teachers and government
a history of intervention in education

by Professor Michael Bassey for
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The Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Driving the education debate.
Teachers and government: a history of intervention in education

Foreword by Dr. Mary Bousted

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers is pleased to further the education debate by publishing this thought-provoking history of government legislation in education. Professor Michael Bassey has written an historical explanatory account of how teaching was seen by politicians in the second half of the twentieth century. He provides a valuable contribution for those joining the profession and for experienced teachers interested to know how education and the teaching profession have progressed to where they are today.

This publication comes at a time of uncertainty for the teaching profession. Politicians of all parties are focusing on the public sector and education is, again, a prominent and much debated issue.

Not all views are necessarily representative of ATL and its 160,000 members. However, in publishing this document, ATL is signalling that there are legitimate questions to be asked about the role government plays in education today. These are not questions that can be answered easily. The important thing is that the teaching profession has a voice in the discussion. It is time to make ourselves heard in the debate and it is time that government listened to the experience and knowledge of an intelligent and reflective profession.

Michael Bassey poses some important questions. By offering you insightful, reasoned argument and discussion, ATL invites you to reflect and respond and to be part of this key debate for the twenty-first century.
The author, Michael Bassey is an emeritus professor of education of Nottingham Trent University, the recently retired academic secretary of the British Educational Research Association and an academian of the Academy of Social Sciences. His publications include *Nine Hundred Primary School Teachers*, NFER Publishing Co 1978, *Practical Classroom Organisation in the Primary School*, Ward Lock 1978, *Creating Education through Research*, Kirklington Moor Press and British Educational Research Association 1995 and *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*, Open University Press 1999. He developed the idea of ‘fuzzy generalisation’ as a meeting ground between research and policy/practice: instead of asking ‘what works?’, practitioners and policy-makers should ask ‘what may work – and in what circumstances?’ He lives in Nottinghamshire with his wife, who was a primary school headteacher during 10 years of constant intervention by national government.

Twentieth century education milestones

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td><strong>Education Act</strong>: minister to carry ultimate responsibility for promoting education, with local education authorities (LEAs) responsible for its development; secondary education for all established within a <em>tripartite system</em> (grammar, secondary modern and secondary technical), with the 11+ examination as the mode of selection; <strong>Central Advisory Committee for Education</strong> (CACE) established, comprising teachers and academics, to advise ministers on educational theory and practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960 onwards</td>
<td><strong>Comprehensive schools</strong> begin to replace the tripartite system.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Establishment of <strong>Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations</strong> asserts teacher control over curriculum and teaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td><strong>Assessment of Performance Unit</strong> (APU) is set up to monitor national standards.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><strong>Technical and Vocational Education Initiative</strong> (TVEI) is launched – first government intervention into curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Schools Council is abolished and replaced by the <strong>School Examinations Council</strong> (SEC), and <strong>School Curriculum Development Council</strong> (SCDC).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>CACE abolished.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td><strong>National Curriculum Task Group on Assessment and Testing</strong> (TGAT) recommends criterion-referenced SATs, levels of attainment, and national assessments at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>First <strong>General Certificate of Secondary Education</strong> (GCSE) exams replace O-Levels and CSEs.</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td><strong>Education Reform Act</strong> establishes the national curriculum and its assessment system. National Curriculum Council (NCC) and School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC), league tables, grant maintained schools and local management of schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><strong>Education (Schools) Act</strong> establishes the <strong>Office for Standards in Education</strong> (Ofsted).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><strong>School Curriculum and Assessment Authority</strong> (SCAA) replaces NCC and SEAC.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><strong>Teacher Training Agency</strong> (TTA) established.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td><strong>Qualifications and Curriculum Authority</strong> (QCA) replaces SCAA and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997 onwards</td>
<td>Government sets <strong>targets for attainment in literacy, maths and science</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td><strong>General Teaching Council</strong> (GTC) established.</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td><strong>National Literacy Strategy</strong> (NLS) and <strong>National Numeracy Strategy</strong> (NMS) begin; later changed to <strong>Primary National Strategy</strong>.</td>
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Introduction from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

What should education be about in a democratic society?

Much government rhetoric suggests that education is always about preparing children for a later stage in their lives. Early years education prepares young children for school; primary school prepares children for secondary education; and secondary education prepares young people for the world of work, for university entrance and for lifelong learning.

Tests and exams allow governments to monitor how well this preparation is going, although there are still arguments, along the lines articulated by Michael Bassey as to whether young people are leaving school with the basic skills needed by universities or by industry. To what extent should education be about preparation for the future?

Preparation for the future leads, perhaps inevitably, to a top-down model where decisions about the kinds of skills needed at 16 lead to the development of certain kinds of education in primary school and earlier.

““To what extent should education be about preparation for the future?”

ATL has often pointed out that government initiatives are developed for secondary education in the first instance and then somehow made to work in primary schools. We have argued that the national curriculum is a secondary, subject-based model. Children are required to reach Level 4 at the end of primary school, not because this is the logical end point of a good quality primary system, but because it is ‘the door to success in the secondary school’ (DfES 2003: 19). ATL’s own research, Inside the Foundation Stage reports evidence that ‘reception class practitioners experienced pressure from their Key Stage 1 colleagues to prioritise particular kinds of achievements (for example, literacy, numeracy and familiarity with particular school routines…)’ (ATL 2004: 19).

Not only is education seen to be about preparation for the future but schools are also perceived as the panacea for all the ills of today’s society. The White Paper, Every Child Matters, and the Children Act, 2004, put schools at the centre of initiatives to protect children and to support parenting; physical education (PE) programmes at school are intended to halt the rise of obesity among children and young people; citizenship lessons are designed to halt the decline in voting among young people, while sex education serves to reduce teenage pregnancies.

Teachers are well aware of their role in supporting children’s development and well-being, but how far should the education system, and the professionals within it, be responsible for correcting the problems of poverty and deprivation?

