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Pocket Watch – Last lap for reform of the National Curriculum ?

Introduction

It seems a long time since Michael Gove first launched the review of the National Curriculum for England one cold, grey morning in January 2011 but it's now moving into the last lap. The first half of this year has seen spirited discussion about individual subject content, the overall balance between knowledge and skills, and the reporting structures of the proposed new Curriculum, and this week the government launched the latest batch of **Papers** setting out the changes it has made in response to such concerns. All being well, consultation will close on this latest, near final draft for all subjects bar KS4 English, maths and science in early August and be available in schools this autumn to help them prepare for what the Prime Minister called this "*revolution in education*" from September 2014

So how do things stand now?

These latest changes follow the consultation on the draft framework published earlier this year. Some changes have been fairly straightforward. Replacing ICT with computing for example was strongly favoured by the industry while 43% of schools in the consultation supported the use of disapplication procedures giving them greater freedoms over teaching and assessment as part of the preparation for the new curriculum. Other changes have been more contentious, for example the removal of level descriptors: "*the current approach can lead teachers to focus on giving pupils the right label rather than setting high expectations.*" This leaves schools developing their own reporting mechanisms just at a time when consultation is due to start on primary accountability and has just finished on secondary. The most extensive changes, however, deal with the concerns raised about subject content particularly in subjects such as Design and Technology, History and Geography, as follows:

- For D/T, where criticisms were that the initial draft content with its use of words such as 'repair' and 'maintenance,' was out of date, unappealing and hardly likely according to Sir James Dyson one of the leading critics, to inspire the next generation of technicians and inventors, there's more emphasis now on problem-solving, industrial processes and high level technical skills using a range of materials from construction to food. The fact that the D and T Association have called these changes "*immense,*" suggests that concerns have now been met
- For History, which often provokes passionate debate and which has done so again this time, the government has made considerable changes. Most of the concerns raised had been about trying to cover too much especially at KS2, focusing too much on our so-called 'island race' to the exclusion of other nations and about the heavy focus on chronology. In response to each of these, some of the content has now been slimmed down and included as optional guidance, additional content on world history has been included and chronology is offered more as a framework than a straitjacket
- For Geography, where concerns were raised about how far climate change had been included, caring for the environment was recognised and scientific processes incorporated, again a number of changes have been made. More explicit references to climate change have been included at KS3, greater emphasis attached to 'locational' geography and scientific principles included to support better understanding of climate change
- Other notable changes include: the provision of spoken language skills for primary English and an emphasis on whole works for KS3 English; greater flexibility over the choice of which foreign language to study at KS2; more demanding requirements for primary maths symbolised by nine years olds having to know their 12x table (currently it's the 10x table by age eleven;) and a strengthening of scientific knowledge as opposed to abstract concepts in science

Does that mean everything is resolved now?

Not completely. Subject content always attracts debate and even with these latest revisions is likely to continue to do so. That apart, arguably five general issues stand out at present

1. The National Curriculum will only apply to maintained state schools not to schools such as Academies and Free Schools which have freedom to operate their own curriculum. This has led some to question why have a National Curriculum at all especially if as Labour have recently proposed, all schools could over time earn a similar freedom. This indeed may well be the last such National Curriculum but for the present as the Secretary of State argued, only a small percentage of primaries, 10% currently, have such freedoms so a national framework remains an essential planning template whatever the type of school
2. Impact on different types of learner. Many people have remained concerned that this more potentially demanding Curriculum could end up excluding more learners especially those with particular needs. This question was raised in the February consultation and the government's response, issued in the form of an Equalities Impact Assessment is basically part carrot, part stick. The carrot is that by slimming things down in most subjects at least, teachers should have more 'freedom' to meet particular needs and the stick is that *"good teachers will always adapt their teaching approach to meet the needs of their pupils"*
3. Timescale. This is a big concern for many in the profession and professional bodies some of whom have referred to the timescale as *"completely unrealistic."* The big problem is that this is just one of a number of extensive changes due for the next few years. Indeed if you add in changes to A levels, GCSEs, vocational qualifications and 'league' tables, all of which are currently being lined up, schools face anything up to four years of continuous change. Little in the government's latest response indicates any change of gear
4. Implementation support. Previous major curriculum reform programmes, going as far back as the introduction of GCSEs in the 1980s, have been accompanied by extensive programmes of support for teachers. That will not happen this time. *"We want to move away from large-scale, centralised training programmes which limit schools' autonomy and towards a market-based approach."* The government is not backing off completely, national Centres such as those for Science and maths, the National College, teaching schools and National Leaders of Education are all expected to play a part. Equally Awarding Organisations, subject bodies, local authorities and others will also provide significant professional development and resource support but it will place considerable demands on schools as they seek to determine the most appropriate form of support for them
5. Level descriptors. By removing levels and level descriptors, has the government removed the basic gridirons that hold the structure together and allow for regular reporting of progress? Many teachers are concerned about this particularly as they will be accountable for monitoring and reporting on their own pupil progress. The government has stuck with its belief that schools are better judges of how best to monitor and record pupil progress, believing as Michael Gove argued that national descriptors are *"opaque and confusing"*

What happens next?

Consultation closes on these latest changes on 8 August and then the final version will be published this autumn. Consultation on final drafts for KS4 English, maths and science will also follow in the autumn. Preparation for the changes will then move ahead also this autumn as schools disapply statutory requirements in many subjects and start to determine the professional support and resources they will need. As for implementation, this will start in Sept 2014 and run through progressively to Sept 2016

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