

Review of the National Curriculum in England – 19 December 2011

Secretary of State, Department for Education (Rt Hon Michael Gove MP):

Over the past year the review of the National Curriculum in England has been looking at curricula in the highest performing, and fastest improving, jurisdictions internationally. Today I am publishing a set of initial findings and recommendations.

The review team's work has uncovered a consistent theme: these high-performing jurisdictions set materially higher expectations in terms of what they believe children can and should master at different ages. This comes as no surprise. Over the past ten years our education system as measured by performance in the OECD's PISA international league tables has deteriorated significantly. If our schools, and young people, are to become internationally competitive again we must learn from the best in the world.

The recommendations made by the review's Expert Panel set out the scale of the challenge we face, and raise fundamental questions about educational practice in this country. For example:

- The Expert Panel recommend that we learn from the approach to assessment and pupil progression used in many high-performing jurisdictions, including the most successful South-East Asian education systems, which ensure that every pupil has mastered the subject content before the class moves on to tackle the next part of the curriculum. They express concern that our existing assessment model assumes that a certain proportion of young people will never be able to master crucial curriculum content, leading to an unjustified lowering of expectations.
- The international evidence shows that all successful jurisdictions expect pupils to study a broad curriculum to 16, built around a core of academic subjects. The Expert Panel argue that England narrows its curriculum for the majority of pupils too early.
- The evidence identifies the higher expectations of pupils in maths, English and science in high performing jurisdictions. For example,
 - In Singapore, pupils are expected to know all their times tables and related division facts by the end of Year 4; here our national expectation is at Year 6.
 - In Hong Kong, pupils are expected to learn about plant and animal cells in Year 6, including how cell division forms the basis of growth, while we leave this until secondary.
 - All high performing jurisdictions – like Singapore, the Canadian province of Alberta and the US state of Massachusetts – have a separate section on grammar in their curricula with clear standards which must be met.

- Poland, a fast improving education system, has high expectations in their recommended reading, including Homer, Chekhov and Shakespeare alongside great works of Polish literature.
- The panel also recommend that we should look again at the “key stage” structure of the curriculum which they argue can lead to a lack of pace and ambition at key points in pupil’s education.

It would, of course, be wrong to conclude that England should simply import systems used in other countries wholesale. But it is absolutely clear that these findings challenge fundamental tenets of our current system.

The Expert Panel also raise crucial questions about the complex interaction between curriculum and qualifications in secondary schools. Evidence shows that what is taught is determined as much if not more by examinations as by the National Curriculum. This means we need to consider GCSE reform alongside the development of the new curriculum.

As the recent revelations in the Daily Telegraph have confirmed, far-reaching reform to our examinations system is vital – and must be considered in parallel with changes to the secondary curriculum. While immediate action is needed to deal with the improper practices that have been revealed, we need also to take the opportunity to ensure that deep-seated problems with how GCSEs have been developed and delivered can be addressed. We must ensure that qualifications support excellent teaching that develops in pupils a broad and deep understanding of the subject.

In light of the far-reaching and complex nature of the Expert Panel recommendations, and to allow for more radical reform of both curriculum and qualifications, I have decided to change the planned timetable for the introduction of the new National Curriculum. Instead of new curricula for English, mathematics, science and PE being introduced from 2013, and the remainder in 2014, the new curriculum for all subjects will be introduced in 2014.

The longer timescale will allow for further debate with everyone interested in creating a genuinely world-class education system; teachers, governors, academics, business leaders and parents, as well as giving schools more time to prepare for a radically different and more rigorous approach.

A detailed timetable for the conduct of the remainder of the review, as well as a refreshed remit, will be published in the New Year and copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

Alongside this statement I am publishing a suite of documents which, taken together, provide a summary of the findings to date of the review. This suite includes:

- The report of the review’s Expert Panel setting out their recommendations in relation to the framework for the new National Curriculum;
- A summary of the evidence gathered about curricula for English, mathematics and science in high performing jurisdictions;

- A research report that looks at subject breadth in the curricula used in other education jurisdictions; and
- A summary report of the responses to the review's Call for Evidence.

A copy of each of these documents has been placed in the Library of the House.

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