Michael Bassey reminds us (see page 18) of the 1967 Plowden Report, which talks of the school as a community; as an environment in which children can learn and develop in ways that are appropriate to their needs and interests. It suggests that ensuring that schools are fit for children’s current stages of development is the best way of looking to the future. Is this still the best way of considering the role of education, nearly 40 years on?

What is the legitimate role of government?

This publication addresses the changes in the role of government since the middle of the twentieth century and it is interesting to see how the balance of power between the profession and government has shifted in that time.
‘No-go’ areas for government have changed: in the past, politicians had ‘no say in what goes on in schools’ (see page 9); now it appears to be perfectly legitimate for government to involve itself in determining curriculum, pedagogy, accountability mechanisms, funding, school design, training and professional development for the school workforce. In the past, politicians did not see themselves, or their officials, as competent to intervene (see page 10); today, national and local politicians, their officials and the private companies contracted to develop strategies all assume an expertise in education matters.

Michael Bassey points out the perverse consequences of this shift of emphasis. He quotes the National Commission on Education Report which says that ‘central control damages teaching’, thus developing the argument against central control. It is an argument with which ATL has agreed on numerous occasions, and Mary Bousted, ATL’s general secretary, is quoted as saying that “New Labour needs to curb its ‘control freakery’”.

Perhaps the Government is beginning to listen. In his foreword to the Five Year Strategy, Charles Clarke suggested ‘a reshaped role for Local Government and for my Department (the DfES), moving away from direction towards an enabling and empowering role… (and) freedom for those at the front line to personalise services and to improve them’ (DfES 2004: 5).

If the role of government is changing, what then is the role of professionals in this ‘personalised’ education system?

Michael Bassey’s underlying argument here is that ‘in the social professions…, the professionals in a locality are usually better placed than politicians in central government to determine what actions should be taken by the professionals in the best interests of the people whom they serve’ (see page 7).

He questions how far this is possible in an education system that, in Bassey’s words, ‘has moved in the last fifteen years from being probably the least state-controlled system in the world to the most’, and asks what needs to be done if personalised learning is to be a possibility. In Bassey’s view, it requires a radical look at the place of Ofsted, the status of the national curriculum, and the use of tests and tables.

“New Labour needs to curb its ‘control freakery’”

Alongside personalised services comes ‘consumer’ choice, including perhaps:

• the ‘right’ for parents to choose schools for their children, so that teachers become accountable to parents rather than politicians;
• a greater diversity of provision, including this government’s specialist schools and academies, or the Conservative Party’s proposals for charities, businesses, groups of parents or teachers to establish schools;
• choice and ‘personalised’ learning for pupils, particularly those over 14 years of age.

Perhaps we must accept that things have changed: we cannot return to some, probably mythical, golden age. If the role of government changes, what is to stop other agencies, or parents, from dictating the pace and direction of change? In his suggestions of what government might do (page 38 onwards), Michael Bassey proposes some major changes to the role of government in education.

Each has immediate appeal, yet each will have consequences, and taken together those consequences could be huge and may be unpalatable for the government of the day.

The consequences may also be unpalatable for teachers. If we are to question the role that government currently plays in determining education policy, we need also to consider our own proposals for what that role should be. How far are we, as a profession, willing to accept the consequences for our own roles?
How can we reinvest teachers and schools with the power to determine what’s best for children?

Michael Bassey provides the profession with a challenge. He suggests that part of the reason for increased central control is that in a rapidly changing world, the teaching profession did not recognise the need for change to the school system, opening up the opportunity for government to take control. If government is to loosen its hold, what levels of responsibility should be returned to the teaching profession?

Michael Bassey argues cogently for each of the proposals he makes – but his is only one opinion. Yet without question, the government has become more and more involved in determining what’s best for children, prescribing how teachers should ‘deliver’ the services (and the curriculum) that will best suit those children, setting the criteria for success, and measuring teachers’ and children’s performance along the way. We cannot just say “hands off” to government and expect them suddenly to decide to leave it all to the profession. We must decide what should be the legitimate role of the profession in determining what’s best for children.

What should education be about in a democratic society?

References

Unrealistic targets lower staff morale: ministers are warned that targets for 11-year-olds are counter-productive

High targets for 11-year-olds in maths and English are becoming counter-productive and narrowing the curriculum, an official report on the national literacy and numeracy strategies will say next week.

Education minister Stephen Twigg has called for a “significant improvement” in English and maths this year to put the 2004 targets within grasp. But academics at the University of Toronto said national targets may no longer motivate teachers, particularly if they are seen to be unrealistic...

...Two-thirds of those consulted on the 2004 targets said they were too high, but the Government has refused to lower its goal of 85 per cent of 11-year-olds reaching level 4 in English and maths.

...Setting targets helped mobilise the teachers early on, said the researchers. But by 2002 the high political stakes resting on 11-year-olds’ test scores – partly responsible for the departure of Education Secretary Estelle Morris – was skewing teaching methods and narrowing the curriculum.

TES (Helen Ward) 24 January 2003

Government remains determined to stick with SATS targets even as results stall for fourth year

The sky is the limit for improvements to 11-year-olds’ national test scores, the senior civil servant in charge of English schools said this week as results stalled for the fourth year running.

Union leaders accused ministers of sticking too slavishly to targets but Peter Housden said that the Government was as determined as ever to press on.

The provisional results show that 75 per cent of 11-year-olds have reached the expected level 4 in English, now unchanged since 2000. In maths, 73 per cent reached the grade, the same proportion as last year. ...Seven-year-olds’ results have also stalled. ...David Miliband, school standards minister, said: “We don’t hide the fact we would like to see faster progress towards the target of 85 per cent of 11-year-olds reaching level 4.”

TES (Helen Ward) 22 August 2003

Slayer of sacred cows will call on ministers to lose their ‘control freakery’

Mary Bousted, Association of Teachers and Lecturers’ general secretary, said (at the ATL conference in Bournemouth) that New Labour needed to curb its “control freakery” and obsession with charging ahead with policy without consulting those who had to implement it.

