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Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

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FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

M A Pattison Esq
Private Secretary
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4 January 1980

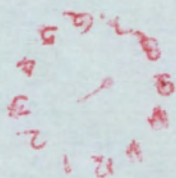
Dear Mike,

The Prime Minister may be interested to see the attached copy of the DES/Welsh Office consultative document "A framework for the school curriculum".

This will form part of the basis for the discussions outlined in the Report on local education authority arrangements for the school curriculum, which was published in the autumn of last year.

Yours ever,

R J GREEN
Private Secretary



74 JAN 1980

Department of Education and Science
Welsh Office

A framework for the school curriculum

Proposals for consultation
by the Secretaries of State
for Education and Science
and for Wales

January 1980

FOREWORD BY THE SECRETARIES OF STATE

In the report on the Circular 14/77 review of local authority arrangements for the school curriculum, published in November 1979, we announced our intention of seeking a national consensus on a desirable framework for the school curriculum. This document sets out preliminary views on the form that framework should take and the ground it should cover. The emphasis is on issues and aspects of the curriculum of importance at local authority level. HM Inspectors' contribution to the debate is published as 'A View of the Curriculum' in their 'Matters for Discussion' series.

We shall be discussing these ideas with the major interested parties within and beyond the education service during the early months of this year. Comments will be welcome from all concerned. Our intention is that the consultations should lead to the preparation of a revised version of this paper providing guidance for local education authorities, schools and teachers.

MARK CARLISLE
NICHOLAS EDWARDS

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Introduction

1. The legal responsibility for the curriculum is laid down, in broad terms, in the Education Acts. The Secretaries of State believe that these statutory provisions are sound and do not intend to change them. But there is an accumulation of evidence, reinforced by the replies to DES Circular 14/77 (WO 185/77) and by the two surveys of primary and secondary education carried out by HM Inspectors, that there is a need to review the way these responsibilities are exercised. There are important differences from school to school and area to area, and in some cases the way in which responsibilities are discharged – or have been allowed to go by default – does not contribute as it should either to the efficiency of the schools or to their responsiveness to national needs. Some stock-taking in these respects is particularly appropriate at a time when Parliament is considering legislation dealing with the composition of governing bodies of schools.

2. As made clear in the report on the Circular 14/77 review of local authority curricular arrangements, the duty laid on Ministers by the Education Acts to promote the education of the people of England and Wales

“must involve an overall view of the content and quality of education seen from the standpoint of national policies and needs as well as the resources devoted to it. The Secretaries of State do not seek to determine in detail what the schools should teach or how it should be taught; but they have an inescapable duty to satisfy themselves that the work of the schools matches national needs. This task cannot be undertaken from the centre alone. The Government must bring together the partners in the education service and the interests of the community at large; and with them seek an agreed view of the school curriculum which would take account of the range of local needs and allow for local developments, drawing upon the varied skills and experience which all those concerned with the service can contribute.

The Education Acts lay the responsibility of providing efficient and sufficient primary and secondary education to meet the needs of their areas firmly on local education authorities. As with central Government, this implies a concern by authorities with the content and quality of education as well as with the facilities which they provide. To fulfil their responsibilities effectively within any nationally agreed framework authorities must exercise leadership and interpret national policies and objectives in the light of local needs and circumstances.....

At the heart of the system are the individual schools. Their role is vital, both in contributing to the formulation of agreed local policies, and in translating these into curricular content in the light of particular needs and circumstances. Existing articles of government for secondary schools commonly delegate to the governors ‘the general direction of the conduct and curriculum of the school’, although curricular matters are often in practice devolved upon the head teacher and staff. Whatever the formal responsibilities of governing bodies, there should always be the closest consultation and co-operation between the governors, head teacher and staff.”

