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## Busy year coming up in education

By Mike Baker

**There is no question which is the biggest date in England's education calendar for 2009. It is Tuesday 7 July.**

It will be a red-letter day for the government, for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and for the exam board Edexcel. All will approach it with trepidation.

For 7 July is education's D-day: the date when the national curriculum test results are due.

After last year's missed deadlines there is relatively little confidence that the 2009 deadline will be met. Indeed the contract with Edexcel does not even require all the results to be reported by that date, stating instead that 99.9% will be acceptable.

Bearing in mind that 600,000 children take the tests, completing several million test papers, even 0.1% would be quite a few missing results.

### 'High risks'

Just before he resigned following last year's marking problems, the head of the QCA wrote to the Schools Secretary, Ed Balls, to "re-emphasise that the risks in this process are high".

The government was, of course, painted into a corner. After such a high-profile failure, and with so little time to prepare, there was only one realistic bidder for the 2009 contract.

That lack of competition has proved expensive. The previous contract was worth £31m a year for the marking of the tests at both 11 and 14. In other words, that is £15m a year for each age group.

With the tests at 14 now scrapped, the new contract will pay Edexcel £25.7m just for the tests at age 11. As the only serious bidder it clearly held a strong bargaining position.

From the government's point of view, though, that price will be worth it if the marking is trouble free.

But if there are major problems again, 2009 will almost certainly be the last ever year of Sats.

### Primary reviews

As well as worrying about how the test marking will go, primary schools will also be wary of where teaching is heading under Sir Jim Rose's curriculum review.

His interim report, published just before schools broke up at the end of last term, recommended an approach to the curriculum built around six areas of learning, designed to encourage cross-curricular teaching.

But despite the impression given by much of the media, Sir Jim did not say schools should abandon discrete subject teaching. Nor did he announce the end of history and geography.

He says himself there is still an awful lot of work left to do on the curriculum and there will be further changes to his plans, which are due to be published around Easter and which will be implemented in schools from 2011.

Meanwhile the parallel, but much larger independent review being run by Professor Robin Alexander at Cambridge University is also due to report in the spring.



The Sats tests chaos became the biggest education story

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Unlike the Rose Review, which is not allowed to look at testing and assessment, the Cambridge Review will address the problems of teaching to the test at Key Stage 2.

Indeed, it has already highlighted the stress caused by the Sats in the final two years of primary school.

### **Diplomas**

In secondary schools and colleges the new Diplomas will hit a critical landmark when the second cohort of students begins the latest batch of applied-learning courses in September.

These new courses for 14 to 19-year-olds will cover business, administration and finance; environmental and land-based studies; hair and beauty studies; hospitality and manufacturing and product design.

This is a high-risk year for the Diplomas. With fewer than 12,500 students enrolled from last September, it will be essential for the government to boost numbers to ensure the Diplomas are sufficiently entrenched ahead of any threats to their survival that could follow the next general election.

### **Legislation**

Meanwhile the Children, Skills and Learning Bill, which will go through its parliamentary stages in the year ahead, will bring more changes to schools.

There will be new powers for schools to search pupils for alcohol, drugs and stolen goods.

The Bill also spells big changes for two of education's biggest quangos.

The QCA will be split in two, creating a new exams watchdog, Ofqual, which is designed to be at arm's length from the government.

The rump of the QCA will be redesignated as the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency. It will also have to find a replacement for Dr Ken Boston.

Elsewhere the Learning and Skills Council will lose its responsibility for funding 16 to 19 education. Responsibility will transfer to local authorities and to an expanded apprenticeship scheme.

And, as if that was not enough change for one year, there is also an education White Paper due in the Spring.

This "21st Century Schools" will set out plans for schools to do more to work with parents as partners in education and will attempt to give a further push to personalised learning.

### **Report cards**

Most interesting, though, will be the government's plans for school report cards. It is currently consulting on these and ministers hope they can come up with a way of giving each school a single grade - perhaps from A to F - which encompasses their performance across a whole range of indicators.

So the grade would reflect not just test and exam scores but also pupil progress, attendance, and wider issues such as the health and well-being of pupils.

It is a tall order to get all of that into a single grade. But ministers know that a complex report card will not be widely used by parents or the media.

And they are hoping that, if the report cards catch on, they could effectively replace the test and exam league tables as the main way parents judge schools.

If that happens, it could allow the government to downgrade the annual performance tables and thus make the Key Stage 2 Sats less of a "high stakes" test.

### **University fees**

Finally, the mother-of-all-reviews is due this year in higher education. When the highly controversial "top up fees" legislation scraped through the House of Commons in January 2004, ministers promised a full review of university funding in 2009.

Abolition of tuition fees in England now looks very unlikely, especially in the current economic climate, so the main debate will

focus on whether or not to lift the fees "cap", which currently sits at just over £3,000.

So far none of the major political parties has shown any great enthusiasm for even discussing the lifting of the cap, so the chances are that the review will be made as independent as possible, will be initiated as late as possible in the year, and may even be allowed to delay its final report until 2010.

That way any tuition fee increase would not have to be agreed until after the next general election. Or is that too cynical?


So for schools, colleges and universities, 2009 looks like being a watershed year. There may be fewer big reforms than the avalanche of initiatives seen in 2008, but some very important markers will be laid down for the future direction of education.

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