TES (William Stewart) 9 April 2004
A time to intervene and a time to stop

The underlying argument of this publication is that, in the social professions like education, medical care, policing and social work, where human concern for other people is at least as important as remuneration for services rendered, the professionals in a locality are usually better placed than politicians in central government to determine what actions should be taken by the professionals in the best interests of the people whom they serve.¹

From time to time it may be desirable for government to intervene and try to re-align the way a group of social professionals perform their services, on the grounds of national interest, such as cost to the public exchequer, or perceived future predicaments. But such intervention should be cautious and short-lived, for inevitably it distorts the ways in which the social professionals relate to those whom they seek to serve and weakens their capacity to make their own decisions.²

This publication is about major government intervention in the education system of England, which began under the Thatcher government with the Education Reform Act of 1988, and has continued unabated under the Major and Blair governments. In particular it focuses on the rising tide of opposition to government-imposed tests, targets and inspections of the years 2003 and 2004.

I will argue that government intervention has already re-aligned the education system to the needs of the 21st century and now is counter-productive, being restrictive of children’s development and destructive of teacher morale.

It is time to stop ministerial intervention, to restore autonomy to schools and teachers, and to reduce monitoring of performance to the minimum needed to ensure that in, say, 10 years’ time, the government of the day can know whether it needs again to intervene. It is time to trust the teachers – on the grounds that teachers know best what their pupils need.

“It is time to stop ministerial intervention”

Notes

¹Target setting, of course, was a major strategy in New Labour’s drive for reform but several social professions found that it became counter-productive. In May 2003, Chris Fox, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, said that the police suffered from being set too many government targets. (The Observer 18 May 2003) and in November 2003, Professor Sheila Read, commissioned by the Nuffield Trust to assess the Government’s ten-year initiative to drive up quality in the health service, in her report, Quest for Quality, said: ‘Political interference and an obsession with targets are threatening to derail the major improvements Tony Blair promised for hospitals.’ (The Observer 23 November 2003)

²In a speech on 8 February 2001 Tony Blair said: ‘After years of intervention centrally, necessary to get the foundations right and basic standards in place, I want power devolved down in our public services, so that the creative energy of our teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers is incentivised and released. They are the social entrepreneurs of the future.’ Three years later there was no evidence of such devolution.
Instead there is a constant flow of national diktats: to control what shall be taught and in some cases how it shall be taught; to set targets for the number of pupils who shall reach specified levels of attainment; to test children to determine whether these targets have been achieved; and to regulate how schools are managed. This system is monitored by regular inspections to assess the quality of teaching and management and to ensure that diktats are being implemented, and is set by local and national media in a public framework of criticism of those who do not succeed in jumping through the hoops and acclaim for those who do.

But it is all recent. It is important to realise that in the mid-twentieth century teachers and schools worked more or less to a professional consensus, without government direction, and much credit was given to our schools for their achievements.

In 1941, the gloomiest time for England during World War II, the historian G M Trevelyan wrote, on the last page of his *English Social History*, this footnote: ‘The battle of Waterloo was won, not on the playing fields of Eton, but on the village greens of England. The men who fought in the ranks on June 18, 1815, were little educated but they had the qualities of countrybred men. Today we are urban and educated. The flyers of the RAF are not and could not be the product of rural simplicity. If we win this war, it will have been won in the primary and secondary schools’ (Trevelyan 1941: 586).

It was a time when government determined the structure and financing of schools, but did not intervene in the curriculum, pedagogy or assessment. Indeed it is said that when, during that war, Churchill asked the President of the Board of Education, ‘Can’t you ensure that the schools are more patriotic?’, R A Butler replied, ‘I have no say in what is done in schools’.

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“Can’t you ensure that the schools are more patriotic?” Churchill

Prolonged negotiations with interested bodies (and Conservative and Labour agreement in the wartime coalition government) led to the passing of the Education Act of 1944. The first clause of the Act stated that while the new post of minister would carry ultimate responsibility for promoting education, the local education authorities would be the agency for its development.

*It shall be lawful for His Majesty to appoint a Minister whose duty it shall be to promote the education of the people of England and Wales and the progressive development of institutions devoted to that purpose, and to secure the effective execution by local authorities, under his control and direction, of the national policy for providing a varied and comprehensive educational service in every area.* (Part I, para 1)

Local education authorities were required to draw up development plans for developing primary and secondary education and the new ministry began to issue circulars on how this should be done.
The concern was about the building and staffing of sufficient schools of different types for future numbers of pupils. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment were not mentioned.

This concept of a ‘no-go area’ – for both national and local government – is described by the education historian Brian Simon in these words:

‘The 1960s are commonly assessed as marking a striking growth in teacher autonomy, especially in relation to the curriculum. … [T]he received (and official view) of the 1960s was that the curriculum (or what went on in schools) was the specific responsibility of the teachers – not of the local authorities (though their role was unclear) and certainly not the state – or the central government’ (Simon 1991: 311).

Simon goes on to quote a Schools Council publication of 1975 which described leaving the curriculum to teachers to determine as ‘the State’s first duty’. Published just a year before James Callaghan’s Ruskin speech altered the atmosphere, the editors stated with ringing confidence:

‘It is remarkable how firmly entrenched now is the purely twentieth century dogma that the curriculum is a thing to be planned by teachers and by other educational professionals alone and that the State’s first duty in this matter is to maximise teacher autonomy and freedom’ (idem).

“\textbf{If we win this war, it will have been won in the primary and secondary schools.}”

MINISTERS BAULK AT GCSE REFORMS

The Government is poised to reject the most radical aspects of this week’s Tomlinson report, which proposes the biggest reforms of secondary education for more than half a century. Within days of being presented with the blueprint for a new, all-embracing diploma, ministers appeared to be having doubts about the plans, putting themselves in conflict with much of the education world.

The dispute centres on changes to the GCSE which would mean that most youngsters would take few external exams until age 18.

Ministers are extremely nervous about the bigger role for teacher assessment in the new diploma system, which would be implemented by 2014. The Prime Minister said that the diploma would not replace GCSEs and A-levels, while David Miliband, school standards minister, said the titles of current qualifications would be retained. Charles Clarke, the education secretary, said that any new system would be based on traditional, externally-assessed exams, though the report suggests that teacher assessment would dominate.

