Speech

The importance of the curriculum

From: Department for Education and Nick Gibb MP
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Nick Gibb addresses the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) event 'Taking ownership of your curriculum: a national summit'.

Thank you for inviting me to join the ASCL curriculum summit today.

Developing a well-thought-through, challenging school curriculum is central to the running of any school, and this is a topic I am always keen to discuss.

Schools are making significant changes to their curriculum to prepare for new examinations. Next month, primary pupils will for the first time sit tests assessing them on the new national curriculum. New GCSEs in maths and English are already being taught, and will be examined for the first time next year. And this September, secondary schools will see the first teaching of 20

new GCSEs, and 11 new A levels.

The subject of school curriculum is also timely from a historical perspective. This year marks the 40th anniversary of Jim Callaghan's 'Ruskin speech', a landmark speech in which Callaghan in many ways set the direction of reform for the next 4 decades.

Back in 1976, Callaghan alluded to the significant concerns that existed amongst parents and employers about the form many school curriculum had taken during the 'experimental' atmosphere of the mid-1970s. He suggested that there is, I quote, a "strong case for the so-called 'core curriculum' of basic knowledge" in schools.

In doing so, Callaghan was making a bold foray into an area of school life which had been dubbed the 'secret garden', to which educationists had previously been granted exclusive access, and politicians and the public had never seen fit to tread.

But, as Callaghan said at the time, £6 billion is spent every year on education, so in his view public interest in how this money is spent was, I quote, "strong and legitimate". I believe the same is true today, though the figure of overall expenditure rather higher.

The government's curriculum reforms, which began in 2010, have been a lengthy and thoroughgoing process, but necessarily so. Many changes which began 6 years ago are only now hitting the ground in schools. With that in mind, today is an opportune moment to revisit the original justification for these reforms.

In 2010, 64% of pupils achieved a level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of primary school, but we were continually hearing from secondary schools that even pupils who arrived brandishing their level 4s were not, in fact, sufficiently prepared. Pupils unable to write cogently, or perform basic procedures in mathematics, were being judged as having met the expected standard aged 11.

At GCSE, 55% of pupils achieved the 'minimum standard' of 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics.

However, this number masked a multitude of deficiencies. The design of performance measures encouraged pupils to enter ‘equivalent qualifications’ in less academically demanding subjects, which employers told us they didn’t value. And there was widespread suspicion of grade inflation within the profession and amongst employers.

Having compared the reported improvement in GCSE results to an annual benchmarked aptitude test, Professor Coe concluded that the question, I quote, “is not whether there has been grade inflation, but how much”.

Lastly, there was a widespread feeling that qualifications, in particular GCSEs, did not represent the mastery of a sufficiently challenging body of subject knowledge. Did a good GCSE in history represent a basic understanding of the chronology of Britain’s past? Did a good GCSE in MFL mean a degree of fluency in the language? Did a good GCSE in English literature mean a pupil had read widely from the corpus of great works?

We all know the cliché of older generations asking their children, or grandchildren, ‘don’t they teach you that at school?’ We were determined to allow the children of tomorrow to answer such inquisitions, ‘yes, in fact, they do’.

Before 2010, pupils’ future life chances were being sacrificed for an illusion of success, which served short-term political expediency. Our objective whilst in government from that date onwards has always been to help build an education system that instead is designed for the long-term benefit of pupils.

More challenging standards may mean a temporary drop in the reported success rate of pupils - for example for those taking their key stage 2 national assessments in 2 weeks’ time. But this is something that we are unafraid to oversee. Because let me ask you: what is a more responsible political decision? To be realistic about the level of numeracy or literacy a child has achieved at the end of primary school, and increase the likelihood that any shortfall is addressed; or to tell a child that they have reached an adequate level of literacy and numeracy for their age, when their secondary school will state they have

not?

You do not need me to tell you that the implementation of the new key stage 1 and key stage 2 tests has been bumpy, and I and the department are more than willing to accept that some things could have been smoother. The current frameworks for teacher assessment, for example, are interim, precisely because we know that teething problems that exist in this phase of reform need to leave room for revision.

But against those who attack the underlying principle of these reforms, I stand firm in my belief that they are right and necessary. Our new tests in grammar, punctuation and spelling have been accused by many in the media of teaching pupils redundant or irrelevant information. “Completely inappropriate” was the verdict of one union general secretary interviewed on Radio 4 last week.

