

# Campaign for Real Education

[www.cre.org.uk](http://www.cre.org.uk)

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

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## **NEWSLETTER**

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**In the light of the recent and shocking OECD report on the state of basic educational standards of youngsters in England, this edition of our Newsletter is devoted to the CRE’s own report on the barriers to progress in the educational attainment of our schools.**

### **Back to Beveridge!**

#### **CRE report on the five great giants holding back our children’s education**

The 1942 Beveridge Report identified five giants standing in the way of progress towards a welfare state - squalor, want, ignorance, idleness and disease. Social improvement comes at a cost and that cost has to be borne by a successful economy. Successful economies are increasingly dependent on a well-educated population. The recent “OECD Survey of Adult Skills” (Oct 2013) indicates the shocking failure of recent British governments, Conservative and Labour, to combat Beveridge’s giant evil of ignorance. England now languishes towards the bottom of the class amongst industrialised nations in terms of basic literacy and numeracy levels for 16 to 24 year-olds. Our younger generation is actually less competent in the 3Rs than the 55 to 65 age group. How can such a situation have come about? Why did our political leaders tell us, on countless occasions since the late 1980s, that ever improving exam results represented a genuine improvement in standards? Why has the ‘educational establishment’, in general, been so self-congratulatory? Where has it all gone wrong? The Campaign for Real Education believes that the time has come for an open and honest debate on these issues. To initiate this debate we are returning to Beveridge and his five giants. The five giants that we are highlighting are the five great barriers to change and improvement in education: Curriculum, Assessment, Teacher Training, Inspection, Resources. The spirit of Beveridge needs to be revived to combat and overcome these new giants.

#### **Giant 1: Curriculum Straitjacket**

The National Curriculum is a straitjacket that has become a crutch for the current generation of teachers. They are reliant on it, they are addicted to it and they have stopped thinking for themselves. The memory is fading of a time when schools decided, more or less, what they would teach. They were guided by exam syllabuses, occasional inspection visits and by their

own expertise and common sense. It did not always work, of course, which is why Margaret Thatcher was persuaded to have a basic National Curriculum for English, Maths and Science. That idea was hijacked and we ended up with a massively prescriptive and complex curriculum across a dozen subjects. The whole system was built on a fatally-flawed model of spurious progression based, initially, on ten levels for each aspect or Attainment Target of a subject; subsequently reduced to eight levels plus one, for “exceptional performance”. However, for assessment purposes the eight levels were soon divided into sub-levels that gave us an ever more complicated structure. Maths and Science, for example, each have around a hundred different levels of progression when one combines the levels and the sub-levels. Teachers have, necessarily, been teaching the target ‘level’ even where this sacrifices subject integrity. Finally, the damage caused has been recognised and after twenty-five years, the statutory ‘levels’ are to be abolished in the new National Curriculum for 2014.

Nevertheless, the National Curriculum straitjacket in its new revised version will remain and will be followed by most schools. Although academies, free schools and independent schools have the freedom to set their own curriculum, few follow that path. Once ‘hooked’ it is difficult to break the addiction habit. Why teach outside a curriculum that you know will pass muster with school inspectors? The mind-set of too many schools is, “Please tell us what to do and please do not ask us to think for ourselves.” This dumb acceptance has had some fairly disastrous consequences. Employers and universities bewail youngsters’ lack of basic skills and knowledge, as we fail to compete well enough against too many of our economic competitors.

Even a rigorous and sound national curriculum needs the capacity to evolve, to grow and to improve; high performing education systems around the world as much as ours. Diversity and choice within the curriculum and between curricula will enhance the prospects of our education system meeting the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will ensure that the best emerges. If the curriculum “Giant” is to be slain, schools will need to have the courage to go off in their own direction. The CRE is already blazing a trail in this area.