…John Dunford, general secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, said ministers’ reluctance to back teacher assessment “demonstrates a major lack of confidence in the teaching profession”.

…Michael Howard, the Tory leader, also pledged to retain the GCSE and A-level titles under any new diploma and promised a return to the system in which fixed proportions of students achieve A grades at A-level.

The Government risks a confrontation with much of the education world if it vetoes the teacher assessment plan. Organisations ranging from England’s General Teaching Council to universities, private schools and headteachers’ leaders have backed the move.

\textit{TES} (Warwick Mansell and Michael Shaw) 22 October 2004

TAKE AWAY SHACKLES ON MATHS TEACHERS

The dominance of tests, exams, targets and league tables leaves little space for creative people to teach in stimulating and effective ways. Teachers feel compelled to give pupils superficial test-passing skills rather than deep understanding and a real sense of the value of maths. That is bad for pupils, fails to meet the needs of higher education and employers and makes teaching an uncongenial task. …Removing some of the testing regime shackles would give good maths teachers more freedom to teach well and more time for sustained professional development.

\textit{TES} (Doug French, Mathematical Association) 7 February 2003
Anthony Crosland, who was Secretary of State for Education and Science for the two years 1965-67, strongly endorsed the autonomy of teachers. Shortly after his term of office, he told the researcher Maurice Kogan that:

‘The nearer one comes to the professional content of education, the more indirect the minister’s influence is. And I’m sure this is right … generally I didn’t regard either myself or my officials as in the slightest degree competent to interfere with the curriculum. We are educational politicians and administrators, not professional educators’ (Kogan 1971: 172).

In the 1950s and 1960s government concerns about education were focused through the occasional, but significant, reports of its Central Advisory Council. This body (for England and a similar one for Wales) had been set up by the 1944 Education Act. Its members (social thinkers, teachers and academics) had the duty of advising the Minister of Education ‘upon such matters connected with educational theory and practice as they think fit, and upon any questions referred to them by him (sic)’. They were non-political bodies of experts brought together to receive and reflect on professional judgement and research evidence, and then to offer guidance to national government, local government and institutions, on effective ways of enhancing educational provision – with careful respect to both governmental duty and teacher autonomy. Major reports included: 15 to 18, (Crowther 1959), Half Our Future, (Newsom 1963), Higher Education, (Robbins 1963), Children and their Primary Schools, (Plowden 1967).

However, the Thatcher government did not value the guidance given and abolished the Central Advisory Council in 1986:

‘without any suggestion for the establishment of any organisation which could draw both on expert and public opinion and act in an advisory capacity to the politicians and civil servants’ (Simon 1991: 507).
A powerful justification for teacher autonomy had been given in 1947 by Sir Ernest Barker in a book widely read at the time, National Character:

‘The Ministry of Education may issue ‘suggestions for teachers’ in various subjects; the inspectors of the Ministry, and those of the local authority, may both advocate their particular methods; but the independence of the headmaster (sic) and his staff in the sphere of curricula is already large, and is not likely to be diminished… Anyone who knows our State schools, primary and secondary, will be proud of the work which their teachers are doing to enrich and deepen national character, not only by what they teach, but also by what they do and what they are’ (Barker 1947: 229-230).

But Barker also gave a prescient warning of the consequences of losing this autonomy:

‘A system of national education is, as it were, a new tool in the hands of the State; and it may use the new tool for what it imagines to be its own ends. It may attempt a uniform prescription from a central office, of a single code intended to realise a national idea conceived in the brain of its own officials, and it may thus seek to defeat the right of self-determination which, in education no less than in other matters, is inherent in any democratically governed community’ (ibid: 228).

It is Barker’s phrase about the work of teachers ‘to enrich and deepen national character, not only by what they teach, but also by what they do and what they are’ that explains why teachers today need to be re-empowered. Teachers need to walk tall in society. They need to be respected by pupils, parents, and society at large, for their wisdom, their humanity, their morality, their knowledge, their skills, and, above all, for their ability to enthuse their pupils with the same qualities. When government tries to control what ‘teachers teach’ and ‘what they do’, inevitably this constrains what they are – and overall inhibits their ability to ‘enrich and deepen national character’.

So why did government break from the prevailing view and begin to control what happens in schools? What went wrong in schools in the 1970s?

**What the papers said:**

**Inspections cut to the bone: Ofsted recalls its troops to save money in the run-up to new quick and cheap visits**

The number of inspections will be slashed by almost 2,000 next year as ministers strive to get more money direct to schools. Inspectors will visit only 2,750 schools during 2004/5 as the Office for Standards in Education struggles to cope with a budget cut of more than £15 million. This compares with 4,443 this year. … Ofsted’s budget this year will be £192m, compared with £208m last year.

…The proposed new framework places greater emphasis on school self-evaluation and would drastically reduce the warning schools receive of an impending inspection.

…The National Union of Teachers says that schools will continue to live in fear of inspections. “Ofsted has contributed to a culture of compliance under which schools and teachers prepare for evaluation out of fear rather than commitment and enthusiasm,” said its consultation paper on the new framework.

*TES (Jon Slater and Roger Bushby) 7 May 2004*

**Tests result bombshell kept under wraps**

Research that casts doubt on improvements in national test results has remained unpublished by England’s exam regulator for nearly two years.

The failure of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to publish the research – which suggests that scores have risen partly because tests have become easier – has raised concerns about its independence from ministers.

Big improvements in Key Stage 2 test results in the years 1997-2000 for English and maths have been described as the biggest education vote-winner for Labour at the 2001 general election.

…However, there is no suggestion that the Government deliberately made any test easier. Some got harder, the research found, and there is evidence of genuine improvements over the period.

*TES (Warwick Mansell) 17 October 2003*

**Mps say scrap national targets**

The Commons Education Select Committee said that national targets should be scrapped in favour of a system where schools set their own goals based on individual pupils’ ability. Barry Sheerman, chairman of the committee, accused ministers of “testing schools to distraction”.

