

Whither the National Curriculum?

What should the National Curriculum aim to do? Some education professionals and experts favour a light touch – perhaps the curriculum could offer a checklist of broad goals for children's knowledge, but leave teachers free to decide what subjects will get them there and how. Others argue that a detailed, prescriptive national framework is the best way to benchmark the quality of teaching and ensure that children learn.

The House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee examined the arguments over the spring and summer while gathering written and oral evidence for an inquiry into the curriculum. It will consider whether a National Curriculum is needed, how the curriculum can be improved, and how it might be managed.

The Committee has now heard from think tanks, teaching unions, politicians, private sector providers and academics as well as teachers. There appears to be little consensus.

Another complication for the Committee is that it is wrestling with a system that has been examined many times before. When it was introduced in 1988 as part of the Education Reform Act, which brought about the National Curriculum Council (now the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority), the National Curriculum replaced a system of goals and inspections. Subsequent major curriculum changes were made in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2005.

Mick Waters, director of the QCA, told the Committee that far from being "tinkering", regular change to the curriculum is both desirable and necessary to keep pace with rapid change in society. "There is a need to prepare young people

for a changing world – for a future that is different," he said. "While we are preparing them for the future, we need to offer them the best possible present. That balance between the future and the present must be considered in creating the curriculum. It should therefore keep changing and shifting."

Schools Minister Jim Knight offered other justifications for regular change in the curriculum, in response to accusations from the Committee that the government interferes with stability. "We are always having to respond at one end to what employers and universities are telling us about outputs," he said. "For example, they consistently tell us that we need stronger soft skills – team work, leadership and communication skills – from young people leaving the education system."

However, Robert Whelan, deputy director of the right-leaning think tank Civitas, told the Committee that the curriculum is subjected to constant change because it is vulnerable to political interference: "Staff are demoralised by all those changes and by the prescriptive nature of a curriculum that often prevents them from teaching in the way that they feel, as professionals, is best for the children." Whelan advocated a return to the pre-1988 system of goals and inspections, with school governors and teaching staff deciding what is to be taught.

Teaching unions, meanwhile, described to the Committee the "disastrous" effect of testing, which they say has narrowed the curriculum and has damaged innovation and creativity in schools.

The Committee is expected to make its final report during the next parliamentary session.

A debacle that ought to bring an end to SATs

This autumn an independent inquiry headed by Lord Sutherland will publish its report into the summer's SATs debacle. It is likely to be a lengthy document.

Schools, parents and unions were cheered in August when ETS, the American company responsible for the marking delays, was sacked by the exams watchdog, the QCA. After a series of computer glitches, more than 1 million 11- and 14-year-olds were unsure whether their test results were even vaguely accurate, and many schools returned all their papers to be re-marked. ETS is said to be paying back more than £19m of its £39.6m contract for the year.

The inquiry will not have to look far for evidence. SATs markers are happy to talk about this summer's disaster, and one of them described his experiences to CASEnotes:

"SATs training in May is usually intensive, with 12 markers working in a group. But this year they crammed 150 of us into a conference room. There was no table space to write, no time for reflection, discussion or even for us to ask questions. We were told not to ask about the new IT system because the chief trainer hadn't seen it."

Once markers were home, they found ETS's web-based system unable to handle the work: "The benchmarking test to check our competence was a two-page essay, but because of the way the page was set up we could only read three lines at a time. We were supposed to mark handwriting, but the papers had been scanned in so badly they were smudged and distorted, so it was impossible to assess them."

According to the marker, if he tried to report a child's absence, the system rejected

the entire school's test papers. He claims ETS regularly sent out updated instructions to markers, but having done so did not allow markers to return to papers already submitted in light of new instructions. The computer system was so badly designed that markers were required to make 4,000 mouse clicks per child. Meanwhile, ETS's telephone helpline staff were "rude and disinterested". Many markers resigned in frustration.

A campaign to end SATs is gathering momentum, galvanised by this summer's delays. Some argue this year's debacle is the perfect opportunity to re-ignite the argument that SATs' linear model for measuring pupils' "progress", and the view that a child's ability is "fixed", is wrong. Meanwhile, the government has invited tenders for a one-year contract to run next summer's marking system.

