

Sharp decline in number of children studying languages prompts inquiry

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

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An alarming slump in the number of pupils taking French and German at GCSE has prompted Alan Johnson, the Education Secretary, to launch an inquiry into the state of foreign language teaching.

The review will be headed by the government troubleshooter Lord Dearing, who has a reputation for solving some of the most intractable problems in education. The 76-year-old former chairman of the Post Office headed a review of the national curriculum under the Conservatives in the early 1990s and an inquiry into university finance set up with all-party support in 1996 that paved the way for the introduction of tuition fees.

Lord Dearing's remit is to look at ways of increasing the take-up of languages after the age of 14 - the time when they cease to be compulsory as a result of a government decision taken four years ago. He will also study ways of increasing the number of language students at university.

While ruling on whether the Government was right to scrap

compulsory language lessons for 14 to 16-year-olds is not an official part of his remit, Mr Johnson conceded: "If Ron Dearing tells me they should be compulsory, I shall have to listen."

As a first step towards producing an interim report before Christmas, Lord Dearing has set up a series of five mini-conferences throughout the country for teachers and language experts to express their views on government policy. He is also asking teachers' unions and universities to submit evidence, and is bound to come under pressure to advise that the Government was wrong to scrap compulsory language lessons for 14 to 16-year-olds.

Lord Dearing said in an interview with The Independent that he was anxious to avoid languages being seen as "elitist".

Figures show that while the majority of comprehensive schools have abandoned compulsory language lessons following the Government's decision, 95 per cent of private schools still offer them. He said he wanted to investigate including language learning in vocational courses being studied by teenagers.

Mr Johnson's decision to appoint Lord Dearing to head the review was welcomed by the Conservatives and headteachers' leaders. But Nick Gibb, the Tories' schools spokesman, urged ministers to accept a Conservative amendment to education legislation being debated by MPs to bring back compulsory lessons up to GCSE level.

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, which represents secondary school heads, argued: "Something clearly needs to be done to reverse the sharp decline in students taking modern foreign languages beyond age 14. Lord Dearing has an excellent track record in education in getting to the root of problems and proposing workable solutions."

Dr Dunford said figures showed the number of youngsters taking languages at GCSE was "in freefall". Since 2001, entries for French have fallen by 110,818 to 236,189. In German, they have fallen by 44,822 to 90,311.

But Dr Dunford warned that returning to a compulsory GCSE was not "feasible" in the short-term because so many language teaching jobs had been shed by schools.

Lord Dearing said he believed there was much good practice that could be spread around schools - but that it might take time to make up the shortfall in GCSE entries of the past few years.

Meanwhile, the biggest independent inquiry into primary school education for 40 years is also being launched today.

The investigation will be the first in-depth look at the sector since the introduction of national testing at seven and 11. Government targets have led to claims that teachers are forced to teach to the test. One of the key questions the inquiry will tackle is whether there is too much testing - critics of the current system claim England's school children are the most tested in the Western world.

The investigation will be directed by Robin Alexander, professor emeritus of education at Warwick University and a former adviser to Labour and Conservative governments.

It is the most wide-ranging review of primary education since the Plowden report in the 1960s heralded the introduction of more child-centred methods of education - prompting critics to claim it had led to the death of traditional teaching methods in schools.

The inquiry will be based at Cambridge University and financed by the Esme Fairbairn Foundation. It will go live today with the launch of a website - www.primaryreview.org.uk

The girl who got a GCSE in French at the age of 10

Dilshud Teemul, pupil at Frith Manor primary school in Barnet, north London

Ten-year-old Dilshud Teemul is blazing a trail many primary school children will soon be expected to follow. The pupil at Frith Manor in Barnet, north London, already has an A-grade GCSE pass in French.

She began learning the language at the age of three - taught by her sister, Iman,

17, who has an A* grade in the subject. Now Dilshud, whose family originate from French-speaking Mauritius, has also started learning German and Japanese at school, and she will begin Spanish lessons next term.

"Languages are really enjoyable," she said.

Dilshud is being taught in a borough where every seven-year-old will be learning a foreign language - two years ahead of a government deadline. Barnet Council is insisting every primary school will offer a range of languages by September 2008. It is also going further. The national directive only states that

every child should have the opportunity to learn a language by then. In Barnet, many schools' interpretation is that every child will be learning a language.

Frith Manor, which has 630 pupils, is offering four languages - the ones that Dilshud is learning. "We aim to give the children the chance to learn the languages at a conversational level by the time they start secondary school," said Reg Herring, Frith Manor's head. "There are children from 70 Japanese families in the school. It gives the rest of the pupils the chance to learn a little about their culture and I wanted them to have the chance to learn a language written in a different script."