

Submission of Family Planning NSW

Inquiry into the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum

August 2020

Family Planning NSW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education regarding the 'Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum'.

About us

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services in NSW and Australia. We are experts in clinical service provision and comprehensive sexuality education. Our mission is to enhance the reproductive and sexual health and rights of our communities by supporting all people to have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their reproductive and sexual health.

We provide clinical services to more than 30,000 clients annually, information and health promotion activities, and best practice education and training in reproductive sexual and health for doctors, nurses, teachers and other health, education and welfare professionals.

Our services are targeted to marginalised and disadvantaged members of the community, including young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, refugees, people with disability, and people from rural and remote communities. In 2019/2020 we provided clinical services to over 4,792 young people aged under 25 years and engaged with young people across the state in providing comprehensive sexuality education. A key focus area for our organisation is enabling young people to achieve good reproductive and sexual health by providing youth-targeted services.

The services we provide to support young people include:

- youth-friendly reproductive and sexual health clinics across NSW
- health information on our bodytalk.org.au website and comprehensive sexuality education
- a free and confidential information phone line, email and webchat service, Talkline
- information for parents and carers on discussing reproductive and sexual health with their children.

Our work is evidence-based and shaped by our research. We offer training, information and resources for teachers and educators to enable them to deliver holistic comprehensive sexuality education in accordance with the NSW curriculum. All Family Planning NSW professional development courses for teachers are endorsed by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). In 2019-20, we delivered training to 389 teachers via NESA endorsed face-to-face and online programs.

Recommendations

Family Planning NSW recommends:

1. include timely, holistic and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in the NSW school curriculum to promote students' wellbeing, emotional development and safety
2. provide access to professional development and evidence-based resources to teachers and educators to facilitate comprehensive sexuality education
3. consistent implementation of a national comprehensive sexuality education framework is needed to ensure all student needs are met, including students belonging to diverse groups
4. integrate comprehensive sexuality education into the NSW core curriculum
5. promote holistic, evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education through a whole of school approach
6. support the emotional and social development of students through the provision of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.

Key points

Family Planning NSW believes that everybody in every family should have access to high-quality reproductive and sexual health services and comprehensive sexuality education. We strongly affirm the need for consistent provision of comprehensive sexuality education to people of all ages, particularly students and young people, to ensure that the reproductive and sexual health and rights of all people are met.

Our key points, in relation to the inquiry *Terms of Reference*, are outlined below:

1. The extent to which the Masters Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, including:

a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

Family Planning NSW supports the inclusion of age-appropriate, evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education into the NSW curriculum. The Masters Curriculum Review identified students' wellbeing, emotional development and safety are important priorities not being adequately addressed by syllabuses and syllabus outcomes.(1) While not specifically identified in the Masters Review, comprehensive sexuality education contributes to students' wellbeing, emotional development and safety and supports the ethos of the Review.

Comprehensive sexuality education utilises an integrative learning approach. It is a crucial early intervention strategy for promoting the health and wellbeing of students through the learning of preventive health activities and protective behaviours. Evidence shows that comprehensive sexuality education improves health outcomes in children and young people including, reduced risk-taking and reduced engagement in gender-based violence, fosters good sexual health, including delayed initiation of sexual intercourse and increased use of contraception and condoms, and encourages protective behaviours to safeguard against violence.(2-7) Importantly, comprehensive sexuality education supports students to create respectful relationships at all stages throughout their lives.(2-7)

Flexibility in the school curriculum is particularly relevant to comprehensive sexuality education. With young girls reaching puberty earlier, and young people's use of technology occurring earlier, teachers may need to address topics earlier than suggested by the curriculum to ensure safety.(8) Adjustments would be based on the developmental stage and behaviours of the students. For example, identification of safe use of technology begins in Early Stage 1 and continues through to Stage 5 where students "discuss responsible and ethical use of social media and technology."(9)

Evidence-based content about sexuality, sexual health and relationships is age and stage appropriate and reflects clear scaffolding of learning. For example, the *NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum* outlines that protective behaviours, a core element of comprehensive sexuality education, are important throughout schooling years and assist students to identify age-appropriate boundaries for behaviours, use of images, and understanding of verbal and non-verbal cues. Protective behaviours are taught throughout all stages of the curriculum, from Early Stage 1, where students demonstrate "protective strategies that keep themselves healthy, resilient and safe," through to Stage 5 where students "demonstrate protective skills to promote health, safety and wellbeing."(9) Similarly, students learn skills to manage change and transition throughout all stages of their lives. Comprehensive sexuality education supports student development, health and wellbeing across the lifespan.(9)

Teachers and educators require skills and confidence to deliver timely and holistic comprehensive sexuality education that meets student's health and wellbeing needs.(10) Family Planning NSW offers training, information and resources for teachers and educators to enable them to deliver age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. Our training and resources for primary and secondary school teachers deliver age-appropriate information on relationships, sexuality and sexual health information, in accordance with the NSW curriculum. All Family Planning NSW professional development courses for teachers are endorsed by NESAs.

Recommendation one: Include timely, holistic and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in the NSW school curriculum to promote students' wellbeing, emotional development and safety.

Recommendation two: Provide access to professional development and evidence-based resources to teachers and educators to facilitate comprehensive sexuality education.

d) Relationship with the national schools curriculum

The Masters Curriculum Review did not discuss the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education. Comprehensive sexuality education consistently addresses and supports student wellbeing, emotional development and safety, important priorities identified by the Review.