One fundamental outcome of a good education system must be that all children, not just the offspring of the wealthy and privileged, are able to write fluent, cogent and grammatically correct English. This is the sort of written language which tutors expect to see in university essays and employers expect to see in a covering letter. All children, irrespective of birth or background, should be able to write prose where verbs agree with subjects, commas separate independent clauses, and pronouns agree in number with the nouns to which they refer.

Now, for children from homes where parents read and share books with their family, it may be possible over time to assimilate such grammatical rules indirectly. But for a great number of children in our schools, the easiest way for a teacher to explain to their pupils the rules that govern our language is to ensure that both have a shared vocabulary of grammatical terms. And when it comes to learning a foreign language, the benefit of having a shared vocabulary of grammatical terms is, again, enormous.

And, of course, the learned op-eds which attack the addition of grammar to the national curriculum are always grammatically correct - why the writers would want to take from children the

ability to write with the accuracy that they consistently display is beyond me. It often occurs to me that grammatical knowledge, as with knowledge more generally, is much like money: only those who have it can be complacent enough to deny its importance.

This is also why we are undertaking the process of enhancing the subject content of our GCSEs. The new mathematics GCSE introduces more demanding content, such as ensuring pupils work with percentages higher than 100%, and use inequality notation to specify truncation or rounding errors.

Teachers are also half way through teaching the new English literature GCSE. I recently read a blog by an English teacher about planning for the new exam, in which he wrote, “I’m not afraid to say that, in our humble little department, we’re rather enjoying it”. His English department had been writing long-term plans to teach new texts: ‘Lord of the Flies’, ‘A Christmas Carol’, ‘Macbeth’ and a number of poems.

The texts that awarding organisations are offering for the new GCSE show a rich and rewarding span of literature old and new, from ‘Animal Farm’ to ‘Anita and Me’, Charlotte Bronte to Kazuo Ishiguro. In 2010, 90% of pupils studying for an English literature GCSE read, as their only text, the same short novella. Such narrowing of the GCSE curriculum is no longer possible.

The aforementioned blog was titled, ‘The New English GCSEs: a pleasure, not a chore’, and this is the spirit in which I hope that other new GCSEs are taken on in schools.

Geography teachers will teach the geography of the country we live in and the world in greater depth to their pupils, and carry out at least 2 pieces of fieldwork outside the classroom. Science teachers will address topics from the cutting edge of their subject - such as the human genome in biology, and nanoparticles in chemistry.

The new computer science GCSE will require students to understand mathematical principles and concepts such as data representation, Boolean logic and different data types. Students

will also have to understand the components of computer systems, and write and refine programs.

In history, teachers can break away from the previous diet of predominantly 20th-century history that pupils have commonly studied at GCSE for 2 decades. History teachers with a passion for the medieval period can now teach in-depth studies of the Norman Conquest or Edward I. Those teachers with a passion for the early modern can choose between Spain and the 'New World', or the Restoration.

I am pleased to say that in all of the new GCSE and A level subjects, Ofqual has accredited at least one exam board qualification. I am also delighted that high-quality GCSEs and A levels in a range of community languages, such as Panjabi, Portuguese and Japanese, will continue. This comes as a result of government action and the commitment from those exam boards who have worked with us to protect these languages.

Of course, planning for these new examinations is placing a significant workload on teachers for the next 2 years. But as workload burdens go, I hope that secondary school teachers will see this as a chance to re-engage with the subject they love, the subject that they went into teaching to communicate.

In addition, a host of reforms that we have pursued since 2010 have been explicitly geared towards reducing extraneous workload burdens for teachers, freeing them to focus on the areas of school life, like the curriculum, that really matter. It is no longer compulsory to write a SEF for Ofsted; the inspectorate no longer require individual lesson plans during inspections; and we have removed 21,000 pages of unnecessary guidance for schools, reducing the volume by 75%, and centralising all that remains in one place on the GOV.UK website.

In addition, the independent workload reports which were published last month offer clear and constructive guidance for schools and for government, to ensure that such burdens reduce further.

The reformed performance measures which coincide with the

new GCSEs will free teachers' time to value the progress of every pupil individually, whether they are on the cusp of achieving a C or a new grade 5 or striving to reach an A* or a new grade 8 or 9.

On the topic of performance measures, there have been concerns amongst ASCL members about our aspiration that, in time, 90% of pupils will be entered for the EBacc. And I understand why these concerns exist. The key concern appears to be the challenge of teaching modern foreign languages to a much larger proportion of pupils, in terms of both recruitment of teachers and achieving success for lower attaining pupils.

