



Submission to Australian Education Legislation
Amendment (Prohibiting the Indoctrination of
Children) Act 2020 - Consultation

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Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations is a peak community organisation and the
One voice for every child in public education

Do you wish your submission to be treated as confidential?

No

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS
SUBMISSION TO THE
AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT
(PROHIBITING THE INDOCTRINATION OF CHILDREN) BILL 2020-CONSULTATION

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation addressing the proposed Australian Education Legislation Amendment Bill.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

The *principle of access* means a public education system available to all, irrespective of their age, capacity to pay, class, culture, gender, level of ability, location, religion/belief, or sexual orientation.

Equality is dependent on recognition that all children have a capacity to learn. Learning is the construction of meaning from experience. School practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school. Children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.

Equity in educational outcomes means all social groups should, as a result of schooling, have comparable distributions of educational outcomes.

Excellence means that the public school system must provide the highest quality education for all.

Participatory democracy means a partnership of students, parents and teachers in school and system decision making. It also means that students should, as a result of schooling, have the knowledge, skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to participate effectively in shaping society. This will enable students to learn how to learn throughout their lives for the benefit of themselves and others.

Public education must develop among all students a sense of justice as well as respect, concern, and opportunities for others

It is important for schools to be welcoming / accepting places for all students, government schools in particular, often lead the way for the broader society in modelling inclusiveness and pluralism.

Peer through the fog of rhetoric – “tougher standards,” “accountability,” etc. – and you will find yourself facing a disturbing reality: our children’s schools are being turned into schools of excessive administration rather than developing lifelong learners.

Education in Australia should involve developing well-informed, well-rounded Australians who can think critically, process information, make good decisions, support themselves and serve the needs of society. In other words, real education allows the individual to achieve their potential and be happy contributors to society to the best of their abilities.

We do not know what the future holds for young Australians, but we can be certain that they will be faced with decisions about a wide range of issues that trigger strong, diverse, and often contradictory responses. If they are to become effective citizens able to play a critical role in creating a just world without poverty, all young people should have the opportunity to *engage appropriately* with alternative or controversial issues.

Being able to consider alternative viewpoints on a given issue is one of the most important elements of critical thinking. Weighing up the arguments on different sides of an issue and coming to a conclusion regarding your own viewpoint is the essence of critical thought.

Teachers have a key role in enabling young people to develop the skills they need to do this. As educators, they are not expected to have all the answers. Rather, in developing helpful methodologies to discussing issues it enables teachers to challenge their own views and explore ideas in greater depth with young people.

Almost any topic can become controversial if different explanations for events are offered, what should happen next or how issues should be resolved. The topic can also become controversial if one side of an issue is presented in a way that raises an emotional response in those who might disagree.

Controversial issues provide valuable educational opportunities where values and ideas can be explored in a safe place, and the process of examining and exploring how the views of oneself and others are formed and changed can be supported.

In academic work it is rarely possible to discern who is right and who is wrong. If you are reading a peer reviewed journal article it is unlikely that there will be major flaws in reasoning or methodology as these would have been picked up by the reviewers. It is more likely that there are points of interpretation that you can disagree with or at least question.

Young Australians do not develop these skills by memorising and regurgitating adult thinking. They develop these thinking skills by considering ideas, critically examining them, and developing their considered view based on their values and the facts before them

The Australian Curriculum, as it currently stands, (ACSSO is aware that the curriculum is under review) recognises the importance of the development of these skills through the general capabilities. Critical and creative thinking is one of seven general capabilities that should be integrated throughout the whole curriculum.

The Australian Curriculum, assists students develop capability in critical and creative thinking as they learn to generate and evaluate knowledge, clarify concepts and ideas, seek possibilities, consider alternatives, and solve problems.¹

Ultimately, one of the aims of education is to encourage students to look at situations from multiple points of view and not be dogmatic about believing one thing or another. The role of education is to assist students to take into account all the evidence, challenge their current thinking and then make an informed decision.

When teachers provide instruction in various subjects, their students will bring with them some pre-conceived ideas about the topic. Student pre-existing knowledge, however, can be partisan. Moreover, some ideas can be difficult to grasp. They may be abstract, contradictory, or quite complex. The teacher's role in this is to be sensitive to the student's understanding whilst presenting a broader perspective on the topic and a wider range of views.

¹ <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/critical-and-creative-thinking/>

Whilst it is useful to consider an issue from varying points of view, this approach can be limiting to critical thought as it potentially divides issues that are more complex. Even if a subject has two strongly opposing viewpoints, it can be more useful to imagine a Venn diagram of these and seek out the intersecting positions so that you develop considerate and convincing arguments that incorporate both viewpoints.

