

CEOL

Prime Minister

To note.

PRIME MINISTER

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18/5

RAISING STANDARDS IN SCHOOLS

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In my minute of 4 May I undertook to give you a note about what we can learn from France and Germany about the school curriculum.

2. One important element of the new policies for making our schools better which you have approved is to improve the school curriculum so that every pupil has a programme throughout his school career which is broad and balanced and includes the basic things needed for our technological society; which is relevant to the adult world into which he is growing eg has a strong practical element; and which takes account of his ability and aptitudes. To that end I am seeking, in consultation with the local authorities and teachers, and with an eye to the views and needs of parents and employers, to achieve broad agreement on:

1. the pattern and content of the 5-16 curriculum as a whole;
2. the objectives for the main subjects - what the pupils should get out of each;
3. the standard to be attained at age 11 and at age 16 by pupils of varying levels of ability.

3. An agreement on these lines would give us a more closely defined and more uniform curriculum than we now have and would have a beneficial influence on teaching approaches and methods. But we should not go so far as to stifle local initiative or discourage flexibility and ingenuity.



4. Greater curricular definition and uniformity would bring us closer to what the French and Germans do. Given our decentralised system, we ought not to go as far as the French with their highly centralised one (which is however, being slowly decentralised). But we should get much nearer to German practice. In West Germany, each Land lays down fairly detailed guidelines for the curriculum of the main types of school. These guidelines do not vary fundamentally from Land to Land. They are in general known to and understood by parents. In some Länder schools have considerable freedom in how they apply the guidelines in detail.

5. In France and Germany pupils are obliged to follow a broad curriculum until at least age 16. They cannot opt out of essential subjects at age 13 as is still possible in England. Our new policies are designed to eliminate that possibility.

6. The French have nothing to teach us on differentiation according to pupils' abilities. They offer the same programme to all pupils in their primary schools and, up to about age 16, to 80% of pupils in their secondary schools, which are now mainly comprehensive. As a result many pupils repeat one or more years, the less able make too little progress at age 16, and the most able are not sufficiently stretched. The Germans who are concerned about the standards achieved by their most able pupils rely for differentiation mainly on a selective system after age 10, which involves three categories of school each catering for a different part of the ability range. As this approach is in general not open to us, we intend to secure proper differentiation in the definition of subject objectives and expected standards of attainment at age 11 and 16+; the latter will be reinforced by the new-style 16+ examinations outlined in my other minute of today's date.

7. Perhaps surprisingly, the French and Germans do not do as well pre-16 as they do post-16 in promoting practical and technical skills. Before age 16 their schools offer most pupils a broad general foundation for acquiring such skills subsequently. But in their teaching approaches there is generally less emphasis



even than the present inadequate emphasis in our schools on the practical applications of subjects and on relating their teaching to the world which the pupils know and will have to face.

8. Teaching approaches, particularly in Germany, have features which our schools will be encouraged to emulate, ~~more~~. For example, there is a healthy emphasis on oral work and on class discussion.

9. At the beginning of 1983 I arranged for a special visit by HMIs and officials to look at French and German secondary schools. At that time I told the then West German Ambassador Herr Rufus what I was doing. He commented 'I will predict what you will find: we teach the average and below average better than you do: and you teach the above average better than we do.' His prediction was borne out by what HMI reported to me.

10. I have made a point of maintaining our understanding of what is happening in French and German school education and will go on doing this, since there are lessons there for us. This applies not only to the school curriculum but to other matters, such as the training and status of teachers.

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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

21 May 1984

The Prime Minister was grateful for and has noted your Secretary of State's two minutes of 17 May about raising standards in schools and the improvements in the 16+ examinations.

(David Barclay)

Miss Elizabeth Hodkinson  
Department of Education and Science

BSS