

Campaign for Real Education

www.cre.org.uk

“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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NEWSLETTER

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Editorial

The Campaign for Real Education was set up by the late Nick Seaton and others in 1987 to combat falling standards of attainment in our schools. The introduction of the GCSE examination to replace GCE O-Levels and CSEs was a particular concern. It was an all-ability exam for the all-ability comprehensive schools that had, by that time, largely taken over from grammar schools and secondary moderns. The spirit of the time was ‘out with the old and in with the new’.

How seductive the arguments for GCSE were and how naïve and utopian they have come to seem, nowadays. Rampant exam grade inflation, set against a declining position on international league tables of educational attainment, has convinced more or less everyone outside the educational establishment that GCSE, along with its attendant National Curriculum and watered down A-Levels and vocational courses, has been something of a disaster.

Employers bewail the standards of literacy and numeracy amongst school leavers. Meanwhile, universities have to put on ‘remedial’ classes for undergraduates. Most extraordinary of all, and uniquely in the world, according to the OECD, our 16-24 year-olds lag behind their grandparents in terms of educational attainment. There can be few greater statements of a nation’s educational failure.

It has come as no real surprise to learn that the CRE was not quite alone in its concerns about the direction of travel for our schools back in the late 1980s. Documents recently released under the ‘30-Year Rule’ show that the Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, shared our concerns. She, too, feared that the proposed GCSE exam would create a “can’t fail mentality” and would “lead to lower standards”.

Sadly, her former ‘mentor’ and, at that time, Education Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, was completely fooled by the educational establishment, the Blob, into believing that GCSE would be an improvement on the GCE O-Level exam it was to replace. He told Mrs. Thatcher that she was “misleading herself” about the new exam and that it would be “a key instrument for improving standards.” How wrong could he have been?

The teacher unions embraced the GCSE but at the time were, as so often, in dispute with the Government and taking industrial action over pay and conditions. As part of this dispute they demanded more time to prepare for the introduction of the new exam. Mrs. Thatcher was persuaded that any hesitation over introducing GCSE would, therefore, be regarded as a concession to the unions: “There seems little alternative but to acquiesce in Sir Keith’s view that GCSE must go ahead. To do otherwise in contradiction of his position would look like taking the side of the unions.” This was an error of judgment, monumental in its consequences.

By the time Sir Keith Joseph began to realise the consequences of his mistake in promoting the new exam he was no longer Education Secretary. However, as a member of the House of Lords he did support an amendment to the 1988 Education Bill that would have broken the GCSE monopoly and re-opened the possibility of some choice in the exam system. It was CRE members, supported by several peers, who wrote the amendment. Since the ‘old’ O-Level was, and is, available to overseas schools the amendment would, in effect, have also made the exam available in England and Wales. Our amendment was defeated, of course, but Joseph voted for it and he commented in the House that the reality of GCSE was a “straight abuse” of what he had intended.

Too late, an Education Secretary, Michael Gove, finally acknowledged that the introduction of GCSE had been “a historic mistake”. It was a mistake that was compounded by the introduction of a ‘dumbed down’ National Curriculum. During the 30 years that have passed since the original error, education systems around the world have been surging ahead of ours. Possibly, we will never recover the lost ground. We are, of necessity, becoming ever more reliant on educated and skilled immigrant labour.

Education will provide one of the battlefields of the coming general election. We are likely to hear a lot of self-congratulation from the Government and much complaining by opposition parties. In truth, all politicians have to face up to, and take responsibility for, the extent to which educational standards in the UK have been diluted over recent decades.

Sir David Bell has warned that the education system in England has been undermined by short-term political pressure. He has called for an “independent” body to set education strategy for schools. Between 2002 and 2006, Sir David was head of Ofsted. Afterwards, from 2006 until 2012 he was Permanent Secretary at the education department. In other words, he has presided over our shambolic and failing educational system for ten years. He should be holding his head in shame rather than pontificating. Sadly, he seems unable to grasp the fact that any so-called “independent” body in education is likely to be hi-jacked by the very people who got us into this educational mess in the first place.

In this Newsletter you will find commentary on a few of the issues that face us in education today. Many of these have not changed significantly since the CRE was founded. Included are the personal perspectives of both a teacher and a parent. Regardless of the general election outcome, there will still be a huge amount to fight for on the educational battlefield.

An educational success story – from behind bars

“Teens behind bars get better education than thousands of pupils in ordinary schools”. I wonder what impression of our education system readers of *Gulf News*, a major online news outlet for the Middle East, gained from this recent headline on its website. Quoting the Campaign for Real Education it noted “how pupils in state schools were being let down by a lack of discipline in the classroom.”

