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Review ordered as pupils shun languages

- Minister acts on fall in numbers taking GCSE
- Teaching must be more inspiring, says Johnson

James Meikle, education correspondent
Friday October 13, 2006

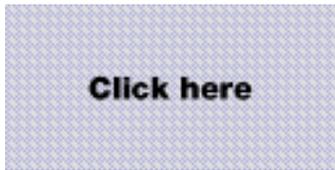
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The education secretary, Alan Johnson, yesterday ordered an urgent review of modern languages in schools after huge drops in the numbers of 16-year-olds taking French and German at GCSE.



The decision to stop making the subjects compulsory after 14 was taken three years ago and the first exam entries following the change showed such decreases in French and German that heads warned they were in freefall.



Mr Johnson shared the "deep disappointment" about a 14.7% drop in languages and said if the review showed the government strategy was "wrong and we should go into reverse, we will listen to that advice and we will do that".



But he gave a clear message he did not want to do so. "We want languages to flourish. Forcing 14-16-year-olds to learn a language I don't think will achieve that objective. Exciting children about languages at an early age, finding

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new and more inspiring ways of teaching languages, will," he told the Commons.

Lord Dearing, who will publish an interim report before Christmas, said he was not starting with a "predisposition" to make languages compulsory. He has long been regarded as education's Mr Fixit - he reviewed the curriculum for the Conservative government in the early 1990s.

Languages are compulsory only for 11-14-year-olds, although the Tories are trying to amend the education bill in the Lords to make them compulsory at GCSE. Numbers taking French and German were falling before language study was made an option for the age group, but the slide has got worse. This year French entries were down to 236,189, a drop of 36,000 in a year, and nearly 111,000 fewer than 2001. German was down by nearly 15,000 entries on 2005, nearly 45,000 on 2001.

Interest in other modern languages has grown, although Spanish GCSE entries were slightly down this year.

Surveys suggest that 56% of primary schools now offer courses to some pupils. Lord Dearing said: "If you can get it going early, it makes pupils feel much more comfortable about it later on because you have a flying start."

Lord Dearing, whose final report must be completed by February, said vocational courses could be adapted so that teaching of motor mechanics, for instance, might include relevant French or German. Employers could also help by stressing how valuable the ability to speak a language could be for future earnings.

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "Returning to a compulsory GCSE is not feasible in the short term and, more importantly, it does not address the fundamental issue. The content of the curriculum must be made more practically focused and relevant to students' career choices."

Meanwhile an independent inquiry into primary education in England is launched today. The two-year review based at Cambridge University and financed by a £350,000 grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Trust hopes to shape the future of schooling for young children for a generation, assessing the impact of political initiatives such as the national curriculum and reading and literacy drives.

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