3. The provision made by local education authorities for schools, in terms of buildings and equipment, teaching and other staff, teaching and learning resources and other support services, including teachers' centres and in-service training arrangements, has inevitable consequences for the curriculum that can be offered by the schools. Indeed this provision, and its deployment, has its justification in the curriculum and should be determined with curricular policies in mind. At the same time curricular policies, and their costs, must be decided in the context of the resources available for public expenditure as a whole and, within that, for education. These issues are of particular importance at the present time, because falling school rolls and the need to limit public expenditure make it the more important to establish priorities for the resources that are available and to redeploy those resources where it would be advantageous to do so. It is also important to recognise that some desirable aims may, because they depend on the total level of resources, take time to achieve.

4. The Secretaries of State consider that each education authority should have a clear and known policy for the curriculum offered in its schools; be aware at any time of the extent to which schools are able, within the available human and material resources, to make curriculum provision consistent with that policy; and, in consultation with teachers in the schools and within the resources available, plan future developments accordingly.

5. Authorities need to consider, and subsequent sections of this paper discuss, the educational aims which the school curriculum should seek to match; the responsibility of individual schools to articulate their own aims and assess the extent to which they are being achieved; the extent to which some key subjects should be regarded as essential components of the curriculum for all pupils; and ways in which the curriculum, whatever subject structure may be adopted, should seek to prepare pupils for employment and adult responsibilities in society and to provide a sound basis for continued education. The emphasis is on the period of compulsory education. Examinations for older pupils, and the curricular needs which determine the patterns these examinations should take, are currently under separate consideration.

6. Whatever the outcome of this work, however, the Secretaries of State consider that local education authorities should ensure that schools and further education colleges co-operate whenever such co-operation will lead to more effective use of resources and improve the curricular opportunities available to pupils.

The aims of school education

7. Schools are likely to be more effective in achieving their curricular aims if these aims are clearly set out in writing, are generally known and accepted by staff and pupils, and are systematically pursued through curriculum organisation and day-to-day teaching. The aims must be related to the age of the pupils and local circumstances, and interpreted in more specific objectives for groups of pupils at different stages. Schools should also review from time to time the extent to which their aims and objectives are appropriate and are being achieved.

8. It is not difficult to articulate broad aims for schools in a form acceptable to most people. Few people would dissent from the proposition that schools should help pupils to develop lively, enquiring minds, for example, or that they should help pupils to learn to

use language effectively. It is much more difficult to express in concise form a set of aims to comprehend the whole range of desirable school curricular activity. Any attempt at such an exposition may be most valuable as an indication of the values against which any substantial element of a school curriculum may be tested, rather than as a checklist of items which should be found within it.

9. A possible list, which draws heavily on that set out in 'Education in Schools' (Cmnd 6869), is:

- (i) to help pupils develop lively, enquiring minds, the ability to question and argue rationally and to apply themselves to tasks, and physical skills;
- (ii) to help pupils acquire knowledge and skills relevant to adult life and employment in a fast-changing world;
- (iii) to help pupils to use language and number effectively;
- (iv) to instil respect for religious and moral values, and tolerance of other races, religions, and ways of life;
- (v) to help pupils understand the world in which they live, and the inter-dependence of individuals, groups and nations;
- (vi) to help pupils appreciate human achievements and aspirations.

The list is closely related to development of body, mind and spirit; and to the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding. It also has much in common with the suggestion put forward by HM Inspectorate, in 'Curriculum 11-16' published in 1977, that the curriculum during the period of compulsory education should be concerned with introducing pupils to eight areas of experience: the aesthetic and creative, the ethical, the linguistic, the mathematical, the physical, the scientific, the social and political, and the spiritual.

10. There is plenty of scope for debate about priorities within lists of this kind, about desirable additions and variations in wording. What is important is that all concerned with the work of the schools, including local authorities, teachers, parents and pupils, should recognise that schools exist for the pursuit of such aims, and judge the curricula and work of schools by the effectiveness with which they contribute to their achievement. Effectiveness, in this context, should be judged not so much by the range of curricular opportunities offered by a school as by the curriculum provided within that range for individual pupils. Most school subjects, imaginatively handled, can contribute to the achievement of many - perhaps all - of the general aims set out above: this should be borne in mind when programmes of work are prepared. Nevertheless, if some major subject areas are omitted from the courses followed by individual pupils, there is a risk that their education will fail to give sufficient attention to one or another general aim or some important aspect of it. It is in this sense that it is important that each pupil's educational experience should be well balanced: and this can only be assured by co-ordinated planning within the school.

