



Submission to the Review of the National Curriculum

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SUMMARY

Women's Health West welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the National Curriculum Review and makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

That respectful relationships education is more specifically and consistently included across the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education from Foundation Level to Level 10 and beyond as well as more thoroughly incorporated in other Learning Areas where relevant.

Recommendation 2

That in line with best practice, both age appropriate and relevant sexuality education, that respects the diversity of human relationships and is inclusive of HIV/AIDS and STI prevention information, is included in the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education from Foundation Level to Level 10 and in the senior secondary years.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1988, Women's Health West (WHW) has actively contributed to the health, safety and wellbeing of women in the western region of Melbourne through a combination of direct service delivery, research, health promotion, community development, capacity building, group work and advocacy. In 1994 WHW began to deliver family violence services for women and children ranging from crisis outreach and court support, to housing establishment and crisis accommodation options, to counselling and group work programs. WHW has been an active and strong supporter of family violence reform at a regional and statewide level, integrating and coordinating family violence services in our region, and ensuring the integration of those services with a range of related sectors, including the housing sector.

Women's Health West also have a health promotion, research and development team, which offers a range of programs and projects targeted to prevention and early intervention strategies to improve outcomes for women's health, safety and wellbeing. We are leaders in the development of regional strategies to further our work, seeing partnership within and outside the sectors in which we work as crucial for bringing about effective and sustainable outcomes for women and children.

Currently the health promotion program plans and implements activities designed to promote women's health, safety and wellbeing across three key areas – sexual and reproductive health, mental health and wellbeing, and prevention of violence. The family violence service, providing women and children with the range of services they require while in crisis – such as court support, crisis housing and case management – through to services designed to promote healing and recovery, such as women's and children's counseling.

Equity and justice for women in the western region of Melbourne is the central vision of the Women's Health West's Strategic Plan (2010-2017). Women's Health West aims to work together for change – by supporting women and their children to lead safe and healthy lives, and changing the conditions that cause and maintain inequity and injustice.

There is compelling evidence for why the inclusion of respectful relationships as a primary prevention strategy for young children and young people is necessary, including:

- One in four Victorian children have witnessed family violence against their mothers (National Crime Prevention, 2001)¹
- In 2012-13, there were more than 60,000 reports of family violence to the Victorian Police (Victoria Police, 2013)²

¹ National Crime Prevention, 2001, *Young People and Domestic Violence: National Research on Young People's Attitudes and Experiences of Domestic Violence*, Crime Prevention Branch, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra

- more than one woman is killed each week as a result of intimate partner violence (Victoria Police, 2013)³, and:
- intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness for women aged 15 to 44 (VicHealth, 2004)⁴.

Women's Health West is also a member of the Western Region Sexual and Reproductive Health Promotion Partnership and was instrumental in the development of **Action for Equity**, a regional sexual and reproductive health promotion plan in Melbourne's west. The vision for Action for Equity is a community where everyone has the:

- Freedom to express their sexuality
- Right to healthy, respectful relationships and pleasurable sex life with the partner of their choice
- Ability to control their body and to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health free from violence and discrimination

Two current projects coordinated by Women's Health West the uphold a commitment to respectful relationships education as a primary prevention against violence strategy include:

- *You, Me and Us*, a respectful relationships education projects aimed at 10-13 year olds and 18-24 years olds incorporating a peer education and professional development component and funded by the Department of Social Services (formally FACHISA)
- *Girls Talk Guys Talk* – a health promoting schools, whole school approach program supporting schools to implement healthy relationships and making healthy sexual decision and choices curriculum. A Community of Practice has been established to support and mentor school and community partners implementing the program.

In support of the vision, missions, strategic goals and guiding principles of Women's Health West, and in line with the vision of Action For Equity, Women's Health West welcomes the opportunity to make the following recommendations to the National Curriculum Review.

1. IN SUPPORT OF RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION

Women's Health West considers that, *in general*, the proposed Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education (F-10) provides students and young people with an appropriate degree of choice and diversity, however that there is significant room for improvement, especially within the *Personal, Social and Community Health Strand*.

Women's Health West strongly approves of the inclusion of both a strengths based approach and the critical inquiry approach as two key elements of the five interrelated propositions in the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education (F-10). Both the current Rationale and Aims support a curriculum which is inclusive of respectful relationships with one aim stating "develop and use personal, behavioural, social and cognitive skills and strategies to promote a sense of personal identity and wellbeing and to build and manage respectful relationships ". In addition the Rationale statement under the section critical enquiry approach stating " students will critically analyse and critically evaluate contextual factors that influence decision making, behaviours and actions, and explore inclusiveness, power inequalities, taken-for-granted assumptions, diversity and social justice." must be retained.

Women's Health West believes that strengthening opportunities for school-based settings to introduce respectful relationships education is an effective primary prevention tool to reduce violence against women and children. Schools are seeing the impact this violence has on their students and understand the critical role of proven

² Victoria Police, 2013, *Crime Statistics Official Release 2012/2013*, Victoria

³ *ibid*

⁴ Vic Health, 2004, *The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner, Violence*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Carlton

prevention strategies. They are responding by establishing respectful relationships programs that will counter the attitudes, behaviours and cultures that are the cause of violence against women and children.

