

The English National Curriculum: A Landmark in Educational Reform

British educators, who once viewed the advent of the National Curriculum with apprehension, now embrace its guarantee of breadth and balance for all schools.

The British education system, and those managing it, used to be guilty of a strong traditional insularity. British educators considered the British system exceptional—and superior—perhaps a model for others to follow, but one which could benefit little from learning about systems abroad. That position has changed dramatically in the past decade, partly because of a developing European consciousness, but principally because we have come to recognize that there is a great deal to be learned from other countries' experiences. The languages, structures, and delivery systems may be different, but the issues are identical.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 reflects the international nature of the reform agenda. It is the longest, most complex, and most fundamental piece of legislation in British educational history, but its principal themes will be very familiar to you: higher standards of educational achievement in the nation's schools, more rigorous assessment and recording of students' work, a closer partnership with parents and employers, a broader and better balanced curriculum, much greater opportunities for the local management of schools, more community involvement and parental choice, and even the opportunity for public elementary and high schools

to opt out of the local school system and become funded directly by the federal government.

A Massive Change

The National Curriculum is perhaps the most important element in this huge package of reforms. It represents a massive change in the United Kingdom. For the first time ever, all public elementary and high schools are required to follow a common curriculum, prescribed in law and set out in a statutory order for each of the 10 foundation subjects: English, mathematics, science, technology, a modern foreign language, history, geography,

art, music, and physical education. Schools are also obliged by law to teach religious education and to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, in order to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development of students and prepare them for the opportunities and responsibilities of adult life.

Many educators in Britain viewed the advent of the national curriculum with considerable apprehension. Initially there was considerable resistance even to the idea. Over the last 18 months, however, there has been a dramatic change in attitude, and few people now disagree with the basic

Photograph by Jennifer Baum



concept. There are, of course, legitimate concerns about issues such as overcrowding and overloading the curriculum, teacher training and recruitment, testing and record-keeping, the provision of adequate specialist resources, and continuity post-16. There are added difficulties because the new curriculum is being introduced incrementally between 1989 and 1993; first, English, mathematics, and science; then technology; then modern languages; and so on. It is rather like building a jigsaw puzzle one piece at a time, without a clear picture of the complete image. At the same time, a single implementation date would have been completely impracticable. Furthermore, the phased approach does give us the opportunity to iron out difficulties, train and support teachers, and coordinate the different subjects and cross-curricular themes.

There are many challenges in defining the national curriculum—in describing the skills, knowledge, and understanding that each child is expected to develop in each subject area at each stage of schooling and in determining how they should be as-

sessed and recorded. In particular, it is already clear that some of the early proposals on testing were far too complicated and that we need an imaginative reappraisal of curriculum organization and testing for 14- to 16-year-olds. The national curriculum sits very uneasily with our traditional system of external examinations.

An Early Welcome

Nevertheless, the early implementation of the national curriculum has won wide public and political support. Parents and students welcome the guarantee of breadth and balance, the introduction of clear expectations according to age and ability, and the reduction of the lottery element in choosing a school. Teachers welcome the structured approach, especially the clearer progression and continuity between phases, which will improve communications between teachers

and students, school and school, schools and parents.

The response of those in the teaching profession, though naturally they are overstretched, apprehensive, and at times bewildered, has been positive, imaginative, and constructive. What was feared as a straitjacket and a threat to cherished professional ideals has been recognized as a stimulus for curriculum debate and an opportunity to win back public and political confidence. We will strive to ensure that the national curriculum becomes an entitlement for all young people to celebrate. □

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