Strange goings on in rural Herefordshire

Alan Carter

Andrew Adonis recently distanced himself from a controversial academy proposal from Hammersmith and Fulham that would have merged a successful local comprehensive with the French Government funded Lycée, by stating on the *Politics Programme* (BBC 1, 8 June) that it was not a "government academy". This must have been quite a surprise to the Council.

An even more bizarre proposal that the government may wish to remain coy about recently (11 March 2008) failed in a planning appeal by the DCSF.

This was to convert a fee-paying Steiner school adjacent to the small Hereford village of Much Dewchurch into a large state-funded academy.

Steiner Schools follow a very open pedagogy – with a lot of emphasis on learning by doing. They are fee-paying (means tested) and do select pupils, but the process for doing this is unclear.

The school currently provides an education for just two local families who rent property in the village – presumably to provide their children with easy access to the school. All the other pupils arrive by car from surrounding areas.

The proposal for development involved 4.5 hectares, a third of the total area of the village, on a green-field site outside the development boundary. It would have completely changed the setting of the local grade 1 listed church building, as it included 3 acres of parking on a site next to it. This school was clearly not going to be serving its local community – and may well have damaged provision in existing undersubscribed Herefordshire schools.

It has been reported that up to £16 million would have been spent on the new buildings – with pupil numbers potentially rising from 270 to 330; if all the new children had come from families that would naturally be in the state sector this would

have been at a cost of £266,667 per pupil.

Incredibly, Andrew Adonis obviously felt that this wonderful opportunity to provide cost-effective education for disadvantaged children should not be rejected on planning grounds and took the rejected proposal to appeal. The appeal also failed.

I had naively thought that – with a residual capacity of 220 children the Academy plan would then be ditched – but no – they are now proposing to use an old and lapsed planning permission from 2004 to bring the buildings up to scratch. This involves developing a number of existing temporary buildings. They will also be building on part of their already limited parking provision.

At the time they applied for this planning permission (2003) numbers were 220 and falling so the proposal was to replace like for like. During the public enquiry the DCSF repeatedly stated that they could get 314 children into the 2004 scheme. Hard to see how when the existing facilities are way below DCSF standards for classroom size and it was a like-for-like provision. Now they are going to have an even bigger problem with access (along a single track that is shared with residential properties!) and parking.

Much more suspiciously they are also applying for permission to put a new range of "temporary buildings" into the field that was to be built on in the rejected academy proposal, so they can clear the existing site and build the new development. Those familiar with temporary accommodation in state-funded schools and how they can eventually become permanent will know what that means.

The logic for this development is rather obscure – I would like to see Andrew Adonis wriggle out of responsibility for this one.

Information about the 35 Steiner schools in the UK can be found on <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk>.

Reaching for "Culture"

Michael Pyke

Anyone who watched Channel 4's remarkable *Ballet Hoo!* project in the autumn of 2006, or who experienced last year's astonishing performances at the Proms by Venezuela's Youth Orchestra, will have seen the enormous gains in motivation and self-confidence made by young people who participate in successful arts activities. And anyone who watched the first series of BBC TV's *The Choir* will have seen the same, but they may also have wondered about the state of music education in most schools, as the school involved was chosen because it was thought by the producers to be "typical."

Certainly the government seems to have woken up to the fact that arts provision within the state sector is, on the whole, mediocre. In February it was announced that some pilot schemes are to be introduced in which participating schools will ensure that pupils have access to "five hours of culture" per week.

If it turns out to be another "add-on" to an already overcrowded school day, the project will fail. Access to "culture" involves far more than simply organising visits to concerts, the theatre or art galleries for children who have no experience of such places. Unless these activities arise naturally from the children's learning, they will be largely wasted and may well lead to inappropriate behaviour. The children who benefit the most from such visits are those whose practical experience of music-making, performing on stage or creating their own art has equipped them with the skills to appreciate what they are taken to hear and see, but opportunities to acquire such experience are increasingly rare in the neurotic, target-driven culture of state education.

