

Submission of Family Planning NSW
to the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA)
regarding the NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report

December 2019



NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report Submission

About Family Planning NSW

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services in NSW. We are experts in clinical service provision and relationships, sexuality and sexual health education.

Family Planning NSW provides 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 people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, refugees, people with disability, young people and people from rural and remote communities.

Our work is evidence-based, and shaped by our research, published clinical practice handbooks on reproductive and sexual health, nationally recognised data and evaluation unit and validated through extensive clinical practice.

Our Services to Young People

Family Planning NSW believes that everybody in every family should have access to high-quality clinical services and information, and a key focus area for Family Planning NSW is enabling young people to maintain good sexual health by providing youth-targeted information and services. The services we provide to assist young people include:

- youth-friendly reproductive and sexual health clinics across NSW
- health information on our bodytalk.org.au website as well as workshops on topics including puberty, respectful relationships, sexually transmissible infections and contraception
- Talkline: our free and confidential information phone line, email and webchat service
- Information for parents on discussing reproductive and sexual health with their children

In 2018/19 we provided clinical services to over 4,241 young people aged under 25 years and engaged with young people across the state in promoting reproductive, sexual health and healthy relationships information delivering health promotion sessions to 10,630 young people on topics

including puberty, STIs, contraception, safe sex, respectful relationships, sexuality and Family Planning NSW services.

Family Planning NSW offers training, information and resources for teachers and educators to enable them to deliver holistic education in the area of sexuality, relationships, and reproductive and sexual health. Our training and resources for primary and secondary school teachers deliver age-appropriate information on relationships, sexuality and sexual health to their students, 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 2018-19, we delivered training to 196 teachers via NESA endorsed face-to-face and online programs.

NSW Curriculum Review

The NSW Curriculum Review 2018 consultation found the curriculum is overly complex and overcrowded, that teachers want greater flexibility to meet the needs of students. Further, the curriculum must be inclusive to meet the diverse needs of every student. Appropriately, the *NSW Curriculum Review* is responding to those concerns.

Several Australian and NSW based research studies have explored the needs of relationships, sexuality and sexual health education from the perspectives of both students and teachers. This submission briefly summarises this research and the implications for the *NSW Curriculum Review*.

Australian research

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, higher rates of unplanned pregnancy and barriers to accessing health services.

The 2018 sixth *National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health*¹ of year 10 to 12 students reported key findings supporting the need for comprehensive relationships, sexuality and sexual health 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 2013²)

- On average, students scored 63% across all general STI knowledge questions and 71% on all STI transmission questions
- In 2018, most sexually active students reported receiving (51%) and sending (40%) sexually explicit text messages.
- 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.
- Most students reported that they received relationships and sexuality education (83.6%) at school. However, student responses to how relevant they found relationships, sexuality and sexual health classes varied from 11.8% who found it extremely relevant; 26.0% very relevant; 35.6% somewhat relevant; 19.4% a little relevant and 7.1% not relevant at all.

NSW research

A Family Planning NSW needs assessment of 339 NSW teachers and principals in 2015³ 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.
- Having executive staff that are supportive, committed and engaged in sexual health education was valued by teachers, especially in responding to parental concerns.
- 54% of teachers indicated they need more assistance in addressing the issues of pornography and media representations of sex and sexuality.

A further study conducted by Family Planning NSW was conducted in 2017 with 1,603 NSW students in years 8 to 12⁴. The study found that nearly half of students increased their knowledge and one third was satisfied overall with the relationships, sexuality and sexual health education received.

Areas that could be strengthened include:

- Professional development for teachers to enhance the effectiveness of lessons.
- Inclusion of more information about gender and sexual diversity, media representations of sex, relationships and consent, and STI testing and treatment.
- Better addressing the needs of sexuality and gender diverse students.

Recommendations

The recent research findings provide valuable insights for improving relationships, sexuality and sexual health education in NSW schools.

Reform Direction 1 – Creating a less crowded curriculum

Teachers and schools can create a less crowded curriculum by looking at ways to integrate relationships, sexuality and sexual health into other topics across the curriculum.

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 this component of the Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) curriculum and have the confidence to integrate the content with other topics.

Reform Direction 2 - Promoting deep understanding

The PDHPE curriculum needs to provide a contemporary approach to learning. Research indicates that students want more than basic education on body parts and adolescent development.

A contemporary approach to relationships, sexuality and sexual health education should include:

- The use of sex-positive teaching strategies, which present balanced information about positive and negative aspects of sexuality and use a holistic, evidence-based and inclusive approach that is non-judgemental and promotes respect and consent.
- Teaching 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.
- Media literacy - evaluating and analysing media representations of the body, sex and sexuality to support students to navigate through the complexity of appropriately using social and online media.
- Healthy relationships and navigating consent
- A holistic approach to health that includes sexual health alongside mental health and physical wellbeing.

- Recognition of diversity, including concepts of diversity in gender and relationships.
- Contraception - including the range of options available, considerations for selecting forms of contraception and how to access them.
- STI treatment and prevention – including information about positive ways for students to discuss STIs, giving practical strategies to understand risks and effectively treat and prevent them and the benefits of condoms.
- 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.

Promotion of a whole-school approach to relationships, sexuality and sexual health education delivery that ensures basic classroom instruction is sustained by a supportive school environment and proactive engagement with families, communities, agencies and peers.

Reform Direction 5 - Creating a more flexible curriculum

Flexibility in the school curriculum is particularly relevant to relationships, sexuality and sexual health. With young girls reaching puberty earlier, and changing trends in young people's use of technology and the need for support to use it safely, teachers may need to address topics earlier than suggested by the curriculum. Adjustments would be based on the developmental stage and behaviours of the students.

Reform Direction 7 - Setting high expectations

The decisions young people are making about their reproductive and sexual health can have a profound impact on their lives. It is important to ensure that young people understand their health and the options available to them so they can enjoy high quality reproductive and sexual health. Comprehensive sexuality education is 'a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality' with the specific objective of equipping all young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to make considered and adaptive choices concerning their relationships, behaviours, and sexual health and wellbeing.⁵ Within the PDHPE syllabus, a consistent and comprehensive approach to relationships, sexuality and sexual health is needed.

The PDHPE syllabus provides a strong foundation to ensure that every student receives adequate and relevant education about relationships, sexuality and sexual health. If flexibility is built into the curriculum, this may lead to content being missed, particularly where teachers may not have the confidence, skills or resources to effectively cover topics where there is fear around the sensitivity of these topics. As a result, there is considerable variation in the range of content and quality of relationships, sexuality and sexual health education delivered across schools in NSW.

A consistent and comprehensive approach to PDHPE syllabus content would ensure no young person misses out on valuable information and skills to keep themselves healthy.

¹ Fisher, C. M., Waling, A., Kerr, L., Bellamy, R., Ezer, P., Mikolajczak, G., Brown, G., Carman, M. & Lucke, J. 2019. 6th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 113), Bundoora: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.

² Mitchell A, Patrick K, Heywood W, Blackman P, Pitts M. 2014. 5th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 97), Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

³ Family Planning NSW, NSW Sexual Health in Schools Needs Analysis, June 2015, unpublished report.

⁴ Roth C, Cheng Y, Conception K, Botfield J, Stuart A and Estoesta J, Opportunities for strengthening sexual health education in schools: findings from a student needs assessment in NSW, under review

⁵ UNESCO, International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach, Revised edition, 2018.