11. Schools should ensure that, where groups of pupils follow a common curriculum, it is well matched to aims and objectives and to the capabilities of the pupils concerned. Where pupils are given some freedom to select within curricular options schools should similarly ensure that individual chosen packages – at any one time and cumulatively from year to year – are both consistent with general educational aims and satisfactorily balanced in the sense described above.

12. Though necessary, it is not sufficient for each pupil's curriculum to be well balanced and consistent with agreed aims; this is a minimum requirement. Beyond this, more specialised curricular opportunities must be available – if not in every school then in each area, sometimes on a co-operative basis among institutions – to meet both individual preferences and national needs. Special consideration should be given by both authorities and schools to the curricular needs of ethnic minorities, the handicapped, the less able and the gifted, and to the avoidance of discrimination between the sexes. This last point is not met simply by making particular subjects and options formally open to boys and girls on equal terms; it is important that the educational and career implications of particular choices should be made clear, and efforts made to prevent traditional differences in the education of boys and girls exercising too strong an influence.

13. Local education authorities are responsible, in consultation with their teachers, for developing schools and colleges in each area which, co-operatively where necessary, can provide the necessary range of subjects and courses. Authorities can only exercise this responsibility effectively, and their responsibility for matching curriculum and resources, if they are well informed about the curriculum offered within their schools and through co-operative arrangements among institutions.

14. The Secretaries of State consider therefore that authorities should collect information annually from their schools about the curriculum offered, together with school assessments of the extent to which the curriculum matches school aims and objectives. They believe schools will find it particularly valuable if the preparation of such assessments forms part of their own self-assessment procedures.

The structure of the curriculum

15. The school curriculum is not, and should not be, either static over time or rigidly uniform throughout the country. It must continually evolve to reflect changes in social attitudes and values, new economic circumstances and employment patterns, improvements in our understanding of the learning process and educational technology, and the extension of knowledge. At one extreme the general aims, pursued through the curriculum, are relatively stable; at the other the content of some particular courses must change very rapidly. But all aspects and elements of the curriculum are subject to change. No curriculum, however good, can be expected to stand unchanged for long.

16. Much valuable work has been carried out by a variety of agencies in recent years with the aim of promoting desirable developments in the school curriculum. The report of the Committee of Inquiry chaired by Lord Bullock on English, Schools Council curriculum development projects, and reports and discussion papers from HM Inspectorate are examples. Other developments have spread from initiatives taken by individual schools and teachers. It is right that this should have been so, and that a variety of mechanisms for change should be encouraged.

17. The Secretaries of State consider, however, that the diversity of practice that has emerged in recent years, as shown particularly by HM Inspectors' national surveys of primary and secondary schools, makes it timely to prepare guidance on the place which certain key elements of the curriculum should have in the experience of every pupil during the compulsory period of education. Discussion in this paper is intentionally brief, and concentrates on issues important at local authority level. A fuller statement about the curriculum, and the principles which should determine its structure in the schools, is set out in HM Inspectors' 'A View of the Curriculum'.

18. In the course of the public and professional debate about the school curriculum a good deal of support has been found for the idea of identifying a 'core' or essential part of the curriculum which should be followed by all pupils according to their ability. Such a core, it is hoped, would ensure that all pupils, whatever else they do, at least get a sufficient grounding in the knowledge and skills which by common consent should form part of the equipment of the educated adult.

19. Thus expressed, the idea may appear disarmingly simple: but as soon as it is critically examined a number of supplementary questions arise. For example, should the core be defined as narrowly as possible, or should it, for the period of compulsory schooling at least, cover a large part of the individual's curriculum? Should it be expressed in terms of the traditional school subjects, or in terms of educational objectives which may be attained through the medium of various subjects, appropriately taught? The difficulties and uncertainties attached to the application of the core concept do not mean, however, that it may not be a useful one in carrying forward the public debate about the curriculum to the point at which its results can be of practical benefit to the schools.