If the government is serious about improving the position of the arts within state schools, it needs to make some fundamental changes. Drama and dance need to be given the status of subjects in their own right, properly resourced and taught by specialists. Every school should be required to have a good range of instrumental and singing groups, including an orchestra and a choir. This means ensuring that every secondary school has at least two skilled music specialists on the staff. It also means restoring the free instrumental tuition that once made our youth orchestras the best in the world. Ofsted inspectors visiting schools should be required to ascertain whether children's art work is on public display. Every secondary school should be required to present at least one large-scale dramatic production per year, as well as at least one musical event per term. Headteachers should be required to provide time and resources for these performances to take place.

It will be interesting to see whether the pilot schemes achieve anything, but the way the notion of "culture" has been presented as some kind of measurable commodity is not promising.

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Membership

To join CASE send £15 (£5 unwaged) with your name, address and phone number to CASE (address above)

CASE annual conference and agm

Which future? Education beyond 2010

Saturday 15 November 2008, 10.30 a.m.
University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1

Representatives of the main political parties have been invited to speak.

CASE will be considering whether to join Accord (see page 4).

For more information and details of how to register see the CASE website or leaflet enclosed with this magazine.

Defining the charitable “public benefit” in fee-paying schools

Tony Mitchell

This year two consultations on Public Benefit in relation to charities have appeared, one on the effect of fee-charging and another on the advancement of education. The Education Review Group, formed in 2007 to respond to the Charity Bill consultation, reconvened and agreed a submission to the Charity Commission on fee-charging. This is a summary.

The “main public benefit task” of trustees of fee-charging schools (the misleading term “public” schools should be dropped) must be both to “broaden the class of beneficiary” to include all income ranges, and to provide opportunities for people in poverty.

The Charity Commission should provide sector-specific guidance containing a clear analysis of what constitutes “direct benefit”, showing the need for and role of quantitative evidence and expanding the reporting requirement. Schools should not be able to opt out of charitable status without transferring their charitable assets to another charitable user first.

Fee-charging schools should be as rigorously and publicly accountable as state schools for their contribution to the achievement and attainment of the state pupils they claim to assist. Trustees and teachers should be inducted and trained to implement this. They should be able to identify the charity’s purposes, recognise and identify the quantified value of all assets (including premises) and benefits available to fee-payers against the value of tax breaks and other benefits from charitable status. These elements should be part of any evaluation of the true cost of enabling a “charity” student to participate fully in the life of the school.

There should be a Public Benefit Statement of Account in a standardised reporting form, based on an agreed set of protocols, and clear Rules of Engagement, establishing the mutual benefits, for working with state schools. The Rules should clearly establish the differences between direct and indirect benefit, and educational

and recreational purposes. They should ensure that benefits are not minimal or tokenistic or just for able children. Activities that have to be paid for and “community service” activities by fee-paying pupils will not normally be acceptable for “public benefit” purposes.

The principles of transparency and accountability should become fundamental to the due diligence of fee-charging schools, so that any member of the public can access information as to how the public benefit test is being met and make representations about it. This should be reviewed by qualified and independent public bodies, such as Ofsted or the Audit Commission, or even a local panel with community and state school representatives. It is misleading to believe that the Charity Commission’s decisions cannot be challenged.

Schools established for the poor must benefit only the poor. Furthermore, a school charging fees at a level to provide (luxury) services would not be meeting a charitable need. This is known to charity law as “goldplating” – using charitable resources to enhance provision so that a school becomes more expensive and less accessible. Rather, any extra resources should be used to widen access and thus increase public benefit.

All claimed benefits must be balanced against any detriment or harm. Traditional bursaries and scholarships awarded on ability do not benefit the public as they can harm state schools and even the children they are intended to help, while boosting the private sector. Nor is attendance at a fee-charging school as a full-time student essential for “direct benefit”. Appointing qualified teachers from the state sector in shortage subjects is another example of harm to the state sector. Governing bodies should advertise to fill vacancies and have sufficient members with no connections to private education.

Finally, the involvement of fee-charging schools in the development of academies needs to be carefully monitored. The acceptance that these count towards the public benefit claim should be queried.

