

Missing persons

The new National Curriculum Board needs the experience and guidance of teachers in public schools, says the AEU. **Diny Slamet** reports.

In the next three years, Australia's education system is set to undergo a fundamental change with the introduction of a new national curriculum. Two months after his election, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced that professor Barry McGaw, one of the nation's education experts, would chair the new National Curriculum Board (NCB), the body appointed to oversee the creation of what the PM has promised will be a "highly rigorous" national curriculum.

Professor McGaw is the director of Melbourne University's Education Research Institute and was formerly the director of education with the OECD in Paris. While the appointment of Barry McGaw as the chair is no surprise, given his national and

international credentials, the union is deeply dismayed and concerned that the voice of practising teachers will not be included in the body that will shape Australian education for the next 50 years. AEU federal

“...the failure...is a serious affront to all teachers...”

president Angelo Gavrielatos says that, while each state and territory will have a representative on the board—and the independent and Catholic systems will have three—there is no specific recognition of the needs and aspirations of public schools and their students.

Briefly

- The new National Curriculum Board lacks a voice that speaks exclusively for the public school sector.
- The AEU believes the federal government is pandering to the private school lobby.
- The board's chairman says teachers will help develop the national curriculum's detail through their role on expert committees.



Directions and frameworks

The new national curriculum is to be in place by 2011. McGaw says the board's role is to set directions and frameworks on which it will be built, and teachers will play an integral role in developing the detail.

He has suggested that the first step in the curriculum process should be a national conference at which each state and territory's curriculum authority puts forward its best drafted proposals, along with examples of best practice from overseas. The conference would also involve academic curriculum theorists and school principals to give a "strong practical perspective" from professionals who are delivering the curriculum.

"After this conference, we will come up with the board's directions and a general statement about the purpose of curriculum in the 21st century, so there's a context in which all of this sits," says McGaw. "It will also do us well to make clear that English, maths, the sciences and history

The state and territory education ministers who have each appointed a member are responsible for both public and private schools, says Gavrielatos. "While the government has said on many occasions that it doesn't seek to distinguish between public and private, it continues to do so by constantly advantaging and pandering to the private school lobby, and this is a further example of it."

When *Australian Educator* contacted Education Minister Julia Gillard's office to put it to her that public education was underrepresented, the response, from a spokesperson, was that the claim "did not ring true". The state and territory representatives would speak for the public system, the spokesperson said.

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[the four main curriculum areas] aren't everything. There are other things for which space has to be preserved. We want to avoid the prospect of our committees going off and producing unmanageable amounts of work that put at risk other important things."

McGaw envisages that the biggest role for practising teachers will be at the next stage—specialist conferences of experts. In the case of science, for example, the expert group may include teachers, Science Teachers' Association and Australian Science Education Research Association

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representatives, and people from the Academy of Science to represent scientists.

"Each expert group will have a good balance between people who are in the field, academics who are teaching the field and practising teachers," says McGaw. "We'll have these expert groups and we'll make sure there's a clear consultative process in which they are receiving constant feedback so they are not developing things in a vacuum."

But Gavrielatos says he is not convinced. He maintains that the failure to include a teachers' representative at board level is a serious affront to all teachers, and notes that it was the Prime Minister who made the decision on the exclusion.

"Practising teachers who are trained to design, develop and implement curriculum should, of course, be on the panels. But there must also be space for the representative voice of teachers." ●

DINY SLAMET is a freelance writer. ►

Case for consistency:

If there is one thing AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos and National Curriculum Board chair Barry McGaw can agree on, it is that our curriculum needs greater national consistency.

The school curriculum is one of the most powerful forces in a democracy, says Gavrielatos. "It encapsulates what a society believes its future citizens should know and be able to do. It is also the means by which all students, irrespective of their background, are provided with access to the worlds of work and further study. A curriculum must articulate and progress social and economic

objectives. It's a tool of social justice because it both describes and unlocks social and economic power.