Unfortunately, improving school results is very different from raising the quality of teaching and the school. Time spent focussing on test results to improve school data, is time that could be better spent helping students become critical, creative, curious learners.

Fostering creativity and social responsibility in children and youth are essential to address society's most pressing problems more efficiently.

Teaching contemporary moral issues will always present a challenge. Of course, students must read, write, and think. But they also need to have fruitful discussions in which different points of view are presented and argued for, ideally by their peers. With this, they can come to appreciate the full range of reasons for and against certain conclusions and can experience reasonable and respectful disagreement across difference.

When discussing a topic, people will approach the subject from different perspectives. For example, an issue may be explored from the viewpoint of different individuals or groups involved. Teachers will have a different view on a subject than their pupils; inmates will tell a different story to prison guards; geneticists will have a different perspective to psychologists. In these cases, the information may well appear to be contradictory, but this can give you a richer picture of a complex matter. Admitting and embracing the complexity is an important element of approaching a topic critically.

When One Nation senator Pauline Hanson introduced the bill to federal parliament, she indicated that it would ban the "indoctrination of children" in schools and combat the teaching of a number of topics considered to be "indoctrination".

An indoctrinated person lacks the rational foundations on which their beliefs are based and is unable to justify those beliefs. In other words, such a person is unable to critically analyse the extent to which his or her beliefs are honourable or worthy of respect. The inability and unwillingness of an indoctrinated person to consider alternative approaches indicates that those beliefs are dogmatic. Therefore, indoctrination is reprehensible because an indoctrinated person is no longer able to think independently. This is exactly the opposite of education and educational ideals to endow people with rationality, autonomy, and cultural openness.

ACSSO's position is that the Australian Curriculum does not support the indoctrination of Australia's students, rather it assists students develop critical and creative thinking skills as they learn to generate and evaluate knowledge, clarify concepts and ideas, seek possibilities, consider alternatives, and solve problems.

In Ms Hanson's own words, those topics include "skewed versions of history taught as fact, controversial sexual programs that teach gender fluidity and realignment to infants, unsubstantiated human-induced climate change, as well as the teachings of so-called 'safe' underage sex, sexting, and non-traditional sex."

Activism for gender equality is often met with resistance by certain groups within the society. One term increasingly used by groups who form resistance towards gender-activism is 'gender ideology', which ACSSO believes has no clear academic nor theoretical basis.

‘Gender ideology’ is a term used by radical conservative organisations to disdain issues around gender, such as reproductive rights and gender studies, for it is seen as a conspiracy against traditional family values. Organisations that use the term also embrace other forms of anti-gender rhetoric as they aspire to influence decision-makers to adopt policies against gender matters, for instance same-sex marriages and transgender rights. As the discussion of ‘gender ideology’ is spread, campaigns against gender matters evolves.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, American soldiers embarked on a massive project of educational reform in the ruins of post-war Germany. Their ultimate objective was to democratize a population that had been indoctrinated during the previous twelve years spent living – and learning – under a dictatorship. From their very first days in power, the Nazis had used the schools to promote nationalism, spread their racist ideologies, and prepare a new generation for war. Of special interest to the Nazis was history instruction, which they rewrote to facilitate the creation of uncritical, ill-informed subjects willing to follow the orders of their Fuehrer.

These reforms made a significant impact on a German nation seeking to combat a legacy of racism, extreme nationalism, and militarism. Educational changes inaugurated during the occupation helped to eliminate the propagandistic instruction that produced uncritical subjects and gradually transformed them into engaged citizens. Most Australians would probably agree that the creation of informed and engaged citizens willing and able to participate actively in our democratic society is one of the principle goals of our educational system.

All schools in Australia enjoy a dual mandate: They are asked to produce students who are knowledgeable and reflective, and also to shape their views and values. Under normal circumstances, there is a healthy tension between these two missions: As students learn foundational values like responsibility or citizenship, they also learn to ask hard questions about such things and the way they play out in the world.

In addition, things we have already learned are sometimes unhelpful in learning new concepts/theories. This occurs when the new concept or theory is inconsistent with previously learned material. Accordingly, it is typical for students (and adults) to have misconceptions in different knowledge areas.

The political battle over education should be focused on the imperative that all children get the highest quality education so that they can be responsible citizens, free and appreciate the value of living in a democracy where individuals rights are protected.

As parents and school educators prepare young people for their futures in a world that is rapidly changing, the goal is to create: -

- emotionally healthy adults who can engage in meaningful relationships,
- empathetic and accepting individuals who value all
- lifelong learners, and
- adults who can compete in a global economy.

It is ACSSO’s position that the Australian Education Legislation Amendment (Prohibiting the Indoctrination of Children) Bill 2020 does not support the achievement of this goal and should be defeated