There is work afoot on both fronts to tackle these concerns. We are in the early stages of developing a range of programmes to boost the number of teachers recruited to teach foreign languages in our schools. And I am delighted that today the Teaching Schools Council announced their forthcoming review into how foreign languages are taught in secondary schools. Led by former ASCL President Ian Bauckham, this report will look at rigorous research and international evidence, and provide schools across the country with thought-provoking, practical advice on how to pursue the most effective method for teaching foreign languages to their pupils.

Many have challenged the fundamental premise of the EBacc performance measure, arguing that a core academic curriculum up to the age of 16 is not suitable for all pupils. This is a claim with which I cannot agree. A tacit snobbery about 'kids like these' - which so often means kids from poorer homes - can lie behind such claims. Indeed, research by the Sutton Trust has revealed that high-achieving pupils of precisely the same starting point at secondary schools are significantly less likely to be entered into the EBacc if they are on free school meals. In 2015, 19% of pupils in Knowsley were entered for the EBacc, compared with 58.9% of pupils in Barnet.

An academic education is the entitlement of every child, irrespective of birth or background. All school leavers should be able to partake in intelligent conversation, and to do so children need to be given a good level of cultural literacy. This should be

seen as a foundational purpose of any school.

It is the luxury of living in today's world that there is no rush to start studying for the workplace. All pupils can be afforded the time and opportunity to be initiated into the great conversations of humankind, and develop an intellectual hinterland which will last them a lifetime.

In his Ruskin speech, Callaghan attacked the view that lower attaining pupils should be fitted with, I quote, "just enough learning to earn their living in the factory". His retort was that all schools should, I quote, "equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in their society".

The same mission lies behind the EBacc policy. A child will almost certainly end up working in a job far removed from the curriculum content that they studied at school. But to limit the work of school to the world of work is depressingly reductive. Adults do not just work: they also read, converse, travel, vote and participate in other processes of democratic life. Just because someone goes on to work in a technical or scientific field, it does not mean they should not enjoy great literature, understand the history of their own country, or be able to communicate in a language other than their own.

All children can rise to this challenge. The structural reforms undertaken by this government have created extraordinary school success stories, which force all of us to revise our expectations about what children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, can achieve.

King Solomon Academy sits in one of the most disadvantaged boroughs of London for child poverty - 44% of its pupils are eligible for free school meals - just over 3 times the national average. Yet last year, 77% of their pupils achieved the English Baccalaureate - compared to a national figure of 24%. The Tauheedul Islam Girls High School in Blackburn has a higher than average proportion of disadvantaged pupils, and 95% of its pupils speak English as a second language. Yet last year, 74% of their pupils achieved the EBacc.

Lastly, I would like to talk briefly about the importance of focusing on curriculum as a means of school improvement. Many during Callaghan's time referred to the curriculum as the 'secret garden' for policy makers, but I think that the curriculum has also in recent history been something of a 'secret garden' in schools - an issue which is seen as slightly peripheral when it comes to driving improvement.

I am delighted to see how many schools are now thinking about how to devise a curriculum that consistently challenges their pupils, and does not allow a single year to be wasted.

Ark Schools, which has been devising a mathematics curriculum to be taught in all its schools based on the mastery principles of south Asian countries. Harris Academies and the Inspiration Trust have both appointed teachers to work across their schools in certain subjects, driving improvements on the quality of curriculum taught to their pupils.

Last year, a think tank called the Center for American Progress published a report entitled '[The hidden value of curriculum reform]', which showed that adopting new curriculum resources is an inexpensive, effective and currently under-recognised means of improving pupil outcomes.

Their claim was based on an analysis of 4 elementary school mathematics curricula, conducted by the US Department of Education in 2011. The most successful curriculum in boosting pupil outcomes was Saxon math, a 'back to basics' approach which blends teacher-directed instruction of new material with daily recap and practice (much like the 'mastery' principles of mathematics teaching that we are currently spreading through our 35 maths hubs).

The Center for American Progress report created a minor tremor on Twitter thanks to the claim that - compared to other school improvement policies - adopting an effective school curriculum such as Saxon maths has almost 40 times the average cost-effectiveness ratio.

Due to the increased challenge of national examinations, and the

new degree of innovation occurring in schools and academy trusts, I believe the conversation about curriculum taking place today is of a higher quality than at any time in the past. And this is a conversation that should lie at the heart of any successful school.

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Department for Education

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