

bringing education back into focus

conservatives call for return to
subject-based curriculum and
greater emphasis on teaching of
computer science



With a constituency of 25,000 schools and 8 million pupils, education is guaranteed to figure prominently in the English political agenda. While responsibility for the contents, supervision and examination of education has been delegated to state-funded agencies like the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and Ofsted, control of educational *policy* in terms of attainment goals remains firmly in the hands of central government.

There is a growing contribution to this process at the local level with parents and governors more actively participating in the decisions which directly affect their schools.

Opinions vary on whether that movement is happening fast enough: the Conservative opposition, for example, believes that decentralisation of responsibility has not moved ahead quickly enough, and wants to expedite that process.

All of the political parties formulate policies which they believe will achieve high educational standards, reduce inequality of opportunity, and equip children for their life beyond school.

Few could argue with those goals. It is in the detail of the policies and the route maps

to achievement that the parties are differentiated. As decisions about school education have an impact on the performance and well-being of pupils far beyond the length of their school career, it is important to understand how the major forces in politics have marshalled their thinking on the subject.

As this edition of *The Informed Executive* is focussing on education, it seemed reasonable to question politicians who hold a brief for the subject in Parliament.

We turned on this occasion to Nick Gibb MP for a view from the Conservative front bench. As the Shadow Minister for Schools, he is a key member of the team led by Michael Gove MP, the Shadow Secretary of States for Children, Schools and Families.

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Support for end of SATS at 14

Not all Conservative policies differ significantly from those of the Government, and it is more on points of interpretation than ideology that the two sides of the House go their separate ways. There was the announcement in the middle of October, for example, ending the SATS tests for Key Stage 3 with immediate effect.

As Nick Gibb commented at the time, tests at this stage have become redundant and discredited. “We supported the Government’s decision while believing generally that testing is an important accountability mechanism for schools. It is no less important for parents and for pupils to know what standard they have reached.”

The Conservatives would not abolish SATS tests at Key Stage 2, neither has the Government declared an intention to do so. “Tests at 11 are important, though some of the content needs to be improved. It should be structured in a way that discourages teaching to the test or any narrowing of the curriculum. The

Department has a joint responsibility with Ofsted to make sure that this is not happening.

“Fine tuning apart, an externally administered, nationally standardised test is a valuable method of ensuring the accountability of schools to the community. In the independent sector, schools’ success in teaching is judged by the marketplace, making it unnecessary for them to follow a national curriculum. But in the state sector, testing provides the only credible method of assessment.”

Sustainability becoming political

On the question of sustainability, one of the prime focuses of this edition, the Conservatives are keen that it should not become a political football. Mr Gibb argues against trying to pack sustainability into the curriculum as a ‘subject’, along with a wealth of other worthy ideas which their supporters believe justify inclusion. “The curriculum must not be the place where every social ailment and problem is parked simply so that schools can be given the responsibility for solving them.

“Every week, our team receives a missive from one interest group or another calling for something new to be added to the curriculum.

“Some of the proposals have merit, such as cooking and obesity and financial literacy but

Nick Gibb visiting Hornchurch Junior School in his capacity as Shadow Schools Minister

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we could fill the curriculum timetable twice over with those ideas. That would be at the price of the true knowledge components of the curriculum. Knowledge is critical and pupils will suffer in later life if core elements such as literacy, the fundamentals of science, or learning a modern language, have had to be excluded.”

Purpose of school education

The Shadow Schools Minister set about defining his Party’s view of the purpose of school education. “We believe they are there to educate children. In practice, that means ensuring that children leave school knowing what the previous generation knew – updated appropriately, of course.

“That should find them being taught the history and geography of key countries in Europe and North America, for example, so that they can better understand more about the people and how those countries’ economies interact.

“It will involve learning facts about the towns and the rivers and the historical events of those countries. And it involves teaching as many children as practicable a modern language.”

This approach to teaching can best be described as subject-focussed, where each subject is taught discretely to a curriculum that reflects that subject’s complexities: no two of those subjects draw on the same portfolio of skills, a factor which makes some of the currently favoured views of educational practice less valuable.

Nick Gibb argues that a theme-based curriculum, in which subjects like sustainability are taken as ‘cores’ for projects around which English and Maths and Science are interwoven, has proved ineffective. “If you are learning maths with a political angle because the course work is trying to justify a political argument for sustainability, it means you are not learning about equations or geometry and the other building blocks of mathematics. We have to be careful not to undermine the principles of a sound education.”

There is another concern. Experimental approaches to education are generally applied first as a panacæa in ‘problem’ areas, so the

children whose attainment is under the greatest pressure are those who benefit least from the ‘new’ educational strategy. As a result, Gibb maintains, the gap between the most deprived in society and the rest becomes even greater.

