

CURRICULUM: GREAT LEADING, TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OUR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

PRIMARY CURRICULUM

A new story of primary schooling is needed, one which starts with building the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, where the joy of learning is celebrated, and each learner's potential is unleashed. Where is the primary curriculum based upon an understanding of how children learn? Where is the space for playful curiosity, for deep wondering and engagement?

The current primary curriculum is too crowded, impossible to teach if taken literally. It is based on outdated models of curriculum, focussed on divisions, grades, and subjects. While this might work for secondary teachers who usually focus on a limited subject selection, the expectations for a single primary teacher to 'cover' all this material is highly unrealistic.

High rates of disengagement and test results that are not that impressive, are symptoms of this malaise. We want good results. We want to see improved results. We question whether these are best attained through current curriculum mandates.

THE TEACHING CHALLENGE:

Teachers need to prepare for fundamentally changing the mental constructs of 30 children in 40 minutes. They need to shift strategies during the lesson to achieve this change in mental state, engage in hundreds of speech acts, maintain order and detect the engagement of each and every child – as well as carry responsibility for a large range of administrative requirements. Add in curriculum that signals that learning should not only be directed at discipline knowledge but simultaneously at learning dispositions, capabilities, and cross curriculum priorities.

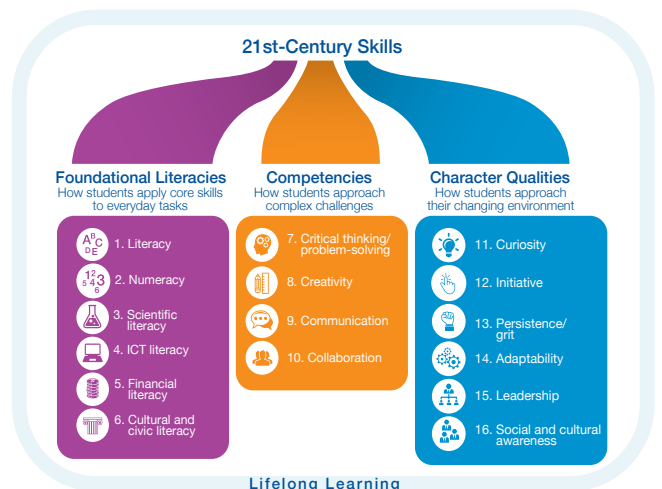
¹ Oates, T (2024). CBE of Cambridge Assessments

TO SUPPORT A NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Reduce Curriculum Overcrowding

A primary curriculum must be one that focuses primarily on building literacy and numeracy competencies to mastery so that each student becomes an autonomous learner. By adopting a modern pedagogy specific to primary children and inclusive of an emphasis on building 21st Century skills, learning will be integrated, contextual, meaningful, purposeful and successful.

Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argued that we need a focus on fewer things in greater depth and with developing creativity skills a priority. (September 2024) ▶



² World Economic Forum (2015) New Vision for Education

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Focus on Meaning and Purpose

Education should be more than just academic achievement—it should help children and young people find meaning and purpose in their lives. Schools should guide students to discover their strengths, develop what they can excel at, and understand their potential contributions to society. By helping students answer questions like “What does society need from me?” and “How can I contribute?” we foster a generation that is not only skilled but also driven by a sense of purpose. Quality student-teacher relationships, coupled with openness to diversity, new ideas, and innovative ways of working, create the foundation for this. These principles underpin an education system that truly empowers students to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives while addressing the needs of a changing world.

Make Teacher Workload Manageable

To support a reimagined primary curriculum, the work of our school staff must be manageable. Recruitment of new teachers to the profession is important but so too is retaining the many good teachers we have. Increasing the number of specialist teachers in primary schools provides generalist teachers more time to do their job well and assists with curriculum overload. More specialist teachers also provide much needed additional planning time for generalist primary teachers.

Learning is relational, not transactional and children learn best when relationships with teachers are strong. And teachers teach best, and leaders lead best when in a safe working environment, have a manageable workload and are well supported. Primary leaders need the freedom to determine the nature of specialisation best needed to enhance learning outcomes across the curriculum and meet wellbeing needs across the school.

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Full-Service Schools - Integrated Services

Children are unable to learn well unless they are well. To be well, children and their families also need ready access to services. Teachers become frustrated when children in need of help, can't access help in a timely manner. It shouldn't be like this. There are many, many agencies and NGOs providing duplicate services soaking up much needed resources which are not effectively used. There are too many uncoordinated service providers, none of which individually has the capacity to provide the level of service needed by some children and their families.

Where resourcing is made available, APPA embraces the challenge of schools being hubs for place-based paraprofessional services, integrating government and NGO services within **properly funded and supported** community service hubs or full service schools (FSS). This would include speech, occupation and physiotherapy, and counselling and family support structures, tailored to the needs of families. While embracing this challenge, this needs to be properly resourced with appropriate staffing. The burden of sourcing and coordinating such services cannot be the responsibility of the principal.

Curriculum programs addressing student wellbeing and resilience will be enhanced as we provide exposure to developmentally appropriate risk taking and challenging experiences. The trialed introduction of Mental Health Nurses is one initiative that APPA supports. Fully qualified nurses with additional training in mental health employed by the State Health Departments to operate in primary schools to triage first aid, administer medication and meet the mental health needs of students and families is an initiative worth exploring.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that practicing principals and teachers work with those in bureaucracies to co-create an enhanced educational system. APPA, as the peak body representing over 7200 practising principals is ideally placed to provide such input and direction. **APPA calls for the development of a new primary curriculum, a curriculum which reflects how children learn, and which encourages responsiveness and adaptability for teachers in meeting needs.** We call for a coherent curriculum which recognises diversity, is culturally sensitive and is built around 21st-century competencies, capabilities, and skills.