### **Giant 2: Assessment Failure**

Education assessment can be comparatively easy. It does not need to be a quagmire of complexity and complication. We do not need to spend millions of pounds each year developing ever more complicated tests based on a host of artificial assessment levels. If we want to know a young child’s level of attainment in reading and writing - including grammar, spelling and punctuation – a short passage of text will suffice, with a few comprehension questions to be answered in complete sentences. Add to this a requirement to write a half a dozen sentences on an everyday topic that is part of the child’s experience and you will know, more or less, a child’s competence in basic literacy. The whole task can be completed in forty minutes. If we wish to go a little further and cover parts of speech or clauses it is easy enough to ask children to pick them out from a given sentence in the text. It really is that simple. The same applies to mathematics, where a page of well-chosen and varied ‘sums’, plus a few mathematical problems to solve, usually tells the school most of what it needs to know.

The Government’s decision to ditch the National Curriculum levels of attainment and to let school determine their own assessment structures is a move in the right direction. Unfortunately, schools are so ‘locked-in’ to the current model of assessment, and to level-related target setting, that we are unlikely to see maintained schools departing far from a standardised model based on forthcoming non-statutory guidance. In any case, National Curriculum tests are not going away for state schools. They need to feel safe that they are

jumping children through the right hoops. Most independent schools will, of course, continue to plough their own furrow. They will continue to use their own methods of assessment and, thus, avoid their curriculum being strangled and distorted by unreliable national tests that are the ‘playthings’ of politicians but, mostly, do little but paint a fake picture of continuing improvement.

Matters deteriorate noticeably at 16+ where the discredited GCSE exam exercises a virtual monopoly of the academic examination ‘market’. With an overall pass rate that fell to 98.8% [sic] in 2013, it is an exam that is almost impossible to fail and that does little to stretch the more able pupils.

Introduced for teaching in 1986, it has proved a ‘comprehensive exam’ for a largely comprehensive school system. The more rigorous grammar school examination that it replaced, the GCE O-Level, continues to be produced in England for export to our economic competitors such as Singapore. It is, effectively, banned here because it does not appear on the Government’s list of approved qualifications. The Secretary of State has had to retreat in his efforts to restore the O-Level in place of the GCSE. Instead, we are to have a revamped GCSE that, we are promised, will be more rigorous. The reversion to end-of-course exams should reduce unfairness caused by the system of modules and by abuse of the current coursework component. However, a fundamental flaw in the new GCSE is the feasibility of a single exam for all abilities, with the possible exception of maths and science. This ‘pie in the sky’ thinking will benefit neither low ability nor high ability pupils. The Government would have been better advised to allow O-Level to be offered alongside GCSE. A freer market for exams would allow the best exams to win through. The monopoly exercised by GCSE is against the public interest and will not be broken up by simply allowing the option of the International version of GCSE.

At A-Level the overall pass rate has been rising in line with GCSE and continues to rise. It hit 98.1% in 2013, but with a marginal fall in top grades. Nevertheless, with 26.3% of entries hitting A\* and A in 2013, compared to under 10% in the mid-1980s, it continues to be impossible, using A-Level results, for universities to distinguish between the best candidates. Many now set their own entrance tests. More concerning is that some university departments have to put on remedial courses for new undergraduates because A-Level no longer provides adequate preparation to begin a degree course. The International Baccalaureate has not had its credibility undermined by grade inflation. It is the course of choice for some of our leading schools but can be expensive to staff and its breadth suits some, but not all, pupils. The new Pre-U exams do offer a more rigorous alternative to A-Level and the top grades are worth more on the UCAS tariff. It is an examination that is growing in popularity with over 150 schools, spread fairly evenly across the maintained and independent sectors, registered to teach it (2013). Unlike the current modular system at A-Level it is based on an end-of-course exam and should provide a model for new, more rigorous A-Levels promised by Government.

At 18+, then, the situation is slightly more promising than at 16+ but, overwhelmingly, the examination system is dominated by A-Levels. If A-Level remains the ‘easier option’ for university entrance it will continue to distort the exam ‘market’ at 18+. Universities should be giving even greater weight to the more demanding Pre-U as an encouragement to greater rigour in A-Levels.

