

‘The Framework for the National Curriculum’ in England – ‘Report on a page’

Among mince pies and wrapping paper, discussion on the aims, structure and form of the National Curriculum is invited by the Secretary of State, building on the 2011 Expert Panel report at: www.education.gov.uk. EP proposals could, if implemented, transform English school education. Public, professional and cross-party support is a condition of long-term continuity in education and we hope for constructive debate. The major ideas and proposals of the 2011 EP report are:

1. ‘Education’ is concerned with the interaction of subject knowledge and personal development. Children develop through personal experience and by learning the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are deemed important within their society. Good to remember this!
2. Clarity of purpose is an important precondition if a system is to achieve coherence and effectiveness. It is possible to identify five main educational aims (economic, cultural, social, personal and environmental). There should be public debate on the substantive detail, and application at system, school and subject levels. Could the outcome gain cross-party support?
3. The National Curriculum is a part of the school curriculum as a whole, and should specify only essential and powerful forms of knowledge – thus leaving schools more scope for the exercise of professional and local judgement. There are complications in terms of core and foundation subjects and the basic curriculum, but these provide significant architectural elements for the statutory curriculum.
4. International and UK evidence on the importance of breadth in the primary curriculum is strong, and it should be retained. Evidence also suggests that there should be more breadth at Key Stage 4. To maintain breadth whilst also reducing prescription, the EP recommends reclassifying D&T, Citizenship and ICT to the basic curriculum - thus lightening requirements on schools whilst preserving statutory status. Issues are also raised concerning how to provide for Music, Art and MFL. A distinction is recommended between subjects requiring detailed Programmes of study with attainment targets for core subjects and much more concise PoS without attainment targets for foundation subjects.
5. It is proposed that KS2 should be split into Upper and Lower parts. This change could help maintain challenge throughout primary education and enable new forms of school organisation in Upper KS2, including use of more subject-based teaching if deemed appropriate. KS3 could be reduced to just two years with KS4 changing to three years. This would mean that the lead up to GCSE would be a more substantial and meaningful three year programme of work.
6. In setting out subject knowledge within Programmes of Study, there is merit doing so by key stage – thus describing two year blocks of work. This would provide a balance between giving clear guidance to schools and leaving scope to exercise judgement. However, schools could be required to publish for parents their specific curriculum on a year by year basis.
7. The form in which Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets are expressed is important. Programmes of Study should describe the purposes, progression and inter-connections of the knowledge that pupils are to be taught. Attainment Targets should specify specific learning outcomes. Links between the two should be transparent. Presenting the PoS alongside content-specific ATs would do this.
8. In relation to assessment, there is a strong case for abandoning the system in which children’s attainment is judged by ‘levels’. This has all sorts of perverse effects, the most important of which is to divert attention from that which is to be learned and to focus attention on the level itself. On the basis of study of some high performing national systems elsewhere and drawing on a significant amount of other research evidence from around the world, a different approach is proposed. Maintenance of high expectations for all is key. This directs attention towards maximising the numbers of pupils who are ‘ready to progress’. Without ignoring other needs, the focus should be on the progress of those at risk of falling behind. Appropriate school performance data must be developed for accountability purposes.
9. The development of oral language is known to be strongly associated with learning and attainment. It should be promoted across subjects and through all key stages.
10. Risks associated with the National Curriculum Review include the challenge of achieving coherence in various elements of the system and the need to support teachers in delivery.
11. School provision must be viewed holistically. PSHE and subject requirements must be complementary (see 1. above). Parents understand this. A pity that PSHE was outside the terms of reference of the EP!

Notes compiled by Andrew Pollard and Mary James in personal capacities.

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The DfE NCR team is responsible for draft Programmes of Study and any comments on these should be directed to them.

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