

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The present document is the outcome of a powerful struggle between two quite different concepts of a national curriculum:

- a. The core curriculum approach, emphasising greater competence for all through objective standards, explicit syllabuses, national tests and maximum disclosure of information in a few basic subjects such as English, Maths and Science.
- b. The state control of the whole of the curriculum, covering 90% or more of pupils time, with an elaborate bureaucracy to determine objectives, standards, detailed syllabuses, assessment, and with minimal emphasis on national tests and reluctant disclosure of information relating to the performance of individual schools.

Strengths of the Paper

Although a compromise, this document is a great improvement on earlier versions. The good points are:

- i. the 10 foundation subjects have been split into a core - English, Maths, and Science - and the other seven (paragraph 13).

Although this is stated, perhaps it needs to be given greater emphasis?

- ii. the emphasis given to attainment targets -

standards - is strong and unambiguous (paragraph 20).

- iii. syllabuses (programmes of study) are also explained clearly in terms of 'content knowledge, skills and processes' (paragraph 23). This is good.
- iv. but teachers still have freedom to exercise their professional talents (paragraph 24).
- v. testing is national, externally moderated and 'at the heart of the assessment process' (paragraph 26).
- vi. important information is to be provided to pupils, parents, teachers, governing bodies etc (paragraphs 32, 33).

Weaknesses of this Approach

There are still two major areas however which you may wish to change in an important way. If you wish to do so, tomorrow is the crucial meeting.

- a. The New Bureaucracy: / the National Curriculum Council (NCC) / and the School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC).

If we wish to have syllabuses for common core subjects as well as national tests, we need some institutional machinery. But these new bodies are in addition to the 10 Curriculum Working Groups and the Task Group on Assessment and Testing. If their proposals are accepted, we shall have set up 13 new quangos.

In particular:

- Do we need two bodies - the NCC and the SEAC - rather than one, in addition to the eleven we are already creating? I doubt it.

- Does the NCC need to carry out all of the functions listed in paragraph 41? eg:

"Consultations, a programme of research, keep under review"?

These are very open-ended commitments. This worry is only strengthened by what is said in paragraph 42. In paragraph 44 the consultations seem enormous and far too unwieldy.

This all seems far too ambitious and grand a role for this body. It needs to be severely cut back.

*Second
School Examination
or Assessment*

- SEAC is another educational bureaucracy which gives the Secretary of State detailed power over virtually everything taught in schools.

Once again this needs to be axed with far more emphasis on the role of existing examination bodies linked to disclosure of information.

b. Monitoring, Inspection and Enforcement

Any core curriculum needs to be inspected.

But the approach in this paper is to start with the existing force of 2,400 Inspectors (500 HMI and 1,900 LEA) and then define inspection such that it keeps them all fully employed.

There is no need for comprehensive and detailed

inspection of individual schools. What is crucial are the national tests and the role of parents. If schools do badly in the national tests, inspectors should draw this to the attention of the public. What we must avoid is the HMI and LEA inspectors writing huge tomes on individual schools.

We need auditors, not management consultants.

I am still concerned at the emphasis given in paragraph 58 to the role of the LEA inspectorate, especially in those boroughs in which appointments have been overtly political. If we have a less ambitious view of the inspection procedure, inspection could be done by existing HMI, supplemented if need be by part-time employment for retired teachers. It would also keep the HMI out of trouble.

Recommendations

- 1 Welcome the strengths of the paper.
- 2 The potentially vast and powerful bureaucracy which is being created will be the vehicle to transform your original idea of a common core in a few subjects into comprehensive state control of the curriculum.

The creation of this new bureaucracy has got totally out of control. Its establishment should be resisted strongly, while of course accepting that some machinery is necessary if the core curriculum is to be delivered.

The Treasury should prove a powerful ally.

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