Triumph of the pub quiz

Keith Lichman

Was it Benjamin Disraeli who said, “There are lies, damn lies and then there are the things that the DCSF says about education”? History is no longer a compulsory subject at Key Stage 4 so perhaps we can be forgiven if the attribution is not entirely accurate, but it nevertheless has the ring of truth. For more than a decade there has apparently been a relentless improvement in educational standards, according to the ever-improving GCSE and A-level results and the rise in average National Curriculum test levels.

The problem, however, is that the “things can only get better” mood which marked the start of the Blair years has changed from a grass roots dream to a top-down administrative instruction. In the context of the progressive strangulation of professional teaching initiated by the Thatcher government in the 1988 Education Act and intensified by all subsequent administrations, test results have got better because the material tested has gradually had to be simplified and trivialised to maintain the illusion of continuous improvement.

In subjects like science and mathematics (my specific fields of experience), and no doubt in all the other foundation subjects, the pattern has been to defer demanding concepts and practice to later years and to substitute pub-quiz type content for real understanding. The defining characteristic of this type of knowledge is that you only have to be able to remember it – you don’t have to know what it means. The defining requirement for scientific understanding in nearly all areas of modern science is mathematical competence. Universities, whose institutional survival in the market for research funding is contingent on producing at least some competent practitioners, are now compelled to teach first year undergraduates what they used to learn on “A” level courses.

Within UK state education one of the perennial deceptions has been to blame the apparent failure of children on the inappropriateness of the curriculum, the inadequacy of the teaching or the native (genetic) inferiority of the students. Given the right circumstances, however – that is, small classes, decent resources (i.e. books) and teachers with in-depth experience of their subjects and the freedom to exploit their knowledge – most people can be taught most things to a level they can enjoy and make use of.

The stratification and lack of social mobility in British society is not fortuitous. It is a direct consequence of an educational system which is structured, by accident or design, to maintain privilege and punish poverty. The accelerated fracturing of the system through the academies programme and the insistence that some knowledge is “vocational” rather than stimulating and useful are tailor-made to perpetuate inequalities in an already highly unequal society.

Comment

“Which Future? Education Beyond 2010” is our theme for this year’s annual conference. State education is being undermined and we need to fight for its survival.

Lord Adonis continues to promote academies, with the engagement of private schools, universities as sponsors, unelected governing bodies, and academy “chains” with questionable sponsors.

The increase in faith schools is a further concern. Meanwhile the government is consulting on further legislation to increase its powers over schools causing concern.

Yet the government does not look at

what its policies are doing to schools. For example, the insistence on continuing with SATs leads to a narrowing of the curriculum so that most of the school week is spent on the subjects which are tested.

If the government did look it would not have to employ draconian measures that are likely to destroy communities rather than improve schools. It could remove its stranglehold on schools and allow them the freedoms it extols for academies. It could share the funding across all schools. It could listen to young people.

But what do we want for state education beyond 2010? CASE will open the debate at its AGM.

Lib Dem leader jumps on the academies bandwagon

The academies juggernaut rolls on. *Academies and the Future of State Education*, a recent book from the think tank CentreForum (edited by Julian Astle and Conor Ryan), highlights how all the major parties are now signed up to some kind of academy future for education.

This is no surprise in relation to the Labour Party, nor to the Tories – after all, the pilot CTCs were their initiative.

However, the book also highlights new Liberal Democratic leader Nick Clegg's openness to the academy model – though he favours calling them "Free Schools" based on the Swedish model. In this the focus is on the idea of the freedom to innovate, and Clegg believes there is nothing wrong with allowing schools to exist outside direct daily local government management as long as there is government oversight (isn't that what the local management of schools is all about?). Although academies have often been supported by local Lib Dem councillors in the past, nationally the Lib Dems have opposed them, so this marks a shift in policy. Perhaps it not surprising since CentreForum has close links to the Lib Dem leadership.