Meanwhile, many pupils are less suited to academic study than to vocational courses. For too long, vocational courses have been regarded as Cinderella qualifications and, in many cases,

for good reason. The Government's proposal for new Tech Levels is a belated move in the right direction but we have some way to go if we are to match the high quality and high status programmes of vocational training and education on offer in Germany.

The “giant” of deficiencies in our current assessment system for schools is having a devastating impact on our educational attainment. For younger pupils, assessment needs are distorting the curriculum. Teaching to the test has become the norm. For older pupils, the ‘dead hand’ of the GCSE monopoly and the near monopoly of A-Level, has dumbed down standards. For too long, exam boards have been in a race to be easier, in order to attract more punters and to increase market share. High quality vocational qualifications have yet to see the light of day. Only through proper choice and competition between different types of exams and exam boards will we slay the “giant” of assessment failure, raise our assessment aspirations and ensure that assessment here competes with the best in the world.

### **Giant 3: The Tyranny of Teacher Training**

Nothing in education matters more than having high-quality teachers. Everything else is subordinate to this central truth about schools. One can have the best curriculum and assessment system in the world but without good teachers it will be of little consequence. Equally, an impoverished national curriculum and a poor national assessment system will matter little if children have great teachers. Get the teachers ‘right’ and everything else will follow. Teacher training is the bedrock on which we have to build the entire edifice of education in schools. Too often, it is on the periphery of the educational debate. We focus on systems and structures when it is only what happens in the classroom that really matters.

Sadly, too much teaching training is focused more on politically correct ideology and ‘accessibility’ than on the craft of teaching and on subject knowledge. The stranglehold of so-called ‘best practice’ descends even at the application stage for teacher training.

So you are going to apply to be a teacher? You have a real love of your subject(s), a good degree, a passion to teach and a desire to ‘make a difference’. In other words, you believe you have a classroom vocation. What advice can we offer you? To begin with, put aside your enthusiasms about subject knowledge and your desire to share it. Suspend your intelligence. You are about to enter a world where common sense, academic rigour and intellectual debate, are suspended and where conformity to an alternative ‘best practice’ is mandatory. Welcome to the world of education in its most distilled form – teacher training.

Here are ‘Ten Commandments of Best Practice in Teaching’. All new entrants to the profession should embrace them. Commit yourself to these and the door to teacher training will swing open. Question these and you will need to look for another career.

### **Ten Commandments of Teaching**

1. How you teach is more important than what you teach. The process of teaching is more important than what children learn, the product of teaching.
2. Mastering a body of knowledge is an out-of-date aim since knowledge is easily accessed via the internet. Children need only be taught cross-curricular and utilitarian skills to access and evaluate knowledge, not the knowledge itself.

3. Teachers are learning facilitators and process managers of the learning process for each individual child. Whole class teaching is undesirable since it is the antithesis of 'personalised', computer-assisted learning.
4. Central to a pupil's classroom experience, and of paramount importance, is the 'feel-good' factor. Children are not capable of accepting adverse criticisms or judgements and should not be subjected to them.
5. There is no such thing as 'failure'. To try is to succeed.
6. All of a pupil's work should be celebrated all of the time.
7. A principal objective of education is to promote 'value relativism'. There is no such thing as objective truth. All knowledge is provisional.
8. Teaching is too complicated and sophisticated a process to be understood by anyone outside of the profession, including parents and Government.
9. Competition in both academic and non-academic areas of school life is divisive. It is inherently bad since it involves 'winners' and 'losers'.
10. Assessment of pupils and of teachers can only be properly carried out from within the profession.