As such Women's Health West supports respectful relationship education being introduced from Foundation to Year 10 levels and to be further reinforced during the final senior secondary years before students leave school as young adults.

Women's Health West provides the following evidence to substantiate the recommendation:

- a) *There is a powerful rational for focussing efforts on fostering respectful relationships among children and young people. Early interventions with children and young people can have a lasting effect on their relationships in the future...Equally there is a powerful rationale for locating respectful relationships and violence prevention education in schools...Schools-based violence prevention operates in the context of state and national policies and curriculum's in education...Schools are now significant sites of violence prevention and respectful relationships education , both in Australia and internationally (Respectful Relationships Education. DEECD and VicHealth, 2009) ⁵*
- b) *Around one-in-three Australian women have experienced physical violence and almost one-in-five have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. For certain groups, this statistic may be much higher.(The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022 - Accessed February 24 2014)*

Recommendation 1

That respectful relationships education is more specifically and consistently included across the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education from Foundation Level to Level 10 and beyond as well as more thoroughly incorporated in other Learning Areas where relevant.

2. IN SUPPORT OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Women's Health West believes that the inclusion of sexuality education content within the Australian curriculum: Health and Physical Education (F-10) is important to young people's overall mental health and wellbeing and must be relevant to key population groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, same sex attracted and gender diverse young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people especially newly arrived migrants, and young people with a disability.

Action for Equity, the sexual and reproductive health promotion plan for Melbourne western region developed by Women's Health West for the Western Region Sexual and Reproductive Health Promotion Partnership (Victoria , 2013) states:

Melbourne's western region comprises the seven local government areas (LGAs) of Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Melton, Moonee Valley and Wyndham. The west is home to many communities disproportionately affected by poor health, with four LGAs ranked in Melbourne's ten most disadvantaged.⁶ For example, 29 per cent of Melbourne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population reside in the west, while 31 per cent of the population was born in non-English speaking countries.⁷ It is well known that these communities fare worse on an array of social, economic and health indicators.

⁵ Michael Flood, Lara Fergus and Melanie Heenan, 2009, *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships in Victorian Secondary Schools*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia', Australian Bureau of Statistics [web page] (2006) <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2033.0.55.001/>>, accessed July 2012.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Community Profiles 2011' Australian Bureau of Statistics [web page] (2012) <<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/communityprofiles?opendocument&navpos=230>>, accessed July 2012.

The experiences of young people across the western region further supports the introduction of a curriculum that provides meaningful and relevant sexuality education. Current research informs us that:

- a) *Only 70 per cent of young women and their partners use contraception to avoid pregnancy, which is considerably lower than the state average of 79 per cent*⁸
- b) *Teenage motherhood is associated with an increased risk of poor social, economic and health outcomes*⁹
- c) *A 21 per cent increase in chlamydia notifications between 2010 and 2012, compared with a 20 per cent increase in Victoria*¹⁰
- d) *Only 53 per cent of sexually active young people in the western region report that they practice safe sex by using a condom. This is lower than the reported Victorian rate of 58 per cent.*¹¹

Furthermore in national statistics the recent “HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia 2013 Annual Surveillance Report” reports:

- a) *Trends in newly diagnosed HIV infection have differed across State and Territory health jurisdictions. In New South Wales, the rate of HIV diagnosis per 100 000 population declined steadily from 6.3 in 2003 to 4.9 in 2010 and then increased to 6.2 in 2012. In Victoria, the rate increased from around 5.0 in 2003 – 2007 to 5.3 in 2008 – 2012.*
- b) *Following a stable population rate of gonorrhoea diagnosis in both males and females in the years from 2003 to 2007, the rate increased to 84.3 and 36.1 among males and females, respectively, in 2012 ...The rates of diagnosis of gonorrhoea increased almost 3 fold in New South Wales, 2.5 times in Victoria and by 53% in Queensland and 12% in Western Australia. In the past ten years, the rate of gonorrhoea diagnosis was highest among people aged 20 – 24 years and 15 – 19 years.*

Furthermore the specific inclusion of a sexuality education curriculum that is inclusive of young people with a disability from for Foundation Level to Level 10 and beyond is strongly supported by Women’s Health West. Women’s Health West believes that all people have the right to develop positive sexual relationships, to maintain good sexual health, to be parents, and to access safe and affordable contraception and reproductive services if they choose to. Yet many people with a disability continue to experience systematic exclusion from sexual and reproductive health services, information and education.

Recommendation 2

That in line with best practice, both age appropriate and relevant sexuality education, that respects the diversity of human relationships and is inclusive of HIV/AIDS and STI prevention information, is included in the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education from Foundation Level to Level 10 and in the senior secondary years.

⁸ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *The state of Victoria’s children 2008: A report on how children and young people in Victoria are faring* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Department of Health, ‘Surveillance of notifiable infectious diseases: Local government summary reports’. Department of Health [web page] (2013) <<http://ideas.health.vic.gov.au/surveillance/tabulatedsummaries.asp>>, accessed July 2013.

¹¹ . Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Adolescent Community Profile: City of Wyndham 2010* (Melbourne: Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011).