

# Conclusions and recommendations of the Commons Select Committee on the National Curriculum

## Context

This Report, published on 2 April 2009, is the result of an inquiry undertaken by the Commons Select Committee and prompted by the twentieth anniversary of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

## The National Curriculum

1. The evidence received revealed a consensus that the nature and particularly the management of the National Curriculum is in urgent need of significant reform.
  - Scaling down the National Curriculum
  - Limiting the reach of the National Curriculum
2. They would like to see the National Curriculum underpinned by the principle that it should seek to prescribe as little as possible with decisions made at the lowest appropriate level.
3. In order to keep the amount of prescription through the National Curriculum to an absolute minimum they recommend that a cap is placed on the proportion of teaching time that it accounts for. Their view is that it should be less than half of teaching time.
4. Parents should be provided with a copy of the National Curriculum for their child's Key Stage so that they might be better informed of the curriculum that their child should experience.

## Recent and ongoing reform of the primary and secondary curriculum

5. The very welcome Cambridge Primary Review report on the primary curriculum contains extensive analysis of the problems but has not enough to say about what might be done in practice to address them. The Rose Review and the Cambridge Review both recognise that the primary curriculum is overly full, but neither offers a practical basis that appeals to them for reducing the load. The committee would see greater merit in stipulating a basic entitlement for literacy and numeracy and offering general guidelines on breadth and balance to be interpreted by schools and teachers themselves.
6. They recommend that the Rose Review does not pursue its interim recommendation that entry into reception class in the September immediately following a child's fourth birthday should become the norm.

## Trusting schools

### Extending Academies' freedoms

7. They recommend that the freedoms that Academies enjoy in relation to the National Curriculum be immediately extended to all maintained schools.
8. The roll-out of extended schools will offer all maintained schools more time in the school day in which to deliver the curriculum. They note that no reason had been brought to their attention for the discrepancy between different categories of schools in terms of the processes that they must follow if they wish to extend the school day. The committee believes that the greater freedom that Foundation and Voluntary-Aided schools and Academies enjoy in relation to changing the length of the school day should be immediately granted to all maintained schools. This would offer all maintained schools maximum scope to shape their delivery of the National Curriculum around the needs of their pupils.

### Promoting local ownership of the National Curriculum

9. Further to their *Testing and Assessment* Report they draw the Department's (DCSF) attention to concerns that a system of Single Level Tests linked to targets, and potentially to funding, could further narrow the curriculum as experienced by all or some pupils.
10. The idea that there is one best way to teach is not supported by the research evidence and so should not be the basis for the delivery of the National Curriculum.

11. The committee states that “The Department must not place pressure on schools to follow certain sets of non-statutory guidance, such as it has done in the case of *Letters and Sounds*”. They recommend that the Department send a much stronger message to Ofsted, local authorities, school improvement partners and schools as to the non-statutory nature of National Strategies guidance.

### **Empowering teachers**

#### **Central control and teacher professionalism**

12. They urge the Department to cease presenting the National Strategies guidance as a prop for the teaching profession and to adopt a more positive understanding of how schools and teachers might be empowered in relation to the National Curriculum.

#### **Supporting teachers as researchers and reflective practitioners**

13. They recommend that the Department diverts resources away from the production of guidance to the funding and dissemination of research findings to teachers in the spirit of informing local professional decision-making.

14. They recommend that the Department and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority develop facilities to disseminate research about teaching and support teachers in sharing effective practice.

#### **Supporting local ownership of the National Curriculum**

15. They recommend that both the theory and practice of curriculum design is given a much higher profile within the standards for Qualified Teacher Status.

16. They expect the Department to set out how its role and that of its relevant agencies will change in relation to the National Curriculum over the next five to ten years in order to support the move to a much less prescriptive curriculum and less centrally-directed approach to its delivery.

### **Curriculum coherence**

17. Alongside the extent of central control over the curriculum, their other main concern to emerge from their inquiry was the poor level of continuity and coherence in the current National Curriculum—and across the National Curriculum, Early Years Foundation Stage and 14-19 arrangements.

### **Transforming curriculum reform**

18. Despite the Department's emphasis on pupil voice in schools, nowhere in the evidence submitted to them did they get a sense that the Department particularly concerns itself with how the National Curriculum is experienced by children and young people. If it had, they suggest, it would have tackled the disjunction that children and young people face in their learning as they move from one phase of education to the next. While this matter forms a key strand of the ongoing Rose Review of the primary curriculum, they are not convinced that the Rose Review alone will be able to tackle this enduring problem with the National Curriculum.

19. They recommend that the Department's highest priority be to review the Early Years Foundation Stage, the National Curriculum and 14-19 arrangements as a whole in order to establish a coherent national framework that offers children and young people a seamless journey through their education from 0 to 19.

20. In order to reduce the number of ad hoc changes made to the National Curriculum they recommend that the Department put in place a cycle, of around five years, for curriculum review and reform and avoid initiating additional change outside that cycle. Reviews should scrutinise the Early Years Foundation Stage, National Curriculum and 14-19 arrangements as a continuum, not as discrete 'chunks'.

21. If the National Curriculum is to be managed more proactively and strategically it is essential that the agency with main responsibility for the development of the National Curriculum is truly independent from the Department and carries authority.

22. They recommend that, as with the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency is made independent of Ministers and instead required to report to Parliament through the Select Committee.

**23.** The involvement of the Committee, albeit in an advisory role, in holding pre-appointment hearings with the nominee for the post of Chair of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency will play an important part in maintaining the independence of the Agency from the Government.

### **Establishing an overarching structure for learning 0-19**

**24.** They strongly recommend that an overarching statement of aims for the National Curriculum—encompassing the Early Years Foundation Stage, National Curriculum and 14-19 learners—be introduced, properly embedded in the content of the National Curriculum, in order to provide it with a stronger sense of purpose, continuity and coherence.

**25.** In addition, they recommend that a statement of provision for learners from 0 to 19 is introduced, setting out the fundamental knowledge and skills that young people should have acquired at the end of compulsory education.

**26.** They recommend that the Early Years Foundation Stage is brought within the National Curriculum—and run through the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority rather than, as at present, the Department.

**27.** They suggest that the review and reform of the Early Years Foundation Stage, National Curriculum and 14-19 provision as a continuum and the bringing together of these frameworks underneath an overarching statement of aims represent necessary first steps to improving the continuity and coherence of the learning opportunities presented to children and young people. These changes must be accompanied by improved communication and co-ordination between teachers and practitioners across the different phases of education.