

2012/4

December 2012

Primary Policy Watch – 2012 round-up

If 2011 was about Michael Gove setting out his stand for education, 2012 has seen a number of key initiatives come to fruition. Primary Policy Watch offers a round-up of some of the key policy events of the year, and looks forward to the next steps in the process of curriculum reform.

Phonics phocus

The emphasis on phonics continued, with the government's match-funding scheme for approved phonics resources and training encouraging many schools to upgrade their phonics provision. Take-up of the scheme was patchy, however, with the government naming and shaming local authorities with low reading results that hadn't taken full advantage of the phonics funding.

2012 also saw the introduction of the controversial Year 1 phonics-based reading test. 58% of children reached the expected standard (reading 32 out of 40 words and non-words correctly). This was widely reported as the failure of 4 in 10 pupils, prompting hand-wringing in equal measure between those who thought this signalled a decline in reading standards and those who were concerned about labelling such young children as failures. The DfE claimed that the test enabled 43% of schools to identify pupils with reading problems of which they had been unaware, but the NAHT countered that it 'is not only a waste of time but can be very damaging indeed for young learners'.

SPAGhetti junction

With phonics in the bag, the DfE turned its attention to the other 'nuts and bolts' of English: spelling, punctuation and grammar (immediately dubbed 'SPAG' by schools across the land). Following Lord Bew's recommendations, writing composition is now subject to teacher assessment only, with the more 'technical' aspects of English to be assessed via a new, externally marked test. The new SPAG test will be introduced from 2013, with the DfE releasing sample questions earlier this month.

What a performance

The Primary performance tables were also released this month. The overall trend was hailed as positive, with a 5% increase in the number of pupils achieving Level 4 or above in both English and maths, and a reduction in the number of schools coming in below the DfE's 'floor target' from 1310 in 2011 to 521 this year.

This picture masked some stark differences between regions, however, a point recently highlighted by Michael Wilshaw. In the highest performing local authority, the City of London, 100% of children reached Level 4 and above in both English and maths, while in the lowest performing, Medway, this figure dropped to 72%.

PIRLS (and TIMMS) of wisdom

If you weren't feeling prodded, poked and examined enough, late 2012 also saw the release of the TIMSS and PIRLS reports. These international research projects take place every four or five years, and compare the attainment of 10 and 14 year olds in maths and science (TIMSS) and of 10 year olds in reading (PIRLS).

In maths, England's performance slipped slightly, from 7th out of 36 in 2007 to 9th out of 50 in 2012. In science, England fell from 7th out of 36 to 15th out of 50, prompting fears that the removal of the science SAT has led to a lack of focus on the subject.

The news from PIRLS was happier, with England rising in reading from 19th out of 45 in 2006 to 11th in 2012. Beneath this relatively strong performance, however, was an undercurrent of concern, with only 26% of pupils positively liking reading, and the learning of 63% of children being limited by a lack of sleep.

Next stop curriculum 2014

Finally, no round-up of 2012 would be complete without a mention of the gathering pace of curriculum reform. Back in June, the DfE released draft Programmes of Study for English, maths and science, setting the direction of travel for curriculum reform. Maths should be more challenging, phonics should be taught fast and first, every Year 4 child should be able to spot a fronted adverbial at 50 paces, and knowledge is king (see [Primary Policy Watch: unpicking the new draft programmes of study](#) for more detail). A full public consultation will take place in early 2013, when the next iteration of the Programmes of Study is released.

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