The Annual Report to Parliament from Ofsted boss Sir Michael Wilshaw recorded that 29 per cent of maintained secondary schools are providing an education that is below the level of “good”. The Chief Inspector regards this situation as a matter for concern and points to poor behaviour by pupils as an important contributing factor.

How different things are at the Hindley Young Offender Institution (YOI) in the North-West of England, reported on by *Gulf News*! Ofsted has judged the teaching it provides as “outstanding”, behaviour as “very good” and attainment in maths and English as “above the national average”. All aspects of learning, skills and work at the Institution are rated as “good”. Teachers are described as having “high aspirations” for the youngsters they teach and poor behaviour is recorded as only “isolated”.

More academic rigour in the exam system?

A personal view by Chris McGovern

“As part of new and more rigorous A-Levels, sixth formers will be able to study the World War I TV comedy series, "Blackadder Goes Forth". This is now regarded as appropriate for a syllabus for the 'advanced level' study of English. Given that time and space on that syllabus is limited, other texts will have to be excluded. Blackadder can only gain entry if something else is omitted.

I wonder if this was what the former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, had in mind when he promised us more academic rigour in the public examination system. Shortly after Russell Brand and rapper Dizzee Rascal appeared on a draft A-Level syllabus for English last year, a source close to Gove at the DfE ridiculed the proposal and claimed that the examination board concerned "must be having a laugh if they think A-Levels in Dizzee Rascal and Russell Brand are going to be let through."

The laugh is now on Gove. Not only has he been unceremoniously dumped out of office by the Prime Minister, but on his watch, whilst he was still in charge at the DfE, the Brand-Rascal syllabus was approved by the exam watchdog, Ofqual.

To rub salt into the wounds of Gove's defeat by the Blob, the approved syllabus for this 'advanced' study of English also includes Twitter feeds from the journalist Caitlin Moran, speeches by transvestite potter Grayson Perry, a charity advert from the NSPCC, an episode from CBBC TV "Horrible Histories" series, Jamie Oliver's cookery show and newspaper columns from "The Secret Footballer".

British Values – ‘thought police’ in the classroom?

Recently, Ofsted downgraded Middle Rasen Primary, a maintained school in rural Lincolnshire, from “outstanding” to “good” on the basis, to a large extent, that it was not providing enough direct, first-hand experience of the cultural, religious and racial diversity of modern Britain. The school concerned is 97 per cent white with 100 per cent of pupils speaking English as a first language. Its geographical location makes exposure to, and interaction with, minority groups in our society a considerable problem in terms of

practicalities. The school's relegated status illustrates well the law of unintended consequences with regard to a requirement in 2002 Education Act that schools promote "British values". Central to these, according to the DfE is "an acceptance that people having different faiths or beliefs to oneself (or having none) should be accepted and tolerated, and should not be the cause of prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour". Ofsted has now been required to take on the role of 'enforcers' of these "values" by Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan.

The Campaign for Real Education reflected the views of many parents in a BBC Look North news feature, when it condemned Ofsted's new over-zealous, 'Big Brother' approach. Ofsted does not offer any suggestions as to how it expects the school to provide its pupils with the "first hand interaction with their counterparts from different backgrounds" that it is demanding.

The Ofsted verdict was described as "ridiculous", "vindictive" and "crackers" by parents of the school. One commented: "The school does a lot to try and teach them about other cultures without there being children from other cultures there. It's bizarre to punish them for being too English." Another added: "It's outrageous that a British school can be punished for being too British. It just doesn't make sense at all. We would welcome people from different cultures with open arms I'm sure – but there just aren't any ethnic minorities around here."

Ofsted's denunciation of Middle Rasen Primary for being too English indicates the future direction of travel for our schools. Schools must swear an oath of loyalty to a misplaced dogma of 'political correctness'. They must also demonstrate their compliance.

'Tolerance' has become 'intolerance'. A 'witch-hunt' is under way; what, in a parallel context, Arthur Miller described as, "a hunt not just for subversive people, but for ideas and even a suspect language."

A parent's evidence to Ofsted about her child's school

Ofsted asks for parental input as part of the inspection process. Here is one parent's response regarding a 'short-notice' school inspection in December 2014.

(Names removed for reasons of confidentiality)

“Dear *****,

Please take into account the following with regard to your inspection of ***** school.