Whilst the most successful education systems, such as Finland and Singapore, have been recruiting teachers from amongst its best graduates the majority of our teachers have been recruited from the bottom end of the graduate pile. This is not to state that the most academic graduates will, necessarily, make the best teachers. It is to propose that we need to be drawing more of our new teachers from those who are both academically gifted and who have a real vocation and ability to teach. A consequence of failing to recruit sufficient numbers of the brightest and best graduates has been the side lining of 'knowledge' in favour of so-called 'skills'. Acquisition and mastery of a body of subject knowledge can be a formidable challenge to both teacher and pupil. Focusing, instead, on 'skills' is the easy pathway. So, we have phrase-book foreign language teaching, fake exercises in evidence evaluation for history, moral issues replacing scientific knowledge and study of literature with the hard bits taken out. All of this is enveloped in a blanket of political correctness and social engineering.

If we are to improve standards of education it is imperative that this stranglehold of teacher training, whether school-based or university-based, is broken. Trainee teachers might learn their first lesson from the speech made in 1978 by Isaac Bashevis-Singer on his acceptance of the Nobel Prize. He was giving reasons why he writes for children:

*'Children don't read to find their identity. They don't read to free themselves of guilt, to quench their thirst for rebellion, or to get rid of alienation. They have no use for psychology. They detest sociology. They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff. They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides, or footnotes. When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority. They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that it is not in his power. Only adults have such childish illusions.'*

It can be argued that teachers are born, not made. The whole process of teacher training has, in many respects, become an impediment to successful teaching.

#### **Giant 4: Inspection Enforcers**

Once we fall into the trap of accepting a perceived ‘best practice’ in teaching and learning it is inevitable that schools will be judged against the criteria associated with this ‘best practice’. Just as a commitment to a particular vision of schooling underpins access to teacher training, so a promotion of this vision has to be ‘enforced’ on schools. This is where, crucially, the inspection giant becomes involved. All schools need to be subjected to an inspection process and not only for reasons of general child welfare. Inspectors should ensure that children are not being ‘short-changed’ in any area of school life. Problems arise when the blueprint for inspection is simply a means of enforcing the pre-determined vision of ‘best practice’. Worse, adherence to the blueprint can disguise real failure. There can be a mismatch between box ticking that indicates success or failure and the reality ‘on the ground’. Not so long ago, for example, a Blackburn school ticked all the right boxes for Ofsted to judge the behaviour of its pupils to be “good”. Shortly afterwards the teachers at the school went on strike to protest against violence and threats from the pupils.

Nor is it difficult to move from a specific example of inspection failure to more general and widespread failure. The OECD report of October 2013 placing 16 – 24 year-olds in England towards the bottom of the international league table of developed countries in terms of literacy and numeracy has not come ‘out of the blue’. It is the consequence of a very deliberate education policy based around new ‘knowledge-lite’ definitions of school subjects. These new subject definitions have been enforced by the inspectors as well as by teacher trainers. They differ substantially from the more knowledge-based subjects taught to an older generation. It is no accident that 55 – 65 year-olds are near the top of the same OECD international league tables for their age group. However, from the point-of-view of inspectors, ‘knowledge-lite’ subject teaching, with a greater emphasis on ‘personalised’ and child-centred learning has become the desired goal. This ‘best practice’ teaching method has become an end in itself. Consequently, for example, until very recently, we had a prescribed method of teaching reading based on the so-called ‘real books’ method, that condemned many children to a life of illiteracy. This method was enforced as ‘best practice’ by Ofsted inspectors. It was, also, more or less enshrined in law by the original National Curriculum. In other words, in maintained schools, it became illegal to teach children to read properly using the traditional phonics approach. The inspectors oversaw and enforced this failed methodology. Indeed, it has been the inspection service that has overseen the entire collapse of our educational standards. What has been true of the teaching of reading can be applied, equally, to the teaching of basic arithmetic and the aversion to rote learning of ‘tables’ from an early age, for example.

The current Government has attempted to restore, through its revised National Curriculum, some of the lost subject knowledge in our schools. However, it remains at the mercy of an unsympathetic ‘educational establishment’ in the implementation of these reforms. The ‘knowledge-lite’ culture, and its attendant framework of political correctness, will continue to dominate since it permeates the inspection process as much as it permeates teacher training. Superficial changes to the paperwork will not bring about lasting change. The culture of education in our country needs to change. A start could be made through ensuring that school inspection teams really do understand that there is not a single ‘best practice’ way of doing things. Quite a challenge!

