

POLICY WATCH

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The Select Committee publish its recommendations on the National Curriculum

Most countries have one and according to witnesses to this recent Select Committee Inquiry most people recognise the need for one, but 20 years after it was first introduced in this country, the National Curriculum remains a source of fierce debate. This [Report](#) from the DCSF Select Committee which has been looking at the National Curriculum as part of a major review of the landscape reforms brought in under the Education Reform Act 20 years ago, explains why.

Over the years, the National Curriculum has been stretched, squeezed, pulled and squashed more times than the average catwalk contestant. The first nip and tuck happened just four years after the National Curriculum had first been introduced into primary schools when the late Lord Dearing was called in to cut things down to size. He reduced the amount of prescribed content and restricted Key Stage testing to just the core subjects -reputedly the preferred position of Mrs Thatcher. Further changes were introduced under Tony Blair in 1999 and these were followed in quick succession by a battery of adjustments including the introduction of National Strategies, revisions to Key Stage 3 and 4, a new statutory Early Years Foundation Stage and a new 14-19 framework. Even as this particular Report was coming out, final touches were being added to a major review of the primary curriculum, revisions to GCSEs were being completed and further developments happening to 14-19 learning. No wonder the Committee came to the conclusion that *"the secondary curriculum is arguably as complex as it ever was."*

So why are things so 'complex?' The Committee suggest four reasons.

First, the problem of trying to fit a quart into a pint pot. Of course the National Curriculum should change to reflect current needs and interests but what has happened is that as these have come along they have been tipped into the National Curriculum bucket with little poured away instead. Whether it's concerns about teenage pregnancy or lack of financial literacy, plonk it in the National Curriculum. As a result the Curriculum has become in the words of the Committee, *"a potential bloating mechanism."* Indeed, as the Committee noted, *"only last October, just a month after a new National Curriculum came into force, the Dept announced its intention to add a further statutory subject - personal, social and health education. This is in addition to its recent decision to make cookery a compulsory part of the National Curriculum."*

The National Curriculum has thereby become part mirror, reflecting the latest anxieties or concerns that society feels need tackling through schools and part shopping list to which the latest flavour of the day is routinely added. The Committee make a number of recommendations to resolve such over burdening including, adopting a reductionist approach, *"seek to prescribe as little as possible"* and limiting the proportion of time given over to National Curriculum activity; *"our view is that it should be less than half of teaching time."*



Second, *“curriculum coherence”* or lack of. Curriculum reform, the Committee feel, is disjointed and as a result pupils’ experience of the curriculum becomes equally disjointed. There is vision and purpose behind the National Curriculum and at each reform the Government is clear what it is trying to do but too often it’s done in bits, a Rubik Cube twisted at different times, Early Years one time, 14-19 reform another. Nor is it evident that at any time the Dept considers the impact this might have on children and young people, let alone teachers and parents.

The Committee believe that *“in order to reduce the number of ad hoc changes to the National Curriculum, the Dept should put in place a cycle of around 5 years for curriculum review and reform and avoid initiating additional changes outside that cycle.”* It would be nice, but given the creeping politicisation of the curriculum over the last 20 years, it’s hard to see Ministers playing ball. After all, Education Secretaries tend to stay in post on average 2-3 years and each naturally wants to make their mark in that time; who could resist a tweak here, a nudge there?

But it may be possible to bring a bit of order to the whole thing in other ways as the Committee indicate, like bringing the Early Years Foundation Stage into the National Curriculum or adopting the Tomlinson model of an overarching Diploma at 14-19. The Committee also believe that the QCDA, currently being considered under the [Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill 2009](#), should, like its other half, Ofqual, be made independent of Government. The aim being that, as a body outside Government, it could provide more of a moderating influence.

Third, growing interference and prescription. What started out as something intended to offer shape, guidance and equality of opportunity has, in the words of one witness, ended up as *“a totally prescriptive, centrally worked out set of curriculum packages designed for delivery by teachers.”* Schools have been able to disapply from parts of the National Curriculum and seek freedoms to innovate but the procedures in both cases are cumbersome. As the Committee noted, it does seem perverse that while some schools such as Academies, are granted freedoms over the curriculum, other schools are not. The Committee call for a level playing field: all schools obliged to follow the National Curriculum in the core subjects of English, maths, science and ICT but ‘free’ beyond that to tailor the curriculum as long as it meets needs and remains broad and balanced. The difficult question is how to play localism, the application of local choice and ownership, in a way that does not return the curriculum to a patchwork quilt of different hues that dislocate choice and progression.

Fourth, the impact on teaching and learning, teaching to the test, de-skilling the profession and so on. This has already provoked a strong retort from the Dept but the Committee’s conclusion will be recognised by many: *“at times schooling has appeared more of a franchise operation, dependent on a recipe handed-down by Government rather than the exercise of professional expertise by teachers.”* Language is telling here: schools and colleges are now seen as providers; the curriculum something to be delivered rather than taught. Teaching, as the Committee noted, feeds off an evolving pedagogy activated through networks, seminars and official channels such as the Excellence Gateway and Ofsted Reports. More should be done, the Committee believe, through Initial Teacher Training, the sharing of good practice including that from abroad.

After 20 years, nobody wants the National Curriculum to put on any more weight.

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