Evidence demonstrates the widespread benefits of consistent provision, which could be achieved through implementation of a national comprehensive sexuality education framework and provision of funding for teachers and educators to attend training in providing holistic, age-appropriate and inclusive comprehensive sexuality education.(2-7)

From a rights perspective, it is crucial that all people, including people with disability, those who are vulnerable and marginalised and sexuality and/or gender diverse, receive high-quality and evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education. Even with a national curriculum, Australia does not provide comprehensive sexuality education consistently across the country. A global review found that comprehensive sexuality education increases safe sexual behaviours, and reduces unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The review found that "failing to provide marginalised adolescents and young people with comprehensive sexuality education will deepen the social exclusion that many experience, limiting their potential and putting their health, futures and lives at greater risk."(2)

Recommendation three: Consistent implementation of a national comprehensive sexuality education framework is needed to ensure all student needs are met, including students belonging to diverse groups.

2. The extent to which the Masters Review meets key Government Policy objectives, including:

a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

The NSW Curriculum Review found the current curriculum is overly complex and overcrowded, and that teachers want greater flexibility to meet the needs of students, including their personal development and wellbeing needs.(1) Further, the curriculum must be inclusive to meet the diverse needs of every student.(1)

Through partnering with Family Planning NSW, teachers can access professional development and current evidence-based resources to build their knowledge and confidence in areas of need. Teachers who feel confident to deliver relationships, sexuality and sexual health content will mean they are more likely to prioritise the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education and have the confidence to integrate the content with other relevant topics. Integrating sexuality and sexual health content across the curriculum may destigmatise these topics, engage student's interests and reduce pressure on an overcrowded timetable for teachers.

Comprehensive sexuality education remains an essential subject. Where comprehensive sexuality education is non-compulsory, extra-curricular or only partially compulsory, a large number of students will not reap its benefits and miss out on essential information.(2)

Recommendation four: Integrate comprehensive sexuality education into the NSW core curriculum.

3. Other matters of public concern and interest in the development of the NSW curriculum:

a) To what extent, if any, 'cross-curriculum priorities' are needed to guide classroom content and teaching

Findings from the Masters Curriculum Review suggest that schools play a vital role in the facilitation of student wellbeing and development of personal and social capabilities.(1) Promotion of a cross-curriculum, whole of school approach to comprehensive sexuality education delivery that ensures basic classroom instruction is sustained by a supportive school environment is essential to support student health, development and wellbeing.

Research indicates that students want holistic comprehensive sexuality education, delivered across a range of curriculum priorities.(2-4) A contemporary, evidence-based approach to comprehensive sexuality education should include:

- the use of sex-positive teaching strategies, which present balanced information about positive and negative aspects of sexuality, respectful relationships and use a holistic, evidence-based and inclusive approach that is non-judgemental and promotes respect and consent
- a holistic approach to health that includes reproductive and sexual health alongside mental health and physical wellbeing
- recognition of diversity, including concepts of diversity in gender and relationships
- reproductive and sexual health including contraception, STI treatment and prevention
- preventative health checks – in addition to STI testing, young people need to learn about cervical cancer prevention, with the HPV vaccination and screening with HPV DNA testing, along with breast and testicular health checks.

Recommendation five: Promote holistic, evidence-based, comprehensive sexuality education through a whole of school approach.

b) To what extent, if any, knowledge and the curriculum are 'socially constructed', requiring the teaching of source verification and fluidity principles

“Social construction typically refers to a tradition of scholarship that traces the origin of knowledge and meaning and the nature of reality to processes generated within human relationships.”(11) Social constructionism is particularly relevant to qualitative research which explains why phenomena occur. Combining qualitative and quantitative evidence has the advantage of using a mixed-methods approach to understand problems. For example, in learning about reproductive and sexual health, students may learn about rates of STIs and condom use via quantitative data. It is useful for students also to explore qualitative evidence about why young people find it challenging to use condoms and ways for overcoming these challenges.

Media literacy skills are critical for understanding the health information available, fundamental to health literacy skills development. A contemporary, evidence-based approach to comprehensive sexuality education should include the teaching of health literacy in sexual health education programs. Educators need to model information-seeking behaviours and build health literacy, such as how to negotiate the health system to access health services. Teachers can support students to locate accurate and reliable sources of information about relationships, sexuality and sexual health to meet their health needs as a young person and across the lifespan.

c) Whether and to what extent schools should be involved in the 'social and emotional development' of students, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, and growing popularity of 'wellbeing programs' in NSW schools

Family Planning NSW strongly supports investment in the provision of comprehensive sexuality education to support the social and emotional development of students. As schools continue to focus on students' social and emotional development, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, comprehensive sexuality education is well positioned to support this.

Young people in Australia face significant reproductive and sexual health concerns with epidemiological data showing a higher prevalence of STIs, lower rates of condom use and higher rates of unplanned pregnancy, demonstrating the need for comprehensive sexuality education.(12) The 2018 sixth *National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health* of year 10 to 12 students reported key findings supporting the need for comprehensive sexuality education:

- most students have engaged in some form of sexual activity by the end of year 12, from deep kissing (74.4%) to sexual intercourse (46.6%)
- 38% of students reported having sex without a condom (up from 24% in 2013)
- on average, students scored 63% across all general STI knowledge questions and 71% on all STI transmission questions
- almost one in ten sexually active students (8.8%) reported that their last sexual event was unwanted and one-quarter (28.4%) experienced unwanted sex at least once.(13)

Further, a Family Planning NSW needs assessment of 339 NSW teachers and principals in 2015 found:

- almost half of teachers (39%) and principals (43%) reported that when sexual health curriculum is a priority, this is supportive
- limited time and resources were the primary constraining factors
- 54% of teachers indicated they need more assistance in addressing the issues of pornography and media representations of sex and sexuality.(10)

Recommendation six: Support the emotional and social development of students through the provision of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.

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