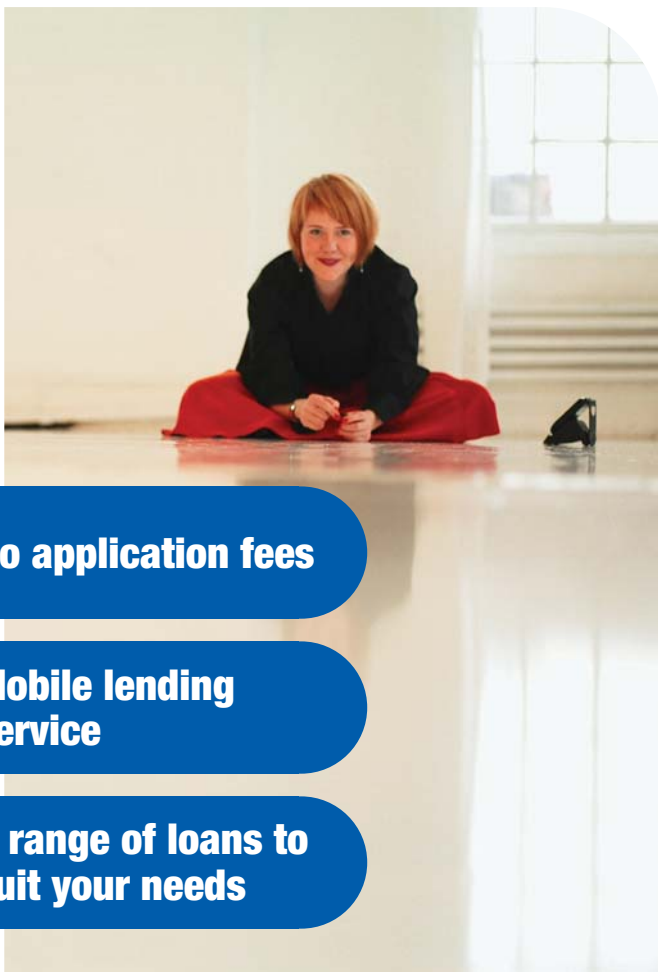
"However, the development of a national curriculum cannot and will not in itself improve students' educational outcomes. They can only be improved if the implementation of a curriculum is properly resourced."

McGaw acknowledges the need for a national curriculum so the children of families that move interstate don't find themselves behind or ahead of their peers in their schoolwork. But there is a greater aim, he says.

"We're only 22 million people, and while we're right up there, close to the top in the international comparisons the

OECD produces, we ought to aspire to be at the top," says McGaw. "This country is not happy if it wins a silver or bronze medal at the Olympics. Why should we be happy not being number one in education? We should at least aspire to it. If we pool our resources, if we work together, couldn't we do even better than we're presently doing?"

Australia's educational ranking has slipped internationally in the past eight years due to several factors. The performances of 15-year-olds in some other countries have been improving, and those countries have lifted the performance of their best and brightest while Australia has been



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working to improve the results of its struggling students. Also, the OECD is now ranking more countries.

“In general, we’re weaker in maths than in reading and science,” says

“Why should we be happy not being number one in education? We should at least aspire to it.”

McGaw, “but we’re well ahead of countries like the United States, France and Germany. There’s a lot of skill in this country. We’re doing well

and we could do better if we work together. For example, 95 per cent of what is done in chemistry in the final years of school is the same in the six states and two territories, yet we develop eight different curricula. If we can do that more efficiently, we’ll get more benefit from our resources.”

It could be argued that competition between states drives better performance, but McGaw says competition is effective only if the states learn from each other. “While we’ve had separate state systems, we don’t stack the states up against one another to make comparisons, to ask who’s doing best and what are they doing better. We’re happy to say,

‘Oh, Finland is doing better than us’ and rush off to Finland to find out what they’re doing. But we don’t say, ‘Western Australia is doing very well and is right up there with Finland’ and go to Perth to find out what they’re doing.”

The biggest challenge will be maintaining a commitment to thinking nationally, he says. “We need to keep bipartisan support for operating nationally. We need to convince people that what we’re doing is effective.” ●

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