*TES (Jo Slater) 17 October 2003*
Different people will have different perspectives on educational change in this period. This is the account of one who was active as a teacher-educator and educational researcher during this period and, as such, in regular contact with schools and teachers.

In the period following the 1944 Education Act there were, in England and Wales, primary schools to age 11 and three kinds of secondary school (grammar, secondary modern and secondary technical), known as the tripartite system. Two major influences on the curriculum were the 11+ examination which determined the entry to secondary education (influencing the curriculum of the later years of primary education although only about one-fifth of each age group gained grammar school places) and university entrance requirements (influencing grammar schools although only about one-fifth of their pupils took university places).

By 1970 the education system in every sector seemed to be advancing. Comprehensive schools were replacing the tripartite secondary schools in many parts of the country and national expenditure on education was rising. The breaking down of inter-subject barriers known as the ‘integrated day’ and ‘topic work’ was permeating primary schools and attracting international interest – particularly from the United States. Instead of teaching separately timetabled subjects such as English, history, geography, and science, many primary school teachers would integrate the work of their classes around topics and draw ways of looking at the topics from the separate disciplines. It was a time of excitement.

As Simon records:
‘Morale was high among teachers, local authorities and even at the DES. There was a general expectation of further growth, of exciting innovations. To many, the traditional educational structure of the past seemed ripe for a new break-out where educational forms embodying new humanist perspectives might be made a reality’ (Simon 1991: 405).

But soon afterwards, as Simon put it, in political terms it was ‘downhill all the way’.

In October 1974 Keith Joseph, as Conservative Shadow Home Secretary, made a much publicised speech on a perceived decline in national life, attributable in part to the education system.

Simon describes his call for a ‘remoralisation’ of national life in these terms:
‘Values were being systematically undermined. Parents were being diverted from their duty as regards education, health, morality, advice and guidance. Delinquency, truancy, vandalism, hooliganism, illiteracy – all these accompanied the decline in educational standards… Particular venom was directed at ‘left-wing intellectuals’, motivated primarily ‘by hatred of their own country’. In a powerful climax Joseph claimed that ‘these well-orchestrated sneers’ from their strongholds in the educational system and media ‘have weakened the national will to transmit to future generations those values, standards and aspirations which have made England admired the world over’ (Simon 1991: 438).
The floodgates were open. The Times, The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph gave space to assaults on comprehensive schools. BBC’s Panorama screened a damning programme of a day in a ‘typical’ comprehensive school (unfairly choosing a social priority school) and Brian Cox and Rhodes Boyson edited a Black Paper entitled Fight for Education in which they proposed tests for all at ages seven, 11 and 14. British industry added its voice with the managing director of GEC entitled an article ‘I blame the teachers’ for the shortcomings of manufacturing industry.

“What the papers said:"

Pass marks set too low: research throws doubt on English tests’ reliability

The pass mark for a crucial set of national curriculum tests, which apparently showed the Government transforming primary pupils’ English skills, was set at least four marks too low, research for the test regulator has shown.

In findings which cast a shadow over the reliability of the testing regime, an independent study for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which sets the tests, has revealed that pupils’ achievements in English were overestimated. Pass marks for the Key Stage 2 tests in 1999 and 2000 should have been set four or five marks higher than they actually were to maintain standards with previous years, the research says.

…The findings are contained in a £300,000 study commissioned by the QCA in 1999 which, as the TES revealed last week, has remained unpublished for nearly two years.

In 1999 and 2000 there were dramatic improvements in English tests for 11-year-olds. In 1998, 64 per cent of youngsters reached the expected level 4. In 1999, the figure rose to 71 per cent and in 2000, 75 per cent. But the study by Alf Massey, of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, suggests these figures were too high.

…the TES understands the research found that in English KS2, the later tests were easier than the 1996 version.

The QCA cut the number of marks needed for pupils to reach level 4 from 51 out of 100 in 1998 to 48 in 1999. David Blunkett, the former education secretary, was forced to launch an inquiry after newspaper claims that ministers had lowered this pass mark. The inquiry cleared the Government and Mr Massey’s research comes to the same conclusion.

However, it does suggest that flaws in the QCA’s level-setting procedures, in particular the failure to take a long-term view of the effect of changes to the tests, allowed a downward drift in standards over a number of years.

TES (Warwick Mansell) 24 October 2003

End the testing of infants: seven is too young for tests, say parents in TES poll

The Government’s commitment to testing seven-year-olds has received a resounding no confidence vote from parents who want the tests scrapped.

An exclusive poll of more than 700 parents in England and Wales today shows that three-quarters of them would like national tests for infants abolished.

TES (Michael Shaw) 9 April 2004
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER YOU: 21 DIFFERENT BODIES FROM OFSTED TO CRE CHECK UP ON WHAT HEADS AND SCHOOLS DO

An astonishing 21 different bodies – from Ofsted to the CRE – check up on what heads and schools do. Why can’t they just trust us more?
The accountability of schools goes far beyond what is necessary to assure the public that they are effective and that public funds are being spent properly. This excessive monitoring is strangling initiative and suffocating creativity. Heads are accountable to parents, governing bodies, local education authorities, central government, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Ofsted, the Learning and Skills Council, Connexions Partnerships, Local Lifelong Learning Partnerships and Child Protection Officers. Like any employer they are also accountable to statutory bodies including the Health and Safety Executive, Commission for Racial Equality, Disability Rights Commission and Equal Opportunities Commission. Heads also frequently find themselves held accountable in the media and the courts. Those working in collaboration with other schools are accountable to partnership organisations.

...School leaders and teachers will do best in a system that encourages innovation, decentralisation and autonomy, balanced by intelligent accountability.

John Dunford, General Secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, TES 28 March 2003

JUMPING TO THE STANDARD CONCLUSIONS

SAT results released this week are as usual being interpreted in extravagant way, in terms of what can possibly be concluded from them in relation to educational standards in our schools. Possible lines of interpretation are that at Key Stage 3 things are getting better, but at Key Stage 2 we (or the students?) seem to have plateaued.

