

# UK government's new national curriculum meets widespread opposition

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Britain's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has revealed plans over recent months to implement a new national schools' curriculum. The programme, covering all subjects for children between 5 and 14 years of age, is to be taught from September 2014.

The proposals represent a deepening of the attack on public education, which has been intensified since the onset of the global economic crisis. This has been spearheaded by the undermining of publicly funded schools and the deskilling of the teaching profession, while education is being opened up to private corporations to secure massive profits.

The proposals, outlined by Conservative education secretary Michael Gove in February, were open to consultation until late last month. A number of high-profile academics and education experts went public with their criticisms, with one letter signed by up to 100 experts noting the proscriptive character of the new system. Children would be expected to learn by rote, memorising an "endless list of spelling, facts and rules," they warned, and young people's "ability to think" for themselves would be harmed.

In English, teachers have condemned the focus on memorising spelling lists and points of grammar in an abstract manner, without any link to applying language more broadly. In mathematics, one example of the move away from problem solving activities is the emphasis on learning times tables by heart.

In history, one academic described the proposals as "unteachable," as the content predominantly focused on memorising dates. Historians have noted the exclusively national focus on British history at the expense of other countries and cultures.

Speaking at the recent congress of the National Association of Head Teachers, where he was heckled and faced a vote of no confidence, Gove acknowledged that the plans for history would be subject to a "more

extensive re-write than any other" subject area. However, he remains committed to imposing a curriculum dominated by lists of facts, even though much of the research upon which Gove's proposals were based has been shown to be flawed.

An important component of this "fact-based" approach in history is an attempt to prevent critical thinking among young people, by moving away from the encouragement of independent study through the teaching of historiography.

The design and technology curriculum has been abandoned in its current form, after several leading academics and representatives of business accused the new programme of "dumbing down" the content. The coalition had proposed the introduction of areas of study including gardening, simple DIY tasks and knitting at the expense of focusing on technological developments.

A measure that produced some of the most widespread opposition was the government's intention to remove teaching of climate change and environmental protection from the science or geography programmes. A petition of more than 60,000 students, teachers and parents was submitted to the Department for Education expressing opposition to this move.

The new system is linked with changes to the structure of exams, with much greater emphasis placed on tests at the end of a General Certificate of Secondary Education (16+) or A-level (18+) course and the doing away of ongoing coursework forming part of the assessment process. Gove announced that from September 2015, A-levels would be assessed solely on a final exam after two years of study.

The move towards testing knowledge against prepared lists of facts is bound up with the attacks of the government on the teaching profession and in particular teachers' pay. Teachers' salaries in England and Wales are to be linked even more directly with

“performance”—i.e., the test scores of pupils and their ability to meet predetermined targets set by the government. Regional variations in pay have also been introduced.

This strategy will facilitate the de-skilling of teachers. Last year, the government announced legislation that removed the requirement for teachers to be fully qualified if they were working in a school, thus no longer demanding a university qualification. In one of the most widely reported examples of the consequences of this move, a head teacher was appointed to run a new academy school with no teaching experience at all.

In her annual speech delivered to Parliament earlier this month, the Queen confirmed that the government’s reform of the curriculum would apply only to state schools. Academies and Free Schools will be permitted to draft their own programmes of study, with only a minimal requirement to follow standards in English and mathematics. The number of academies has grown exponentially since the government of Prime Minister David Cameron came to power in 2010, with now well over 2,000 schools having been transferred to academy status. The government is preparing to sell these institutions to private sector organisations, with private corporations able to determine how children and young people are taught.

While state funding for public education is being slashed, the sums of taxpayers’ money being made available to private providers are staggering. A Sussex-based academy that runs four schools is paying £100,000 per year to a US company in order to gain access to its patented Paragon curriculum. The Aurora Academy Trust has been granted a “lead sponsor” status by the government, meaning it is one of the first organisations to be consulted on future changes and will likely be given control over a greater number of schools. The establishment of this academy was facilitated by Ofsted, the government’s education inspection service, which placed the four schools in “special measures.” Under current regulations, two consecutive “failed” inspections from Ofsted means that the school concerned is compelled to convert to an academy.

In a related development, the *Guardian* reported on talks between the government and Amplify, a US-based education firm owned by Rupert Murdoch that provides tablet computers with preloaded study material. It noted that such equipment has already been used widely in the US and that ministers were pursuing an agreement to make these tablets available in Britain’s schools. The

provision of such a predetermined programme of study to children and young people would be used to remove the need for fully trained staff to support learning and personal development. As the *Guardian* article put it, “It’s not too much of a leap to imagine that schools full of over-worked teachers scrabbling to keep up with change might think an off-the-shelf curriculum on sale from another school, or a tablet replete with pre-planned lessons, is an answer to their nightmares.”

The assault on public education is embraced fully by the opposition Labour Party. In a recent article for the *New Statesman*, Labour education spokesman Stephen Twigg called for schools to build “collaborative partnerships” with private companies and other organisations to improve educational standards. It was under the previous Labour government that academies were introduced.

The trade unions have done nothing to mobilise opposition. The main teaching unions have sought to place responsibility for the reforms almost entirely on the education secretary as an individual, adopting no confidence votes in Gove. The National Union of Teachers is planning to call a series of isolated regional protest actions and one-day strikes, with the pledge that some form of national action may be called before Christmas.

Opposition to these attacks must start from the premise that education is a social right to which all are entitled. High-quality institutions that support the development of young people to their full potential must be publicly funded and supplied with fully trained teaching staff to facilitate the education process. This can only be achieved in struggle against the capitalist system, which subordinates all areas of public life, including education, to private profit and the interests of big business.



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