20. The questionnaire attached to Circular 14/77 did not directly approach this problem, but it did include questions about certain subject areas, either because of their intrinsic importance for all pupils or because they appeared in their nature to give rise to special problems for local education authorities in establishing the general pattern of curricular provision for the schools in their areas.

English and mathematics

21. The Secretaries of State consider that English and mathematics should form part of every pupil's course throughout the whole period of compulsory education. These subjects are essential both in their own right and because of the importance of language and mathematical skills for many other curriculum areas.

22. The importance of developing English, embracing language and literature, as a means of communication in all parts of the curriculum was set out in 'A Language for Life', the report of the Bullock Committee. This recommended in particular

- systematic policies for the development of reading competence in pupils of all ages and ability levels;
- an organised policy for language across the curriculum, establishing every teacher's involvement in language and reading.

The Secretaries of State consider these recommendations to be of great importance. They also consider that schools should pay careful attention to oral communication as well as to reading, writing and the appreciation of literature. Teaching should be carefully matched to the ages and capabilities of individual pupils, and opportunities should be taken, particularly at the secondary stage, to relate school work to the skills required in employment and adult life. The proportion of school time that should be devoted specifically to English and language skills must vary according to age and ability. The Secretaries of State consider that normally all pupils at all stages of compulsory education should devote not less than 10 per cent of school time to such work. Some pupils, especially in primary schools, should devote a larger part of their school time to it.

23. The teaching of mathematics in schools is at present under examination by the Committee of Inquiry chaired by Dr W Cockcroft, which expects to report by about the end of 1980. The Secretaries of State consider, however, that similar overall principles to those set out above for English should be applied:

- systematic policies for the development of mathematical competence in pupils of all ages and ability levels;
- an organised policy for mathematics across the curriculum, establishing the involvement of most teachers in fostering this development.

Again it is important that teaching should be carefully matched to the ages and abilities of individual pupils. At all stages, mathematical skills and concepts should be related to a variety of practical examples and situations, and at the later secondary stages to their application in adult and working life. As with English, the proportion of school time that should be devoted specifically to mathematics must vary according to age and ability, but the Secretaries of State consider that throughout the period of compulsory education not less than 10 per cent of school time should normally be devoted to it.

Science

24. The Secretaries of State consider that science should form part of the experience of every pupil during the period of compulsory education. It should begin for all pupils in the primary school, and continue to hold a place in every pupil's programme to the end of the period of compulsory education. In the early stages the emphasis should be on the processes of science and a broad course embracing elements of physics, chemistry and biology and their practical applications should continue until at least the age of 13. During the later years of compulsory education integrated science courses based on two or more of the specific science subjects may be appropriate, but the Secretaries of State consider that at this stage all pupils should normally devote at least 10 per cent of their school time to science subjects or closely related work, and that pupils should not normally devote more than 20 per cent of their school time to science subjects.

25. Local education authorities are already considering the extent to which they should give particular attention to curricular provision for science in the light of the deficiencies to which attention has been drawn by HM Inspectors' primary and secondary surveys. Consistency of approach among an authority's primary schools, laying a sound basis for transfer to the secondary stage, is important. The need for primary school science specialists, as referred to in the primary survey report, should be considered. Particularly at the secondary stage, for pupils of all ability levels, it is important that attention should be paid to the industrial and practical applications of science and to links within the school curriculum between science, mathematics, and craft, design and technology.

Modern languages

26. The Secretaries of State consider that most pupils should have the opportunity to become acquainted with another modern European language as part of their secondary education. Modern language teaching should normally begin during the secondary school stage. French should only be taught in primary schools where qualified staff are available, and where it can be satisfactorily linked with the teaching of modern languages at the secondary stage.