...The reality is that SATs are very crude measures of the general performances of young people. ...The SATs taken this year were not the same as those used last year. There have been significant changes in the format of the English tests at Key Stage 2 and 3.

...The absolute priority with SATs is that they do not distort the educational experience of young people. We already have a culture of league tables based upon SATs results which brings us dangerously close to becoming so obsessed with test scores that we forget about other educational priorities. Uncomfortable though many find it, SATs will only ever give us a fuzzy picture of the complex realities of children’s learning at school.

Professor Roger Murphy, University of Nottingham, The Guardian, 20 August 2003

He moved on to discuss the new informal methods of teaching, about which he knew parents were concerned.

‘These can produce ‘excellent results’ in well qualified hands, but are much more dubious when they are not’ (idem).

Then he tackled curriculum, standards and educational aims.

‘There is, he suggested, a good case for ‘a basic curriculum’ with ‘universal standards’. This should be thoroughly aired. As far as educational aims are concerned there has been imbalance. Children should be fitted both for a lively constructive place in society and to do a job of work. The former has been stressed at the expense of the latter’ (idem).

Callaghan finished by saying:

‘...that he did not join those who painted a lurid picture of educational decline ‘because I do not believe this is generally true’. But there were examples which gave cause for concern. The main issue was to achieve higher standards all round due to the complexity of the world we live in’ (idem).

However, Callaghan’s government took no decisive action. Shirley Williams, the Secretary of State, initiated the ‘Great Debate’ but, as Simon (1991: 454) puts it, ‘the ideals and objectives of teachers and local authorities were allowed to crumble and decay’. ‘Procrastination, indecision, delay at all costs – endless consultations’ were endemic and achieved no more than ‘to prepare the soil for a breakthrough by the radical right’ in the next decade. The Callaghan government was defeated in March 1979 and Mrs Thatcher became Prime Minister, appointing Mark Carlisle as Secretary of State for Education.
He was interviewed in June 1994 by the researcher Peter Ribbens about his two-and-a-half years at the Department for Education (1979–81). Clearly Carlisle in 1980 saw the idea of ‘falling standards’ as a myth.

‘I got fed up with constantly hearing people talking about falling standards in education. The plain truth is that at the time standards were not falling. What people should have made clear is that standards were not as high as they wished them to be. But the claim that educational standards were falling and teachers were failing was rubbish: they were not’ (Ribbens and Sherratt 1997: 70).

Later in the interview he elaborated on this:

…almost all the statistics which you might consider – such as the number staying on in higher education, the number passing O-Levels, the number passing A-Levels – showed an upward trend. To claim that they were diminishing in real terms seemed to me to fly in the face of the available evidence’ (ibid: 76).

It wasn’t until Thatcher’s third ministry that her government began to intervene drastically in the education system: when Kenneth Baker as Secretary of State for Education introduced the Education Reform Act of 1988.
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

HEADS HIT OUT AT PRIMARY TARGETS: GOVERNMENT ACCUSED OF PILING TOO MUCH PRESSURE ON TEACHERS TO RAISE TEST SCORES

Anger over pressure on schools to hit targets for 11-year-olds has erupted as the Government published a list of revision topics to boost results in this year's test. Officials from the Government's standards and effectiveness unit have told literacy and numeracy strategy regional directors to ask LEAs whether they know the names of all children who could achieve level 4 or 5 “with support”.

…At a heads’ conference Mr Clarke defended his plans to boost results: “Complacency is not an option. We would fail in our duty if we did not build on past success.”

…The conference was one of a series of eight being held to discuss the forthcoming primary strategy with headteachers. Nansi Ellis, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers’ primary education adviser, said: “It is not a strategy being genuinely developed with the teaching profession, but something imposed from above. The conference was not about developing primary education – it was about raising test scores.”

TES (Helen Ward) 14 February 2003

WHY EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT IS FAILING THE TEST

If you want to look at why so many 14-19-year-old kids are leaving the education system, by the age of 14 many children have become terrified of assessments and have been put off the whole idea of learning.

SATs remove a child's enthusiasm for learning, creating a stressful atmosphere for pupils and one where the teachers are merely teaching to the test. We need to reclaim assessment for learning rather than making it of learning. At present, SATs are of much more benefit to government than schools or children.

Paul Skidmore, Beyond Measure: Why Educational Assessment is Failing the Test, (Desmos 2003), cited by John Crace, TES, 11 March 2003

TESTS HERE TO STAY BUT STRESS WILL BE EASED

Tests and targets will remain at the heart of primary education, despite complaints from teachers and academics that they stifle creativity, the Government will make clear next week.

TES (Helen Ward) 16 May 2003

My perspective on the educational provision of the 1970s entails separating primary and secondary schooling. This is necessary because childhood from five to 11 is very different from the adolescence of 11 to 16 (or 18), and also because parents tend to judge education in the former more by their children's happiness and general progress, and in the latter more by their job prospects and social maturity.

In schools a major educational distinction between primary and secondary lies in the extent of personal contact between teacher and pupil. In primary schools in the 1970s, as now, the class teacher was the major educator, taking about 30 children for a year through most, if not all, aspects of the curriculum and serving the pastoral role of nurturing their individual development for that year. As pupils moved to secondary school, as now, there were about six to 10 educators teaching them week by week, each serving a different subject of the curriculum and usually with one of them serving the pastoral role.

While this difference is required in order for secondary pupils to have appropriate access to specialist knowledge and skills, it means that the school day is fragmented, with each succeeding teacher having to re-establish the group dynamic of the class and needing to know as much as possible about the educational progress of perhaps 200 pupils, taught at least one lesson every week.

…”secondary schools are much larger then primary schools and so different management structures are appropriate.”

