

‘Inciting culture wars’: Labor states push back on Tudge’s positive history curriculum bid



Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge will meet with his state and territory counterparts next week to discuss finalising the new national curriculum.

By Lisa Visentin
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Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge’s hopes for a national curriculum that presents a positive view of Australian history is facing a challenge from Labor states, with ministers in Victoria and Western Australia accusing him of trying to reignite culture wars over the nation’s past.

Mr Tudge will head into the final education ministers’ meeting of the year next Friday having graded the draft curriculum a “C” last month, saying it would teach students a “negative, miserable view of Australia” and future generations would be unwilling to defend the nation against threats to its liberal democracy.

The meeting is the last formal opportunity this year for education ministers to discuss the final draft curriculum, which requires a consensus to be implemented, unless an additional out-of-session gathering is scheduled. But the path to agreement, particularly over the history content, is unclear, with Labor ministers in Victoria, Queensland, WA, the ACT and the Northern Territory critical of Mr Tudge’s comments.

Victorian Education Minister James Merlino said Mr Tudge's remarks were aimed at "inciting culture wars", adding Victoria would advocate for a curriculum "that will produce the thoughtful and proud Australians of the future".

"We have long called for Australia's Indigenous heritage to be firmly embedded in our curriculum – not at the expense of other important aspects of the Australian story, but as part of a balanced, diverse history offering that covers both the inspiring and challenging parts of our nation's history," Mr Merlino said.

WA Education Minister Sue Ellery said it was important students learned different perspectives on the past as well as the skills to form their own judgments.

"I don't think going again to the fake so-called history wars has added anything to the review as history is always judged by the perspective of who is looking at it," she said.

Queensland Education Minister Grace Grace said it had been unhelpful for Mr Tudge to comment on the review before it had been completed.

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"I don't think it helps to provide a running commentary on the teaching of Australian history and other subject matters," she said.

A spokeswoman for ACT Education Minister Yvette Berry said she did "not share Minister Tudge's concern regarding the history learning areas of the draft curriculum".



Victorian Education Minister James Merlino said he would advocate for the national curriculum to provide students with a "balanced, diverse history offering" rather than "inciting culture wars"

NT Education Minister Lauren Moss said the independent review process "should be respected" and she supported attempts in the draft to strengthen Indigenous history content.

“Critical to two-way teaching and learning is being honest about the many facets of our history, and the Australian curriculum review seeks to improve this, including the ongoing impact of colonisation on First Nations Australians,” she said.

Mr Tudge’s criticisms of the draft curriculum included that Anzac Day should not be taught as a “contested idea” but as the most sacred day of the year. He has also argued the curriculum struck the wrong balance when it came to teaching Indigenous perspectives, saying they should be included but not “at the expense of dishonouring our Western heritage”. It is unclear whether these concerns have been addressed in the final document.

Mr Tudge did not respond directly to questions about whether consensus could be reached at next week’s meeting. In a statement, he said his concerns went well beyond the history content.

“I’ll be reviewing the final draft curriculum closely. Parents, guardians and school communities would expect nothing less,” he said.

Liberal education ministers in NSW, South Australia and Tasmania declined to say whether they agreed with Mr Tudge’s criticisms of the draft when approached for comment.

Speaking at NSW budget estimates this week, Education Minister Sarah Mitchell said students should have a “proud understanding of Australian history”.

The review was undertaken by the independent Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, which has held briefings with ministers on the final revised curriculum this week.

According to the timeline agreed by education ministers in June last year, the review process should be completed by the end of 2021, with the new curriculum documents made publicly available from the start of the new year.

“Once endorsed by Education Council, the revised F-10 Australian curriculum will be published on an improved website platform and be available for implementation from the start of 2022,” the terms of reference for the review state.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority chief executive David de Carvalho told Senate estimates last week the board had signed off on the final draft of the curriculum on October 14 and it had been sent to senior state and territory education officials for review before the ministers’ meeting.