27. In general pupils should have a minimum of two, and preferably three years of foreign language teaching, amounting to about 10 per cent of school time during these years. While most secondary schools offer French as their first (or only) modern language, and it would not be practicable or desirable to change this, it is important that other languages should be widely available, and available as first modern languages for some pupils. Local authorities should keep under review the provision made for modern languages in their schools, and seek to ensure an adequate variety of languages in each area. It is important that some pupils should be able to learn more than one foreign language, but it is not normally desirable for pupils to devote more than 20 per cent of school time to foreign languages at any stage during the period of compulsory education.

Religious education

28. The position of religious education in the school curriculum is unique, in that religious instruction is specifically provided for in the 1944 Education Act. The Secretaries of State consider it is right, as is commonly the case, for religious education to be linked with the wider consideration of personal and social values.

29. Local authorities should keep under review the provision made in their schools for religious education, bearing in mind the provisions of the Education Act as regards collective acts of worship and religious instruction. They should also have regard to the provision in the Fifth Schedule to the 1944 Education Act for the agreed syllabus to be reconsidered from time to time in the light of the religious and cultural diversity of the society, locally and nationally, in which pupils are growing up.

Physical education

30. The Secretaries of State consider that physical education, taking a variety of forms, should normally be part of the curriculum for all pupils throughout the period of compulsory education.

Welsh language

31. Regard will need to be had in Wales to the special position of the Welsh language and the Secretary of State for Wales will be circulating a separate document as a basis for consultation.

Preparation for adult and working life

32. Schools contribute to the preparation of young people for all aspects of adult life. This requires many additions to the core subjects discussed above, in areas such as craft, design and technology; the arts, including music and drama; history and geography (either as separate subjects or as components in a programme of environmental and social education); moral education, health education, preparation for parenthood and an adult role in family life; careers education and vocational guidance; and preparation for a participatory role in adult society. The weight given to individual topics of this kind, and the method of providing for them within the curriculum, should vary according to local circumstances and the ages and capabilities of pupils, but, at one stage or another, all should find a place in the education of every pupil.

33. The Secretaries of State consider that substantial attention should be given at the secondary stage to the relationship between school work and preparation for working life. Pupils need to acquire an understanding of the economic basis of society and how wealth is created. Close links between the schools and local industry and commerce are valuable in this context, but also have wider benefits. Particular attention should be given to the place of careers education and guidance for all pupils, including the most able and those in the sixth form, planned in conjunction with the work of the careers service. Systematic careers education should begin not later than the third secondary year, and it is normally desirable that it should occupy a specific place in the timetable. Periods of work experience and work observation can be useful for pupils of all levels of ability.

34. The preceding two paragraphs cover a formidable range of subject matter, and indicate the intensity of the pressures on the schools. Some aspects are likely to find a place in time allocated to core subjects, and work in all these areas should be planned to aid wider development of the basic educational skills. Some topics may with advantage be made the subject of short courses. But the extent to which a school can enable an individual pupil to explore all this territory within the time available is clearly limited.

35. The subject options usually provided from the third year of secondary school onwards are a useful means of broadening the range of opportunities available to pupils and providing courses related to individual interests and career expectations, but such options should not be left entirely to pupil choice. Options may usefully be based on a scheme of subject combinations drawn up by schools, but whatever pattern is adopted, schools should ensure that each individual pupil follows a coherent and balanced educational programme. A balanced curriculum (see paragraph 10 above) remains important at all levels of the ability range.

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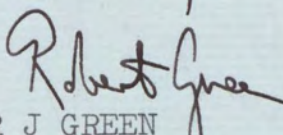
FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

M A Pattison Esq
Private Secretary
10 Downing Street
LONDON SW1

9 November 1979

Dear Mike,

I attach a copy of the Report on Local Authority Arrangements for the School Curriculum. It is to be published at midday on Wednesday 14 November.

Yours ever,

R J GREEN
Private Secretary

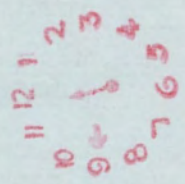
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