Victorian Catholic Schools Parent Body (VCSPB)
Feedback on ACARA Draft Australian Curriculum

1. Preamble
The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the draft Australian curriculum.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards, or where none exist, through school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of the Victorian Catholic education authorities in advancing the interests of Catholic schools and their students, particularly in those areas where parent input can strengthen the quality of Catholic school provision.

The VCSPB decided not to make use of the on-line survey as it was too granular; asking for comments and ratings at every level, and not particularly relevant for a parent group response. It is acknowledged that parent groups are not the primary audience for the survey.

This statement deals with the VCSPB’s general views regarding the concept of a National Curriculum, as well as some general feedback on certain subject areas, bearing in mind that parental comments on technical detail are perhaps less compelling than those of professionals.

2. General Comments
We acknowledge the aims and benefits of an Australian national curriculum.

The VCSPB acknowledges that a common Australian curriculum has the benefit of making efficient and effective use of the resources of the community.

We also acknowledge that a high quality Australian curriculum will better enable parents and schools to deal with interstate or international family movements.

However, it must also be acknowledged that a national curriculum for its own sake is not a sufficient reason to change, unless that curriculum is of a higher quality. Should the Australian Curriculum be of lesser quality, then it would be better to persist with a range of curricula of higher quality, even though they would be less efficiently administered.

“Quality” can be interpreted subjectively, so we think that an appropriate framework for quality can be informed by the Melbourne Declaration which lists as its strategic goals:

- To promote equity and excellence
- For all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens
- World class curriculum and assessment is to be promoted.

The Melbourne declaration goes further in defining these quality attributes as follows:
• An acknowledgement changing needs and an orientation to future curriculum needs to be addressed.
• Minimum entitlements to be set with flexibility for teaching delivery and the accommodation of individual learning needs as well as local and topical content.
• Inclusion of skills in the curriculum relevant to life and ongoing learning.
• Learning to be seen as a continuum with recognition of the stages of learning.

From a parental perspective, we would clearly want to see the following characteristics:

(i) Clear and consistent definitions of learning content at various levels.
(ii) Clear definitions of student learning expectations at various levels.

Parents need to be able to relate these two so that they can gauge their children’s progress throughout their school careers.

Hence, the above were the criteria used by the VCSPB in examining the four subject areas.

Two other general comments related to the concern about a crowded curriculum, and about access and equity.

Having ten general capabilities—(literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, thinking skills, ethical behaviour, creativity, self-management, teamwork, intercultural understanding and social competence) and three cross curriculum dimensions—(indigenous history and culture, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia and sustainability) being developed through teaching in each learning area is a laudable aim. How this will be managed so as to avoid making the curriculum even more crowded, is a significant challenge.

Information and communication technology is one of ten major capabilities. How do we deal with a possible ‘digital divide’ where some families due to financial or remote location reasons may not have ready access to the full suite of new technologies?
3. Comments on Draft Science Curriculum

Learning Content: The learning content from Kindergarten (Prep) to Year 10 across the identified “strands” was clearly and consistently defined.

The content appears very dense. In the context of an already overcrowded curriculum, parents would have concerns that the time children spend in a science lesson is well spent (i.e. efficient use of student time and teacher/school resources).

The comments below seek to identify those areas of the science curriculum that have the greatest likelihood to develop properly scientifically literate minds by year 10. This, after all, is the essential objective of a general science curriculum.

By year 10, the expectations of the technical components (Strands) of the draft curriculum Science Enquiry Skills and Science Understanding appear well founded, and to a large extent traditional in nature. The Parent Body has no real issues about these. However the remaining strand, Science as a Human Endeavour appears to be tangential to the development of scientific thinking. There are some areas where many parents would have concerns that this is the easiest strand to teach, and may influence the views but not necessarily the scientific understanding of children.

Combining humanities elements with science is appropriate for the academic field of “History and Philosophy of Science”. As it stands, the Science as a Human Endeavour strand does not convey the essence of science that matters. Scientific theories and practices are fundamentally different to “traditional” practices, though they each have similar origins (observation, trial and error etc). Most traditional practices are at best “pseudo scientific” practices. Elements of this field could be better applied within this strand to develop better scientific minds.

Parents with a developed understanding of scientific principles would have no issue with proper identification of non-scientific practices within the curriculum, as students should be able to clearly identify good science from bad or non-science.

Parents would expect that the curriculum would minimise material within Science as a Human Endeavour that does not link directly to the development of scientific thinking. There is a risk that students will be confused having to deal with essentially historical/geographical/social issues at the expense of core scientific concepts. Will a student’s result in science depend on their understanding of science as a human endeavour, as opposed to their understanding of the scientific method?

Parents may well be uncomfortable with the inclusion of contentious issues within the curriculum. Straying into areas of major scientific debate or dispute demands that a sceptical position (the high moral ground in scientific enquiry) be maintained. It is suggested that as much of the curriculum as possible should be allocated to deeper and better understanding of the more technical strands Science Enquiry Skills and Science Understanding.

It is likely that most students will complete their science studies at Year 10. By year 10, students may not have developed the thinking skills required to pursue higher level scientific studies, so it is perhaps as important by year 10 for students to really understand the principles of scientific thinking as the content issues.

Learning Expectations: Overall these were well defined.
4. Comments on Draft Mathematics Curriculum

Overall, the mathematics draft curriculum appears well defined and structured.

There are clear and consistent definitions of learning content and student learning expectations at various levels.
5. Comments on Draft English Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum: English involves learning about English language, literature and literacy.....the three strands provide the foundation for study across all curriculum areas*. The VCSPB appreciates this important acknowledgement that fluency in English is important to success across the curriculum.

The content descriptions at each year level list thirty or more areas under the strands of Language, Literature and Literacy. Will the reporting at school level do justice to this material while at the same time be presented in a manner which is accessible and clear?

The literary texts studied should include: Australian literature-(including traditional and contemporary indigenous literature and world literature drawn from classic and contemporary texts including texts from Asia. Working out an appropriate balance between in this area one expects to be an area of on-going debate.

Achievement standards, under the headings “Listening and Speaking”, “Reading” and “Writing” provide a year by year description of “the quality of learning that students should typically demonstrate by a particular point in their schooling”. The depth/complexity of the learning process logically builds from K to 10 and indicates what students need to know before they can proceed successfully to the next level.

There is a strong emphasis on the teaching of grammar in all years of schooling. In the Language strand, “students learn about the use of grammar and understand why it is used” but grammar is also applied through the literature and literacy strands. It is important that the minimum grammar content to be taught at each year level is defined and a glossary is provided so that grammar terminology is consistent- (previously terminology associated with grammatical concepts has often been inconsistent).

The teaching of spelling is based on using “phonic, visual and morphemic knowledge”. Teachers are encouraged to use a range of strategies and more importantly these approaches have “a stronger focus in the early years”. It is important that these skills are taught explicitly and parents would expect that strategies for successful spelling are embedded before students proceed from the early years of their schooling.