that all young people, but especially those least advantaged, have access to an engaging, high-quality and rich curriculum.

The proposed changes are a good start, but we still have a long way to go.



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