The book itself has remarkably little analysis and is written by leaders of some of the most "successful" academies, with additions by policymakers who support them. Academies architect, Andrew Adonis, has written the foreword, which sets out government policy. His contribution is a series of unsupported assertions – such as that independent leadership and governance are "essential to the creation of a first class school", and that it should be a goal to emulate private schools which "nurture the full range of talents of each individual to the full". He celebrates head-

teachers sometimes being "headhunted" to take over academies (at what expense to other schools we want to know?). Adonis foresees chains of academies in future "at the cutting edge of educational innovation" and he looks to develop all-through 3–18 academies. His support for academies grew from the "success" of CTCs, but he overlooks that these schools could select their pupils.

The remaining chapters are written by apostles for the academies – chief executives and principals of "successful" academies and their sponsors. They extol the freedom of the sponsor and the curriculum, and governance arrangements based on smaller governing bodies. The head of an all-through 3–18 school in development sets out the benefits of this model, even though the school has not yet opened.

This all makes depressing reading because it assumes that the benefits can only be achieved through academies. Yet effective state schools are equally successful in teaching and learning, community involvement, developing the whole child and good governance and leadership, but their achievements are ignored.

Perhaps the most sinister chapter comes last, written by CentreForum's Director. He suggests that the definition of "failing" in relation to primary schools is too weak, and that the government should set about establishing the academy model there more aggressively. Primary schools are "smaller and easier to run", so parents, community groups and co-operatives should sponsor them, leaving the limited number of private providers for larger secondary schools.

The book should carry a health warning for supporters of state education.

Two forthcoming conferences

Comprehensive Future

AGM and annual conference

Saturday 11 October 2008, 11.00 am, at NUT, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BD

Speakers: Alan Parker (School Adjudicator) and Francis Beckett (journalist)

To register contact Margaret Tulloch, Comprehensive Future, PO Box 44327, London SW20 0WD

No charge, but donations welcome

Children's Services Network

School Admissions: securing fair access

Thursday 9 October, 9.45am, at Mary Ward House, Tavistock Place, London W1

Speakers: Jim Knight and Chief Schools Adjudicator Sir Philip Hunter

The conference will look at the opportunities and expectations arising from the new School Admissions Code

Booking form from events@lgiu.org.uk or phone 020 7554 2800

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CASE campaigns for the right of all children to the best in state education, regardless of their race, gender, home circumstance, ability or disability

News in brief

New group fights discrimination on basis of faith

Accord, a new coalition launched on 1 September, is calling on Children, Schools and Families Secretary Ed Balls to stop state-funded faith schools discriminating against students and teachers on the grounds of their beliefs. The launch of Accord, a broad coalition including the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), the British Humanist Association (BHA) and Christian think-tank Ekklesia, came on the day that new rules came into force to restrict even further the employment rights of staff in state-funded religious schools. Since 1 September religious discrimination has been allowed against headteachers in voluntary controlled faith schools and against non-teaching staff in voluntary aided faith schools. Discrimination of this kind in staffing and admissions is illegal in other schools.

AAA campaign sheet

The Anti Academies Alliance has produced a one-off broadsheet newspaper. It was printed in September and distributed to delegates at the TUC conference. It is hoped it will be used widely by campaigns, in trade unions and for sending to councillors and school governors.

The newspaper will have contributions from Ken Purchase MP, Fiona Millar, Francis Beckett, Melissa Benn, Peter Mortimore, and several trade union leaders. There are articles on What do parents really want?, international privatisation, attainment and exclusions, and reports from campaigns around the country.

Anyone who would like copies should contact the Anti Academies Alliance, on office@antiacademies.org.uk or 07528 201 697. CASE will also have copies.

Schools Admissions Consultation 2008

The proposals in the Children's Plan include a commitment to review the school application and allocation process. In June the DCSF launched a consultation on proposed changes aimed at making the process for parents as fair, transparent and straightforward as possible.

The proposals include changing the composition and powers of admissions forums, referring appeals for primary schools to a reviewer, changing the role of schools adjudicators, obliging local authorities to report each year on the legality and effectiveness of admissions policies, and allowing schools to give priority to parents who support the school's ethos.

The consultation document is on the DCSF website (www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations) and the closing date is 2 October.