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Pocket Watch – What’s in store for schools in 2014?

Introduction

2014 sees the fourth anniversary of the publication of the Michael Gove blueprint for reform of the school and qualification systems. Some of the details and timings may have changed in the interim but DfE policy remains firmly fixated on implementing as much of what’s in the eight chapters of the 2010 Schools White Paper as possible. *"Tweaking things at the margin is not an option,"* the Prime Minister wrote in his Foreword to that Paper, a concept that many would recognise some perhaps more ruefully than others. In his Autumn Statement last month, the Chancellor praised the Education Secretary for *"doing more to transform school standards and raise the aspirations of pupils from the poorest families than anyone else who has done the job before him"* and 2014 is likely to see further 'doing more' particularly to the qualification system, accountability arrangements and the school system. It was no coincidence that all three areas provoked considerable discussion when Michael Gove appeared before the Education Committee just before Christmas and if they are to be implemented from 2015 on, 2014 remains the year when the building work needs to be completed.

The Year Ahead

To take qualification reform first, 2014 will see the revised National Curriculum start to come in, the first wave of new GCSEs and A/AS levels developed and teaching start for the first Applied General and Tech Level qualifications for the 2016 performance tables. Particular areas of interest at the start of the year include the so-called 'public conversation' promised by Ofqual on standard setting for the first new GCSEs along with further consultation on the structure, assessment and position of other GCSEs.

At A' level, Professor Smith is reconvening the subject review panels so that they can draft final changes to subject content following last autumn's consultation. For primary schools the emphasis will be on preparing for the introduction of the revised National Curriculum this autumn when they will have two years to prepare the first cohort for the *"more demanding"* secondary ready tests.

And running through all stages of learning are the continuing concerns about performance levels in English and maths, highlighted again in the recent PISA and Ofsted Reports and which the Government will continue to prioritise throughout 2014. The most recent development here was the announcement at the end of last year about creating 30 new maths hubs to support the implementation of the new national curriculum maths from Sept 2014 and new GCSE maths from 2015.

On accountability, 2013 saw a sweep of consultations on proposed changes at primary, secondary and post-16 level and while the general thrust is now clear in the shape of more sophisticated and rounded profiles of school and pupil performance, exploiting the surge in data now available, some of the detail remains to be filled in.

For primary schools where Government confirmation is still awaited on new accountability arrangements due from 2016, concerns remain about how a scaled score might operate if at all and how pupil progress will be managed and reported. The Government is setting up a small Innovation Fund to help schools develop 'innovative approaches' on assessment with expressions of interest due appropriately perhaps by Valentine's Day. More immediately many primary schools may be looking out for guidance from the NAHT's 'Commission on assessment without Levels' due out shortly. Other issues likely to interest primary schools in the coming months include the potential for re-introducing external testing at age 7 as raised by the Chief Inspector in his Annual Report last month, the impact of a proposed raised floor standard (*"all schools should aim for at least 85% of their pupils to reach the secondary ready standard"*) and the effect of dovetailing ambition around secondary readiness.

For secondary schools where new accountability arrangements are also due to come in from 2016, the key area of interest at present is the Progress 8 measure, confirmed by the Government as a core measure in a Statement last October but subject to further modelling and technical development this spring. As for 16-19 year olds where the lists of vocational qualifications approved for 2016 tables were published last month, Government response to the earlier consultation is also due soon.

The third area likely to attract considerable interest in this pre-election year is school system reform. Over the last four years, the Government has overseen the creation of 3,500 schools as academies and free schools and more are due to be announced shortly. Michael Gove remains keen to further diversify the school system and extend autonomy where possible but the policy has been controversial and debate is heating up about how things might change if at all after the general election.

Michael Gove has moved to establish what he's called "*a long term architecture for a new system*" essentially ceding supervisory powers to a new tier of regional chancellors working with designated school boards. Job applications for the eight new regional chancellors went out last month and the Dept clearly hopes to have the system up and running this year and certainly before the 2015 election.

The new school system raises some difficult issues for the Opposition and we've already had one leading academy sponsor claim he'd walk away if a change in Government brought a change in ownership. Tristram Hunt, Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, has tried to build on his predecessor's plans for parent-led academies by identifying three tests that would apply: such schools would have to be in places of need, have properly qualified teachers and have a clear system of financial accountability.

Further thinking may follow the outcomes of the Blunkett Review into local authority arrangements due early this spring but another interesting factor may be the role of academies in school improvement. This was an area that the Education Committee looked into as part of its Inquiry into school collaboration last year and intends to investigate further this year looking for example at what role academies "*play or should play*" in the new school landscape.

Elsewhere, school funding reform of course has been put off until after the general election but there are plenty of other topics to keep an eye on in 2014 including: the long-running saga of careers guidance and potential extension of the National Careers activity; the equally long-running struggle to close the gap for disadvantaged pupils along with the impact of the pupil premium and universal free school meals; the first year of a performance-related pay for teachers, the subject of a recent Report by the think tank Policy Exchange; school choice and the provision of places and last but certainly not least, school improvement and the development of a self-improving system. Plenty, as indicated.

Some useful dates

- 2013 Performance Tables published (Jan 2014)
- Further round of academies and free schools announced (Jan 2014)
- Consultation closes on regulatory requirements for A levels (Jan 17 2014)
- Consultation closes on proposed Programmes of Study for KS4 English and maths (Feb 3 2014)
- Technical Guidance published for new 16-18 core maths qualification (March 2014)
- EFA confirmation of 16-19 national budget and student numbers for 2014/15 (March 2014)
- Government response on primary and 16-19 accountability arrangements (Spring 2014)

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Year Ahead for Schools Jan 2014