Coupled with this is the fact that for logistical reasons surrounding the curriculum, secondary schools are much larger than primary schools and so different management structures are appropriate. Primary and secondary education are at least as far apart as secondary education is from further and higher education and it is a disservice to treat primary and secondary education as one. For example, the one-week time-frame set for Ofsted inspections meant that all teachers in most primary schools had several observation periods whereas in secondary schools some teachers had none.
By the end of the 1970s, 81 per cent of secondary age pupils in England and 96 per cent in Wales were in comprehensive schools and the 11+ examination had disappeared in most parts of the country. These comprehensive schools strived to give everybody success in terms of their individual abilities, irrespective of their social or ethnic origins. They tried out various logistical approaches such as streaming, banding, and mixed ability classes for younger pupils with setting for older ones. The result of some of these changes (such as setting) was improvement in the opportunities for pupils to follow their own interests and to succeed in these, but in practice many students found the actual curriculum of secondary education boring. The regular weekly diet of English, mathematics, science, craftwork, history, geography, French or German, art, physical education, religious education, etc., often organised in 40-minute periods, was unsuitable for some, especially as they grew older.

Although schools and local education authorities were in principle free to determine their own curriculum, in practice they had to respond to the entry requirements of the universities, even though only a small proportion of an age group would actually enter higher education. If equality of opportunity had been at least partially achieved, the opportunities it offered in the curriculum seemed dull to many students. In contrast the opportunities of the world outside school – legal and illegal – were exciting, and fuelled by increasing teenage disposable wealth to spend on clothes, music and drugs, for example. Too many of today’s 30 to 40 year olds left school disenchanted with their formal education – and some looked to government to provide something much better for their children.

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**What the Papers Said:**

**Time's Up for Ofsted: Inspections Do Not Improve Exam Performance, According to New Research**

Inspections do not improve exam performance, according to new research. Should we still be funding them?

Ofsted inspection has had no positive effect on examination achievement, according to new research that studied more than 3,000 schools over six years.

A four-strong team of researchers from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, reporting in the British Educational Research Journal, examined the GCSE results of 1933 mixed-sex comprehensive schools (among the 3,000-plus state schools of all types studied) over a period of six academic years between 1992 and 1997. The findings do not make pleasant reading for those who believe Ofsted inspections will raise the academic standards of our young people. County mixed comprehensives are the most common type of school in England and Wales, but the researchers found that “Ofsted inspections had no positive effect on examination achievement (in these schools). If anything it made it worse.”

...Most alarmingly, the Newcastle researchers found the depression in examination results was not just confined to the year of inspection. They found “inspection had a consistent, negative effect on achievement, depressing it by about one half of a percentage point. This effect persisted during the period studied.”

Guardian Education (Tony Mooney) 8 July 2003

**These Pointless Tests: Could Be Replaced by Internal Teacher Assessments**

National tests are a waste of time and money that yield little information about pupils not already known to their teachers.

Formal tests could be replaced by internal teacher assessments without affecting children’s results, a study of more than 100,000 pupils found. Two-thirds of pupils were given identical scores in their teacher assessments to those they achieved in formal tests. Danny Durant, a Worcestershire education adviser, told the British Educational Research Association conference, held last week in Edinburgh.

...Only about one in 10 pupils had differences between their teacher assessment and test scores equivalent to a whole level. Five-year-olds were most likely to have large differences between the two scores, with 11-year-olds the least likely. The findings were based on Worcestershire pupils test scores between 1995 and 2002.

TES (Jon Slater and Helen Ward) 19 September 2003

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3-Streaming’ means that there is a hierarchy of classes in an age-group, each class consisting of pupils with less ability than the class above. ‘Banding’ also entails a hierarchy of ability, but with a number of parallel classes in each of perhaps three bands of ability. ‘Setting’ entails dividing pupils into ability sets for a particular subject, rather than for all of their work. These approaches imply that it is possible to measure relevant ‘ability’ and to teach more effectively to that level than to a ‘mixed-ability class’. This view was being challenged by many teachers in the 1980s.
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

ENGLISH TEACHERS URGE BOYCOTT OF NATIONAL TEST MARKING

The London Association for the Teaching of English claims the curriculum at seven, 11 and 14 is dominated by tests which fail to provide reliable information about how pupils are doing. John Wilks, general secretary of LATE, said: "The increasing status given to SATs results through league tables and performance management is encouraging teachers to teach to the test. There is a real danger that the curriculum will become increasingly narrow."

The National Association for the Teaching of English has called for national tests to be replaced by moderated teacher assessment.

TES (Julie Henry) 17 January 2003

HOW WE LOST OUR LOVE OF LABOUR: MANY STAFF CELEBRATED IN 1997 BUT NOW FEEL LET DOWN

The tyranny of targets, of externally-imposed performance measures, impacts on the lack of recognition by the Government of teachers' expert knowledge and skills – their professionalism. There is still a strongly-held view that teachers cannot be trusted. Ministers and civil servants alike doubt the profession's commitment to raising standards. The onslaught of policy initiatives from New Labour is a shining testimony to this distrust. All are predicated on a deficit model: 'Teachers, you're not doing xxx, so we're going to produce a document, a CD, or a video, to show you how to teach literacy, numeracy, speaking and listening, citizenship, cross-curricular themes, or leadership.” And so on.

The Government should pause in its drive to tell the profession what to do – particularly when it is clear that, in hindsight, so many of its panaceas have proved ineffective.

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, TES 28 November 2003

GTC WANTS TO SCRAP TABLES

League tables and pupil assessment would be abolished in their present forms under radical plans being proposed by the General Teaching Council for England. It is calling on the Government to review testing at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. …

The GTC believes that the testing regime should be overhauled to provide diagnostic information about how a pupil can progress, instead of focusing on raw results. And it wants to see performance tables being used to inform parents about the different types of schooling in their area, rather than a crude mechanism for ranking schools.