1. There is little valuable life skills learning available from the school [CV writing, Interview techniques, career advice].
2. Expected grades are unreliable. The recent RE GCSE grades for example. Many students had a 3 or 4 grade difference between expected and achieved grades. This makes us, as parents, nervous about our son's capability and the associated focus needed on revision and homework.
3. The school did not react positively to the grade differences. Given the volume of grade discrepancies we expected to see some sort of enquiry and details of options for remark. Such discrepancies surely cannot be seen as "normal". We received no communication from the school and subsequently a deadline for remark submissions was missed, as it was not communicated. The attitude seems to be "Ah well, that's the marking system for you. What can we do?"
4. General communication with parents gives us very short notice of events or details of parents' meetings, for example.
5. The last weeks of a term are a waste of education time. They appear to be left to watch DVDs in most lessons. We fail to see how this marries up with the sense of urgency conveyed during the early days of a new school year.
6. Poor teachers retain their position and do not respond to feedback and performance improvement. We have had our son moved from one teacher's class due to his poor teaching methods.
7. The school is very reactive and shows little forward planning or ambition. A recent Creative Media offering has clearly been put in place in a panic with

no clear budget for equipment or materials, and no business network to support it.

8. We are looking for alternatives to the ***** School for 6th Form for our son. There are 5 in our shortlist and ***** school is in last place on that list.

With regard to your inspection, whilst we understand the need to give short notice to the school, 24 hours in which for a parental response is not really satisfactory.

The questionnaire is inadequate as it leads you to a positive response across all areas. For example "My child is taught well in school" covers all subjects. Some subjects are taught well and inspire my son but others are extremely poor.

Also, I am sure that most schools will do it, but you must be aware that you are not seeing the school as normal. My son has stated that some teachers are leaving their best lessons for when they get an inspector observing.

From an overall perspective on education in general in this country, we seem to be concentrating on teaching children to pass exams, not to learn their subjects. It is no wonder that children are so uninspired by their schools. They are not being taught how to 'learn'. Until this fundamental principle is addressed and changed, I think this country will continue to be behind the curve when it comes to the quality of education compared to other developed countries.

Very little has changed since the last inspection, beyond the initial parents' meeting and reactive measures, and I will be very surprised if this school gets a satisfactory rating.

I feel very sorry for the few teachers who really are first class, who are being dragged down by those who are being left to peddle inadequate teaching in this school.

As you can probably tell I am very frustrated with this school. We moved to this area over 23 years ago before we had children, specifically to give our children a chance to go to the ***** schools based on their reputation in the area. To see the standards deteriorate as they have over the last few years is very sad.

I am happy to be contacted on an individual basis if you are interested in further details."

A teacher's perspective on the state of our schools

Anthony Rudall has had a distinguished 35-year teaching career, both inside and outside the classroom, spread across the armed forces and a wide range of secondary schools in the UK and overseas. His wide educational experience includes acting as 'science expert' for BBC science education projects.

Education, Education, Education

“There is a level of anarchy in many classrooms. Kids are on prescribed drugs and illegal ones. Public examinations can be passed with little depth of subject knowledge. If you look into school handbooks, syllabuses and government guidelines you are hit with incomprehensible babble. Recently my Head of Department included a written apology in her interpretation of one section of the National Key Stage 3 Maths Syllabus for Year 8. She simply could not understand it! This is the promised land of ‘education, education, education’ to which Tony Blair has led us.

In a feeble effort to stem the flow of academic and social degeneration those of us within education are told that we have to try harder. We must meet our targets. My background in private and state education across the age ranges has made me realise that in both sectors we fail to hit the bull's eye, but in the state system we do not even hit the barn door.

I would not get so concerned about it if I did not know for sure what could be turned out by our schools if young people had the appropriate motivation and teaching. As an Instructor Officer in the RN and an Education Officer in the Army, I saw that young people from the age of 16 could achieve in weeks what they had failed to achieve in 11 years of formal school education.

State education and the independent sector are poles apart. Independent schools can almost guarantee that their students will achieve more highly at GCSE and A level than their equivalent state counterparts. Private school pupils tend to have the confidence to hit the world running, whereas, in comparison, comprehensive school students often seem as though they have hardly learnt to walk.

We hear and read a great deal in the media about the horrors of state school education; the disruption, the violence, the drugs, the bullies, the intimidation, the plummeting standards. It is all true. Parents sometimes get the blame but it is we, the teachers, who see the kids more than anyone. Bad kids grow into bad parents, who produce bad kids and so on. It has been going on for more than 30 years. By the time it gets to the courts, the social workers, the police and the drug rehabilitators, it is all too late. Teachers are the only ones in a position to break the vicious circle.