Specialist schools

The wave of specialist schools which have evolved over the past decade is broadly consistent with Conservative strategy. “They are justified because a school that becomes a specialist language school still teaches history and geography and mathematics to the relevant levels. To that extent, they contribute to a diverse pattern of school education,

“The diversity of provision which this implies is superficial, however. If you are a talented musician in West Sussex, for example, you have no opportunity to attend a school with special music status as there are none in the County.”

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Increase the diversity of provision and subject specialism by raising the number of independent school providers to 15% as first goal and then beyond that figure in years ahead.

How the Conservative Party would increase the diversity both of provision and subject specialism is to increase the number of independent school providers to the 15% mark as a first goal, and then beyond that figure in the years ahead. 'Independent' in this context means third party organisations who complement the existing state system by establishing schools within the state framework that are free to pupils.

Revenue for those establishments comes from the capitation allowance that is currently paid direct to a state-funded school, together with the sum paid to the local authority for its management and oversight. The Conservatives have drawn on the experience of national education systems that have implemented this collaborative approach successfully.

Gibb points to the Swedish model which developed after a change in the law there in 1992 allows parents to set up schools and be paid by the State for doing so. The process was smoothed by parallel changes in the planning rules which have seen current-generation office blocks, for example, being converted to schools as in the case of Internationella Engelska Skolan in Stockholm, which rents a former Marconi building that was converted at a cost of £200,000. "It funds the whole of its rental and overheads from the capitation

allowance. The model has worked well and the company has schools in nine different Swedish towns and cities.

"Standards are high, and the independent schools movement of which Internationella Engelska Skolan is a part has helped drive further the already high standards of the Swedish state system."

Greater computer literacy

It will come as a welcome relief to school administrators that the Conservative Party would not be planning changes in the ICT components of the curriculum that would involve plundering their budgets to change technology overnight.

What Nick Gibb and his colleagues are seeking to achieve, however, is a shift in the teaching of ICT so that the level of computer literacy on the part of school leavers is raised. "We noted Microsoft's concerns expressed to us that there are insufficient people with a grasp of computer science. That does not mean just knowing how to use a search engine or handle an elementary spreadsheet – tasks which even the youngest pupils seem to be taking in their stride.

"There has to be a greater understanding of the fundamentals of computing which enable so many of the activities which we now perform – and which are of immense value in the job market. That means having a greater factual knowledge of computer languages, software applications and some of the mathematics involved."

Knowledge-based curriculum

Reference there to the needs of employers raises the question of schools' responsibility for providing their pupils with the most appropriate platform of knowledge for their future. Nick Gibb argues that in the past two decades, school education has moved away from an academic knowledge-based curriculum to a skills-based curriculum.

That is a mistake, he believes, because what the world and an increasing number of jobs both require are intellectual skills. "You can only develop these if you have a firm knowledge base.



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There is concern about the number of children failing to acquire a knowledge of a modern language, and that the content knowledge of many other subjects being taught is declining.

We take issue with the OCA, which maintains that you can teach children learning skills which they then apply to assemble their own body of knowledge through research and experience. This philosophy runs back to the 1920s in America and does not work.

“The only way to teach children *how* to learn is by giving them the knowledge they require. It means that you teach a foreign language by instilling into children the grammar and vocabulary of the language. And in history by delivering a narrative history which puts the times and dates into context.”

The Shadow Schools Minister disagrees with the OCA line that children should be taught to be confident *learners* and be taught conceptual skills.

In practice what happens is that children are turned off and get bored, he believes. Knowledge gets downgraded in that process where its true content is almost negligible.

The saving grace is that schools often ignore that guidance and, as a result, the education system performs far better than one should expect from the strategy being handed down by the OCA. “The OCA’s focus is on learning and ‘confidence skills’ which have no precise definition and children leave school with insufficient knowledge.”

“The number failing to acquire even a basic knowledge of a modern language is appalling, and the content knowledge of many other subjects is declining. This thrust of project-based learning downgrades knowledge in the curriculum which damages intellectual levels.”

The Conservative team has clearly examined the options and formulated its strategy, but is there the teaching resource in the nation’s classrooms to move it forward? There will be a heavy demand on teachers, particularly in more specialised areas such as computer technology.

As Mr Gibb noted, teachers have to be academic in their approach, constantly adding to and communicating their own knowledge base. “They can no longer rely on teaching children to learn. It is better to spend INSET days discovering more about new research in their subject areas than finding ways to manipulate five more marks for their pupils out the examination system.”



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Moving education forward

It would be easy to categorise Conservative approaches to education simply as that; conservative and inflexible; a harking back to the days of flying blackboard dusters and rooms full of children chanting out their tables.

That is not what Nick Gibb and his colleagues are seeking to restore. Their message is clear: they are keen to return to knowledge-based education whose content stands up to rigorous scrutiny both inside the educational system and in the world outside it.

But they are not shouting from the sidelines knowing it will never fall to them to implement the strategies to achieve that goal. By all accounts, they are ready with the plan of action to make it happen.

Nick Gibb visiting Rose Green Junior School in Bognor Regis. He is the MP for the area (Bognor Regis & Littlehampton)