

NGOs and individuals sign petition to reject alteration of Decree-laws related to the National Preschool and Basic Education Curriculums

On 9 April 2018, the Advocacy Network for Education sent a petition declaring their rejection of recently promulgated alterations to the national preschool and basic education curriculums to the President of the Republic, all political parties, and the Catholic Church. The petition was signed by more than a hundred individuals from 25 organizations including FONGTIL, Fokupers, Fundasaun Alola, Asosiasaun HAK, La'ó Hamutuk, HASATIL, Permatil, ADTL, RHTO, LABEH, MOFFE-TL, ACBIT, AJAR, Fundasaun Balos. The following is a shortened version of its content:

We, both as representatives of non-governmental organizations and as parents and families of children and students in preschool and basic education, have read and analysed the alterations to the two Decree-laws regarding the preschool and basic education (cycles 1 and 2)¹ curriculums, and soundly reject both of these altered decree laws. We want to see the continuation of the implementation of the 2015 national curriculum until such time as a fair assessment of its results may be conducted, before embarking upon future revisions. We are very familiar with the 2015 curriculum, and happy with both the quality of its content and pedagogy, including how the two official languages are taught, which is in a manner that recognizes the linguistic realities of the country, and uses a methodology based upon numerous studies that have shown that this methodology achieves positive results.

The results of our monitoring show that the majority of teachers want to continue using the 2015 curriculum, but need more support in the form of materials, training and infrastructure in order to be able to implement the curriculum well. Large changes less than three years after the beginning of the first phase of implementation only cause negative impacts to the learning process. Thus, we urge all parties to support a parliamentary review as guaranteed by our Constitution.

We reject the alterations for the following reasons:

- 1. The alterations were made using a non-transparent process that had no technical basis.***
The process of altering these decree-laws was very hurried, and was not based on any scientific assessment of the 2015 curriculum. The process was not transparent and did not include any consultations. This shows that the current politicians did not recognize the great effort made by the community to contribute to 2015 curriculum's elaboration process.
- 2. The alterations show serious inconsistencies related to teaching methods and using both official languages.*** The new Basic Education curriculum law does not determine a clear method of how to teach literacy, nor about the language of instruction. According to the RDTL Constitution, article 13, the Tetum language must be valued and developed, but the alterations to the curriculum do not do this. The 2015 Curriculum outlines a clear path to developing Tetum and building a strong base in both official languages.

¹The original laws were No.3/2015 and decree-law No.4/2015, and the alterations were published in the *Jornal da República* as Decree-law No. 3/2018 and Decree-Law No. 4/2018.

3. ***The alterations to the preschool curriculum are not realistic, and do not recognize the importance of developmental play.*** Because of the increase in minimum hours for preschool, many children will not have the opportunity to go to preschool due to very limited teachers and facilities. The alteration also says that children will achieve the result of “possessing a solid base of literacy in the two official languages.” This learning result is not appropriate for children of preschool age. The alterations also reduce the importance of the methodology of play-based learning and child-centered learning.
4. ***The alterations are against the principles of inclusive education.*** In the alterations to the two decree laws, it is determined that teachers will have to “reference” students with special educational needs to a “resource center”. *This represents a step backwards to a colonial mindset about students with deficiencies.* The alterations do not reflect the objective of inclusive education and its first priority, which is to identify ways in which all students are included in the regular teaching and learning process, instead of going back to the old way of thinking whereby students with any kind of deficiency should be sent to a far away and ‘special’ place, in order to separate them from other children.
5. ***The alterations show a lack of minimum understanding of the basic concept of education, and are full of inconsistencies that will contribute to confusion in the teaching and learning process.*** Perhaps because of the intention of altering the laws so quickly, along with a lack of in-depth analysis, we can identify with surprise that these alterations clearly show a lack of basic knowledge of education, such as the lack of understanding about the term ‘literacy’ and language teaching methodologies described above.
6. ***The alterations reduce school autonomy, especially for Catholic and private schools.*** The 2018 legislation removes the option of schools (except Portuguese language immersion schools) being able to make changes to the curriculum and they will increase bureaucracy when schools want to add something to their curriculum. This alteration will have a large negative impact on many schools including Catholic schools, international schools and those using sign language or Braille alphabets.
7. ***The alterations bar the possibility of using a large amount of relevant, new and high quality teaching and learning materials, that have been developed through a long, expensive and inclusive process.*** Materials such as Lesson Plan Books (for teachers) and didactic books for students will no longer be used. We have observed that books have not yet been distributed and the warehouses of the Ministry of Education and Culture are filled with books supporting the 2015 curriculum. Will these books be used or not? Are there already new materials? We were very involved in the preparation of these books that have not yet been delivered. This is a grave insult to us, and to all Timorese that were involved in their preparation. This also violates our children’s right to education, because all children have the right to have books in school. Perhaps they were not distributed specifically with the political intention of ruining the 2015 curriculum. A great deal of money was used in the development, elaboration, printing and distribution (of those books who were distributed) of school materials during the past 3 year period. When books that were developed are now not being used, this shows a lack of value of the books, and a big waste of money.