The problem is, partly, cultural. The greatest motivator on the planet is peer group pressure and this is geared towards producing the fashion-obsessed, sex-obsessed and image-obsessed contemptuous youth we see examples of in every school. Fortunately, those we see and read about are still a minority. The bad kids! Unfortunately they have a disproportionate effect on the good kids who retreat into their shells. It is quite frightening! They become quiet, withdrawn and isolated. They are bemused and bored. They look vacant, often tired and remote. Some work silently and progress through the grim saga of Key Stage 3, GCSEs and A-levels, underperforming, but eventually quietly filtering into further education. Others are just lost.

At the forefront of the teacher's awareness and attention are the rowdy role models. The cultural bullies, the attention-seeking crass louts with whom nobody seems to be able to deal.

Where does it all go so wrong? Well it is not as difficult to analyse as the politically correct, bureaucratic bumbler within the management of education would make out. What we dispense is mainly disorganised, dull and delivered, far too often, only by women. And most women agree!

Nearly 30 years ago I left state school teaching for some time in order to join the Royal Navy. I had not been able to survive financially in the maintained schools and issues of political correctness were frustrating my teaching career. I had been the first male teacher many of my Year 7s had ever encountered. Women make great teachers of course, but they, and their male colleagues, suffer because pupils have never had a sufficient number of male role models. That is not going to change overnight. Other things could.

How did primary schools once achieve so much without homework and SATS tests and only 'Nature Study' for science? And why are secondary schools so ignorant of what goes on in the earlier years? There's little or no effective communication between the two stages and the bemused new pupil recruits to secondary education are led forward by the painted, punctured, posing images they see in Year 8 and above.

In their previous schools there was a lot of learning by play with lots of colouring, cutting out, and sticking in. Many secondary school teachers appear to believe that their students cannot cope with much more. GCSE is an extension of an undemanding primary school curriculum. Anything too academic is avoided.

Charisma and ‘personality’ is something teachers often used to have 40 years ago but I have been through 3 separate versions of teacher training and it has never been mentioned. However, it is a key to successful teaching. Sadly, these days, with our highly prescriptive and fake target-driven classroom culture, there is no room for it. It is not surprising that teachers soon lose the little fizz they have.

It gets worse! The eye-liner, the tattoos, the eyebrow studs and the iPads are much more alluring than disorganised, boring, scruffy, overweight, gum-chewing teachers who grimly dispense an unchallenging, watered-down curriculum from behind a desk piled high with the detritus of a term’s frustration.”

Homework – a waste of time?

School homework is in danger of becoming a “completely pointless” task, of little educational value, as schools seek to meet new Ofsted expectations. That, at least, is the view of Tom Bennett, director of the “Research Ed” Conference and one of two UK nominees for the Global Teacher Prize. He has told *The Times Educational Supplement* that he is not against homework ‘per se’ but fears that “too often it’s an exercise in back covering, or box ticking, with no real thought for educational outcomes.”

Tom must have a poor opinion of his teaching colleagues if he considers that they are unable to set worthwhile homework. All that Ofsted is requiring is that “teachers set homework in line with the school’s policy and that challenges all pupils, especially the most able.”

However, the debate he has resurrected is an important one. A major teacher union (ATL) has already called for a ban on homework for primary age pupils and some schools do have a ‘no homework’ policy. In terms of marking and assessment this can make life easier for teachers but it is also claimed that it reduces pressure on children and allows them to enjoy a fuller childhood.

The CRE is very much in favour of nurturing and enriching childhood and there is no valid reason why homework should not enhance this process, rather than being an impediment to it. Unsurprisingly, most children wish to learn and to improve. They understand and accept that relevant homework is intrinsic to learning. If teachers can fulfil their central obligation of encouraging in children a love of learning, then homework ceases to be a burden.

A crucial homework task for all young children, for example, should be to read to their parents each evening. Learning to read, as homework, is not a blight on childhood; rather it is an enrichment of it. It is not only a passport to future learning but the access key to books and to the pleasures they can bring. Pupils see all of this very clearly and most have a strong desire to reinforce their reading skills at home. Which child wishes to be the illiterate kid left behind and with his/her life chances destroyed?

If daily reading homework is fundamental to childhood happiness, homework practice of number-bonds and ‘times-tables’ is not so far behind. Pupils doing arithmetic without this basic knowledge in place become slaves of the calculator and have little concept of what might be a right or a wrong answer. Homework practice should support classwork lessons in numeracy and allows more progress to be made. Few children are prepared to sacrifice learning in order to ditch homework.

