

Australian state Labor government undermines Arts curriculum in schools

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31 January 2025

The Labor government in New South Wales (NSW) is seeking to impose sweeping and regressive changes to the state's High School Certificate (Years 11 & 12) Drama and Music syllabus. The move has been met with opposition from the teaching community, students, parents and performing artists.

High profile artists Heather Mitchell and Tim Minchin are among those raising their voices in protest, together with various theatre companies including Belvoir St Theatre, the Australian Theatre for Young People and Bell Shakespeare.

The proposed changes to the Creative Arts syllabi are part of the NSW government's comprehensive reform of the education curriculum, the first in 30 years. The stated aim is to make the Curriculum clearer by "de-cluttering" it. In reality, however, the Labor government is further undermining public education, using the Curriculum reform as a mechanism to impose budget cuts and further narrow the curriculum in line with big business demands for a pliant and readily employable youth workforce.

The Arts curriculum review includes Drama, Dance, Music, and Visual Arts.

Of particular concern for Drama teachers and students is the reduction of the courses' performance component for the final Year 12 assessment. The initial proposal for the new Stage 6 syllabus for Drama called for no external marking of the Group Performance, and a reduction in subject choices for the Individual Project, with directing, video, research and lighting no longer offered.

This would gut the subject area and significantly reduce the opportunities for students to showcase their performance skills. For many students, the current drama syllabus, in particular the Group Performance, provides them with a means of coping with the pressure of the final years of high school, by encouraging a high level of camaraderie and ownership of their work. This will be undermined if the proposals put forward in the new draft curriculum are implemented.

Teachers would also be adversely affected. For example, the external marking of High School Certificate (HSC)

Drama includes an intensive four-day benchmarking process, where hundreds of teachers come together from across the state. This provides a unique opportunity for both experienced and new drama teachers to mix and collaborate. With the axing of external marking for performance, this important in-service training will be lost, and years of expertise dust-binned.

Many teachers have also pointed to the retrograde nature of the proposed changes in the weightings of the Drama course, which would see an increase from the current 90-minute written exam to two hours, which places further emphasis on the academic component of the course, at the expense of performance.

Dr Michael Anderson, Professor of Creativity and Arts Education in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney issued a sharp statement of protest against the proposed curriculum changes issued by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA).

"I am writing to resign from my voluntary role providing feedback on the HSC Drama syllabus revision process NESA," he explained. "As you know I provided extensive advice on this syllabus revision and none of my concerns about the draft syllabus have been addressed in the recent release. This is profoundly disappointing and undermines my faith in NESA's process.

"I will be expressing my view publicly that this syllabus revision process is symptomatic of the low regard NESA has for teacher feedback. I have little faith the current consultation will change that. I do hope that I am wrong and that NESA responds to the overwhelming concerns of the teaching community."

In Music, NESA is proposing that the number of performances for Year 12 Music 1 students be cut from as many as four to two. In addition, composition or musicology electives would not be allowed. The current one-hour written aural exam would become a two-hour exam.

Sydney Conservatorium of Music teacher James Humberstone, when interviewed about the changes to the syllabus on ABC Radio, said: "The best practice and the best

research around the world shows that we want to learn music musically. The new proposed syllabi really take away a lot of that freedom and that choice for students to explore the bits of music that they're really interested in."

Harry Day, drummer for Australian alternative indie rock band Middle Kids, studied Music 2 and Music Extension at high school. He said, "Getting the freedom to get to play that much, play solos and play with others, just helped me develop my craft as a musician so much. If I'd had to spend about half that time sitting down, listening to someone talk about music instead, I think that would have had a real impact on my development."

An open letter signed by 30 music teachers and academics has called on Education Minister Prue Car to immediately suspend the draft syllabi and begin a new review process of the subjects. Petitions demanding further consultation have so far garnered over 8,000 signatures.

NESA's so-called consultation process, begun in early 2024, has proved to be nothing but a fraud. State authorities set a deadline for feedback on the new draft curriculum of December 20 last year and rejected appeals from multiple teachers for an extension of this cut-off date. The input of experienced teachers has been ignored, and when opposition became public, concerns about the undermining of the practical component and subject area choices were dismissed out of hand. The finalised syllabus is due for release in 2025, with a mandated implementation in 2027, leaving little room for further input.

The gutting of Arts in NSW is taking place as Australian schools are mired in crisis.

From 2019–2024, public schools lost \$13.1 billion in funding. NSW Premier Chris Minns announced in April 2024 public school funding cuts of \$148 million, to be followed by a further \$1.4 billion in cuts over the next four years. With schools already underfunded for decades and savaged by federal and state government budget cuts, there has been an exodus of teachers from the system and schools are being crippled by staff shortages.

One part of the government's agenda with its school curriculum reform is to prepare further spending cuts, through a reduction in performance aspects of Drama and Music and a greater emphasis on the less costly teaching and assessment of Arts theory. One likely outcome of the curriculum change, if allowed to proceed, is that HSC Arts subjects will be less attractive to senior school students, reducing the need for qualified teachers in these areas.

There are other educational and political factors at work in the proposed changes to the Arts curriculum.

In July 2024, the NSW government announced that it was mandating explicit instruction across all curriculum areas for both primary and high school students. Explicit teaching is a

teacher-centric model of teaching, focussing on the cumulative acquisition of skills across a predetermined sequence of learning objectives. This approach is counterposed to a more student-centred, inquiry and problem-based learning that is often favoured by teachers and students in the Arts.

In HSC Drama, for example, the Group Performance and Individual Projects that have been targeted by NESA's reforms are entirely student-centred and driven by their interests. Students sometimes explore contentious social and political issues that "ruffle feathers" within schools, for example on the impact of climate change, the plight of refugees, attacks on democratic and human rights, and the horrors of war. The NSW government, and the ruling elite as a whole, has no interest in developing young people as politicised critical thinkers.

Despite the opposition from teachers, students and parents to the proposed draft curriculums for Drama and Music, no statement has been issued by any of the teachers' unions, consistent with their history of collaborating with state and federal government attacks on public education.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) calls on teachers and school workers to establish rank-and-file committees in their schools, independent of the teacher union bureaucracies, to fight for a counter-offensive that defends the Arts in schools, while aiming to secure a proper educational provisioning for all students and decent wages and conditions for educators, within a fully funded public education system.

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