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Leading article: A shattering failure for our masters

Friday, 29 February 2008

The latest reports for The Primary Review – the independent Cambridge University-based study – provide the most alarming findings yet regarding the state of our primary education sector. One report identifies "a decrease in the overall quality of primary education experience by pupils because of the narrowing quality of the curriculum and the intensity of test preparation". Another report condemns the "state theory of learning", which is based on the idea that repeated "high-stakes testing", a national curriculum and "mandated" teaching methods are the only way to raise standards in schools.

The criticisms of the intensive testing regime imposed on children since 1997 are by now familiar. Few outside the Department for Education defend it. But the attacks on the national curriculum and centrally mandated teaching methods are less common. Yet as these reports make clear, their effects are every bit as damaging to the educational process.

The idea of a core national curriculum, as established by the 1988 Education Act, was a good one. There was to be a list of subjects that every child could be reasonably expected to have studied before leaving education. Most of our European peers have long had something similar in place. But, like national primary school tests, another sensible idea when devised by the Government, the project has been abused.

At the heart of the problem is the meddling of successive education secretaries and various Whitehall departments in the curriculum, and the ever greater demands being made of teachers. Consider the evidence of this week alone. We learned yesterday that the Association of Police Officers wants schools to play a role in defeating the domestic terrorism threat. The day before, the Government suggested that schools be rated by Ofsted on the quality of their anti-drugs lessons. And a few weeks ago we learned of the Culture Secretary's "aspiration" that all pupils should be subjected to five hours of culture a week.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these proposals, and indeed they are the sort of things schools ought to be doing. But the imposition of this sort of thing from above removes responsibility from teachers and heads. And as these reports make clear, it helps to demoralise schools.

Schools must be free to innovate. At the moment, they are being used as political battlegrounds by ministers. It is time for the Government to lay out (briefly) what standards it expects and the subjects it believes ought to be covered, and then let schools get on with delivering them.

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