

Pocket Watch: 'First Steps.' The CBI's School Report

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"Raising the performance of UK schools to match that of Finland in core subjects could have a value of more than £8tr over a child's lifetime"

Introduction

The title of the CBI's [Report](#) on schools published this week is deliberate. 'First Steps' refers both to the CBI's belief that we need to build progressive reform into the education system from almost a child's first steps, "*the very early years open up big differences,*" and to the fact that this Report is intended to be the first step in a programme of reform that the CBI's new employment and skills board will continue to press for. The argument is that since the landmark Callaghan speech of 35 year ago we've had too much tinkering with the education system and subjected the system to a regime of intensive testing and accountability in a quest to prove that things are working. We need to follow the example of other countries, clarify the purpose of education and "*define a new performance standard based on the whole person*"

What are the headline messages?

In many areas the Report echoes familiar concerns, the sense that the education system has become one long conveyor belt, the deadening effect of focusing on narrow targets, the pursuit of accountability at the expense of rounded achievement to name but three. But also there are some interesting messages; here's some of the main ones. First, the need to be a bit clearer about what we're trying to achieve from our education system; aspirational goals are one thing, pragmatic 'guardrails' another, Singapore is cited as an effective example of the latter. Second, the need to harness parental engagement from an early age; the debilitating effects of disadvantage hamper a child and make it hard for them to catch up. Third, decentralising schools is good but needs to be backed up by professional support for heads and teachers. Fourth, the primary national curriculum should be scaled down partly to allow for focus on core requirements and partly to allow for more creative space to help the transition at age 11. Fifth, a review if not a rethink to look at the best forms of provision for 11-14 yr olds where achievement can tail off. Sixth, gradual move from GCSE to a formative assessment system at age 16, with formal core assessments at 14. Seventh, 18 to be seen as the main summative assessment stage with a Tech Bacc model alongside A levels. Eighth, accountability to be in the hands of Ofsted using a more balanced scorecard

So where does this leave the exam system?

We're in the middle of extensive reform at present but essentially the CBI propose a gradual move to a 14-19 system with an EBC model at age 14, formative and more diagnostic assessments between 14 and 18, and a 'gold standard' model at 18 incorporating English and maths, academic and technical qualifications

Some of the recommendations

- "*Development of a clear, widely-owned statement of the outcome that all schools are asked to deliver*"
- "*Ofsted to steward the delivery of such outcomes using a wider range of measures and assessments*"
- "*Greater focus of early years spending on parenting support and childcare provision where ed performance is low*"
- "*Use decentralisation to give teachers greater freedom to tailor their teaching and learning*"
- "*Remove the over-specified national curriculum from primary schools in favour of clear goals on literacy, numeracy, science, computer science*"
- "*Study the routes taken by young people from age 14*" so as to advise on the optimal mix between formative and summative assessment
- "*Move from GCSEs to a more diverse assessment approach by the middle of the decade*"
- "*Move the focus of the exam system to 18 and develop more stretching standards for both academic and vocational A levels + Eng/ma*"



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