

National Association for Primary Education

Response to the draft Programmes of Study

This response draws on four of the key principles put forward by the Expert Group.

The new National Curriculum will be developed in line with the principles of freedom, responsibility and fairness – to raise standards for all children ensuring that they have the opportunity to acquire a core of knowledge in the key subject disciplines.

The content of our National Curriculum should compare favourably with curricula in the highest performing jurisdictions.

Schools should be given greater freedom over the curriculum.

It is the Association's view that the draft PoS fails to meet these principles.

1. Raising standards for all children

International comparisons have shown with absolute clarity that our levels of attainment are lowered by a long tail of underachievement which is highly correlated with disadvantage in home background both in terms of poverty and attitude. The proportion of children not meeting the expected level in core skills, as many as one in three disadvantaged children, matches the proportion who receive free meals. Successive governments have endeavoured, so far without any real success, to help schools to close this gap already identifiable by the age of three and which widens as children grow older through the school system.

It is important to note the findings of the authoritative Cambridge Primary Review.

With regard to the core of English, mathematics and science, "There was a further finding of some importance concerning the spread of scores for English pupils compared with other countries. In all three subjects the range of attainment from the lowest 5 per cent to the highest 5 per cent in England was among the very largest of all countries. This wide gap was present in earlier pre 1980s, surveys and persisted as a feature in all international surveys since. **In the PIRLS study, the highest 5 per cent of pupils scored more highly than the highest 5 per cent in any country. This was also true for the higher scoring 50 per cent when compared with some other countries with a similar overall score. But the lowest 5 per cent scored lower than many other countries with a similar overall score. There is evidence from the PISA surveys that the difference increases as pupils get older. In the 2006 PISA survey the spread of 15 year olds' scores for England was the largest among 20 OECD countries**". The persistence of this wide range of attainment since the introduction of the national curriculum and SATs-based targets suggests that these have done little to raise the performance of our lowest attaining children. (CPR final report p 334)

Our most able children are the best in the world but at the other end of the spectrum of ability there is persistent failure which the new PoS must seek to remedy.

2. The draft proposals

The secretary of State has affirmed that “there will be a relentless focus on ensuring that all pupils grasp key curriculum content” (Letter to Tim Oates, 11th June 2012). Yet the proposals merely embody higher political expectations and thus higher expected performance at the end of year 6. Undoubtedly this will result in yet more pupils recording failure as they embark on the secondary stage of their education. The draft Programmes of Study will require teachers to work even harder as they strive to cover more challenging content. But by targeting all the children as if they share the same readiness to learn the PoS fail completely to tackle the great weakness in our school system, the children who, shaped by the circumstances of their life, find learning difficult. There will be even less time to revisit and reinforce poorly grasped skills and to strengthen the understanding of children who lack educational advantage.

The overcrowding and narrowing of the primary curriculum will be further exacerbated by the specification of core subject content year by year. This coupled with the national assessment of core subjects and a rigorous inspection regime which too often focuses on test results will lead not only to an increase in teaching for the test but also to an even greater neglect of the wider curriculum. Inevitably there will be a lack of time to devote to meeting the needs of children who learn only with difficulty. Our schools deserve more than a test driven national curriculum. The most serious weakness of education in England and Wales will remain not only unconsidered but will be worsened.

The Secretary of State is determined that all children should grasp key curriculum content. We share that determination, there is not a single primary teacher who does not want his or her pupils to succeed. But the tightly prescribed Programmes of Study reveal all too clearly that teachers are not trusted sufficiently, not only to challenge and realise the achievements of our most able pupils but also to work hard and well with children of all abilities. That lack of trust has had a damaging impact on the morale of many teachers who have come to expect only criticism and denigration of their professional training and experience.

There has to be consideration of the young children who will be taught the core subject content. The higher expected performance which will be demanded of them must be balanced against the nature of childhood in the UK shown by international studies. In 2007 Unicef looked at 21 economically advanced countries and compared 40 indicators that constituted wellbeing, among them education and the children’s feelings about their lives. At the bottom of the league table was the UK. Our pupils in their primary schools were the unhappiest in the industrialised world. In

2009 the Children's Society Good Childhood Inquiry found a significant increase in the number of children suffering from conduct, behavioural and emotional problems. One in ten children currently has a clinically diagnosed mental health issue and the conclusion of the inquiry was that half a million children across the UK were unhappy with their lives. The draft Programmes of Study must not add to the pressure experienced by many children and their teachers. Indeed it must lessen the pressure through teaching which is freer of outside constraints so enabling greater fulfilment in learning and the achievement of improved standards.

3. The National Association for Primary Education recommends that **the draft Programmes of Study be slimmed down and matched more appropriately to the majority of primary pupils** before public consultation begins. **The core curriculum should be set out as content to be taught throughout the six years of primary education.**

There should be no specified content relevant to a school year or key stage. **Teachers should be trusted to meet the learning needs of all children** from the least able to the most able. Attainment targets specifying learning outcomes should be delineated as a continuum. However it should not be expected that children will progress by meeting targets sequentially in increasing order of difficulty. Much learning of core subjects is not linear in nature.

Primary schools enjoy a high level of support provided by parents and the community they serve. There is constant accountability. Only by giving teachers greater freedom to meet the individual needs of children and trusting them to do so in partnership with parents will we begin to remedy the serious weakness present in the school system.

In the summer of 1989 speaking about the growing number of young people not in education or training, Michael Gove, then shadow schools secretary, said, "Far too many of these young people have been caught in the long tail of underachievement in the education system which is concentrated in the poorest areas." Now in office the Secretary of State can help us put things right.