Opponents of homework claim that British children get more homework than some other European children. However they fail to point out that the schools in the most successful education systems in the world, notably Shanghai and Singapore, set considerably more homework than ours do. On average 15-year-olds in the UK spend 4.9 hours a week on homework. In Shanghai the average homework time is 13.8 hours per week and, according to the OECD, their 15-year-olds are three years ahead of ours.

Given that pupils in England spend only 195 days per year in school, homework demands are hardly excessive. Former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, gave head teachers the power to determine how much homework a school should set. It is to be hoped that they will not be persuaded to lessen the, already, light load. Worthwhile and carefully planned homework is a real benefit to our children and most youngsters will agree.

A lesson from *The Guardian*: If you seek influence and power, attend a public school

The prospects for influence and power, it seems, have never looked brighter for journalists on *The Guardian* newspaper. First of all, we had the appointment of its deputy editor, Ian Katz, to the position of editor of *Newsnight*, the BBC TV's flagship current affairs programme. Now, we learn that the fellows of an Oxford college, Lady Margaret Hall, have elected its editor, Alan Rusbridger, to take over as College Principal. The talented Mr. R. is due to step down as *Guardian* editor in the summer of 2015 after nearly 20 years in the job. He will, however, retain his links to the newspaper by taking over as chairman of the trust that owns it.

Katz and Rusbridger are much more than members of that Praetorian Guard of liberal-left intellectualism represented by *The Guardian*. They are both products of independent schools and amply demonstrate the long-term impact and advantage of receiving an outstanding education.

Like the current Shadow Education Secretary, Tristram Hunt, Katz attended the highly prestigious University College School (UCS) in affluent Hampstead, north London. As a former head teacher of one of its feeder preparatory schools, just around the corner, I know UCS well. It is a great school. It will have given the fortunate Mr. K. the building blocks, both academic and personal, for his successful career. Few, if any, maintained schools could even dream of providing such an advantage in life as that offered by UCS.

Much the same goes for Alan Rusbridger. He is the product of Cranleigh School, another jewel in the public school system. The benefits of the outstanding education it provides are life long.

For all of its deference to principles of equality, modern Britain remains a society in which destiny is disproportionately determined by the quality of school one attended. Most of our great schools are from the 7 per cent that make up the independent sector. They are supplemented by a scattering of state grammar schools and by a handful of high-achieving comprehensives.

It is these schools that create the 'movers and shakers' of modern Britain. They are a talented elite that speaks for and leads that vast majority who attended second-rate maintained schools and have who never gained the education or the confidence to become leaders themselves. Even 'democratic', populist "Mumsnet", labelled by journalist Toby Young as a further outlet for left-wing *Guardian* readers, is, in part, a product of the

independent school elite. It was the ‘brainchild’ of Justine Roberts, married to the aforementioned Ian Katz and a product of the elite independent Guildford High School.

The future of our country depends on maximising the talents of our children. It is a great tribute to the quality of our private school system that it can produce so many ‘leaders’ in so many fields. It is, sadly, a damning indictment of our maintained schools that, proportionately, so few of its pupils can compete with the best from the independent sector.

No Comment

“Only a third of schools now hold a traditional nativity play at Christmas time. The most common school Christmas celebration (for more than half of all schools) is now an ‘updated nativity’ with modern characters including...aliens, recycling bins, a Sir Alan Sugar-style ‘Lord Christmas’, punk fairies, Elvis, footballers, a lobster, a napkin, carrots, sprouts, a pumpkin and a drunken spaceman...But despite its decline, there is overwhelming pressure from parents to continue the tradition of a Christmas Nativity play.”

(Netmums.com, Dec 2014)

“Ofsted Chief Backs Picking Teachers by Colour ...The head of Ofsted has told LBC he would support positive discrimination in order to employ more teachers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.”

(LBC online report, 7th Jan 2015)

“Terror attacks on schools and colleges around the world have risen to higher levels than at any point in more than 40 years, according to a long-term analysis of global terrorism.”

(BBC report, 6th Jan 2015)

“I have three roles in my classroom: teacher, parent and social worker. Sometimes, the actual teaching part is the least important of all.”

(The Guardian, 10th Jan 2015)

Prime Minister, David Cameron: “A lot of people are unemployed. It is tragic that we can’t do better at training people and preparing them for work.”

(Daily Telegraph, 10th Jan 2015)