## **Giant 5: The Stranglehold of Resources**

For over-worked teachers, short of time, it is the availability of teaching resources that determine, to a considerable extent, how children are taught and what they taught. Many teachers do not think for themselves. They are 'resource reliant'. Who controls the teaching resources controls the teaching. Matters have now deteriorated to such an extent that according to "The Times" newspaper (15<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013) the Education Secretary of State's "closest advisor" has suggested that many "teachers are so mediocre that they should be given a script to read to pupils and forced to follow standardised lesson plans." 'Resource reliance' means that this is already happening in many schools. The battle to be fought is over who controls and publishes resource material. Some primary academy schools have already gone down the pathway of the Singapore maths curriculum. Alternative and less rigorous pathways are likely to have a wider and more seductive appeal and to be followed by many educational publishers who wish to keep in line with 'best practice' interpretations of the National Curriculum.

It comes as no surprise to find that the modern generation of textbooks and software is 'knowledge-lite' and undemanding compared to textbooks that once served our high-performing older generation. Any school searching for such traditional teaching resources is likely to come up short. The emphasis these days is on 'personalised learning' – a programme of learning to suit each individual child. This ignores the fact that a body of subject knowledge cannot be personalised. Fundamental building blocks, such as axioms in mathematics or grammar in language learning, cannot be personalised for an individual learner. Whole class teaching is efficient and effective, tried and tested. It runs against the prevailing fashion in this country for personalised learning but is central to successful education systems across the world.

The growing fashion for 'personalised learning' in our schools has led to a great surge in reliance on technology. It is through computers that learning can be made truly personal. It allows pupils to proceed at their own pace under loose supervision by a teacher. Technology certainly has an important part to play in our schools but its effectiveness over more traditional resources is very much open to question. The quality of educational software varies enormously. Computers are the opium of mass education. They often give a short-term boost to pupil focus and concentration. At the same time, as Baroness Greenfield has warned, they are changing the physiology of the brain and taking young children, in particular, into unknown territory in terms of their overall mental and emotional development. We may be facing a ticking time bomb of what she describes as "mind change"; as great a danger to the future as 'climate change'. What will be the consequence of our obsession with technology inside and outside the classroom? Children are becoming immersed in a virtual world of the screen. Who knows what will be the long-term consequences in terms of sensitivity to the needs of others, interpersonal awareness and general mental health? The stranglehold of this giant needs to be loosened and a balance sought between the best of the traditional textbook and best of technology.

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## No comment

**“This year the overall A\*-E grade pass rate did rise for the 31st successive year, creeping up to 98.1%”**

*Times Educational Supplement, 16.8.2013, regarding A-Level results*

**“A brief explanation of summer 2013 GCSE results...the proportion passing (A\*-G) is down 0.2 percentage points to 98.8 [sic] per cent.”**

*The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)*

**“The British Chambers of Commerce said that many employers had been left ‘disheartened and downright frustrated’ by poor levels of literacy, numeracy, communication and timekeeping among school leavers and graduates.”**

*Daily Telegraph, 14.8.2013*

**“Allied to these teaching methods which have nothing to do with passing on knowledge there has also been an emphasis on teachers having to put their own learning aside so that work is ‘relevant’ to the students. This has resulted in the dumbing of educational material down to the level of the child – with GCSE English papers that ask students about Tinie Tempah, or Simon Cowell – rather than encouraging the child to thirst after the knowledge of the teacher.”**

*Michael Gove, speech to Policy Exchange, 5.9.2013*

**"Many teachers today have an actual fear of knowledge. They find it frightening, threatening, dominating, and oppressive.”**

*Professor Michael Young, quoted in online magazine, "Spiked", 21.10.2013*

**“Regular moderate to vigorous exercise improves teens’ academic performance, and particularly seems to help girls do better in science...”**

*BMJ Press release, 21.10.2013*