TES (Dorothy Lepkowska) 2 July 2004

By contrast the primary schools of the 1970s were happier places. As the 11+ examination started to disappear, the teachers of junior children – the seven to 11-year-olds – felt able to broaden the curriculum. Often they adopted the ideas of their infant colleagues and moved towards a child-centred view of education, as had been expressed cogently in the Plowden Report (of the Central Advisory Council for Education) in 1967:

'A school is not merely a teaching shop, it must transmit values and attitudes. It is a community in which children learn to live first and foremost as children and not as future adults. In family life children learn to live with people of all ages. The school sets out deliberately to devise the right environment for children, to allow them to be themselves and to develop in the way and at the pace appropriate to them. It tries to equalise opportunities and to compensate for handicaps. It lays special stress on individual discovery, on first-hand experience and on opportunities for creative work. It insists that knowledge does not fall into neatly separate compartments and that work and play are not opposite but complementary. A child brought up in such an atmosphere at all stages of education has some hope of becoming a balanced and mature adult and of being able to live in, to contribute to, and to look critically at the society of which he forms a part. Not all primary schools correspond to this picture, but it does represent a general and quickening trend’ (Plowden Report 1967: para 505).

My own research is relevant here. Eleven years after the Plowden Report I published the findings of a massive survey of primary teaching practice. I directed a team of 31 teacher-researchers who interviewed 893 teachers in 114 Nottinghamshire schools in 1976–7, asking a battery of questions about how they taught. In over 100 tables it describes the way that 281 infant teachers, 498 junior teachers and 114 headteachers organised the work of their classes and schools.
Lady Plowden wrote the foreword:
‘This most comprehensive report on the practices of primary education in Nottinghamshire gives a great deal of information about the day by day work of a large number of teachers. …Judging by the replies, there does not seem to be any danger of the schools in Nottinghamshire moving into the so-called ‘progressive methods’ in which ‘children do as they please’. …I believe that a national survey would similarly show that throughout the country teachers are in general responsibly structuring children’s experience in the classroom…’

My overall impression from the report is of the variety of practice in these schools, of the lack of gimmicky ‘progressive’ methods and of the care taken in covering areas of the curriculum; but sadly there does seem to be a lack of planned progression either in class or school’ (Bassey 1978: 7-8).

“…teachers are in general responsibly structuring children’s experience in the classroom…”

Lady Plowden put her finger on the key weakness of primary schools in the 1970s: lack of planned progression. The evidence is that schools had their ‘outline syllabuses’ in mathematics and English and sometimes other subjects, but there was little rigorous assessment of achievement in these, and in consequence little opportunity for monitoring individual progress and planning future work on the basis of achievement.

The greatest achievement of the 1988 Education Reform Act, in my view, has been in training teachers to make significant assessments of pupil progress and to plan their teaching on this basis.
What went wrong in schools in the 1970s?

James Callaghan as Labour Prime Minister in 1976 had said that he did not believe the ‘lurid picture of educational decline’ – although he posed some significant challenges. Mark Carlisle as Conservative Secretary of State for Education in 1980 did not believe that standards were falling – but recognised that they could be higher. Nevertheless, negative messages continued to reverberate through the media and the public slowly came to believe them.

My perception is that most primary schools were happy places where the children engaged in creative and interesting educational activities – but the schools lacked a sense of individual progression in the basic skills of English and mathematics so that, while most children had success in acquiring these, those who didn’t were left to flounder.

Likewise most pupils in secondary schools were happy to be at school, but for many this was in spite of the curriculum rather than because of it. Those with an academic bent enjoyed success: for the rest, much school work was boring. But employers were expressing concern about the basic skills of many school leavers and arguing that this was affecting the economic productivity of the nation.

Parents in general knew little about the educational progress of their children beyond what the children told them and what they learned on one evening a year in a meeting with teachers and (in secondary schools and some primary) from annual reports. But the latter tended to be rather uninformative with comments like ‘good work and progress’ or ‘could do better if he tried’.

Teachers tended to work in isolation from each other: many were excellent, some were poor. Children, and parents if they realised, had no option but to suffer the latter because incompetence as a teacher did not lead to dismissal and only rarely to help from more able colleagues.
Local education authorities varied considerably in the extent of support for teaching and innovation in schools. There was a tendency for fashion to influence practice, spread by the newly trained teachers from the colleges and by local authority advisers, and based on the limited evidence of classroom success by a few outstanding teachers rather than by research and professional judgement. Examples of fashions that permeated some primary schools were: pedagogic methods like the initial teaching alphabet (ita – a phonetic alphabet intended to help young readers with the vagaries of the English language); and curriculum notions like ‘children don’t need to learn number bonds because they will use electronic calculators in adult life’, and ‘spelling is not important: what matters is the ability to communicate’.

“There was a tendency for fashion to influence practice”

In a rapidly changing world the school system was not responding fast enough to the economic challenge of the time – the competitive need to replace the UK’s declining manufacturing base with new industries manned by a technically skilled workforce. The teaching profession should have recognised this and taken appropriate action. It didn’t and so it was the Government that intervened – in a clumsy and bureaucratic manner which eventually achieved a raising of standards in the basic skills, but made many mistakes in the process.
Government intervention in schools: 1981 onward

Sir Keith Joseph replaced Mark Carlisle as Secretary of State for Education and Science in 1981 and stayed there until 1986. It was a post that he wanted and to which he devoted deep thought, preparing the ground for many changes introduced by his successors. After Joseph’s death Clyde Chitty reconstructed in interview format some of his views. Foremost was his concern for the children who were gaining little from the education system.

‘Education is about teaching all the young as well as possible to read, write and number, to be sufficiently well-informed and self-disciplined to think for themselves and use their minds well, and to be motivated and enabled to earn a living by making the best use of their talents in existing opportunities for productive work. Any discussion that does not start from this purpose and direct everything towards it is not about education as it is understood by most men and women in England.

And these are the issues I really care about. And more and more over the years I’ve come to care about those children for whom education isn’t working. And we ask where did we go wrong and what can we do about it. Because it’s the bottom 40 – the bottom 50 – per cent that are getting a raw deal from education’ (Ribbins and Sherratt 1997: 79).

Joseph was instrumental in two highly significant government interventions in the education system: the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) in 1982 and replacing O-Level and CSE examinations (taken at 16) with the differentiated General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1984.

Of the first he said:

‘We face a catastrophe in this country through low expectations of less academic children and poor standards. We need to stretch the less academic by giving them things to do they want to do. We simply must not squeeze out non-academic, vocationally based subjects.

That’s what TVEI was all about – stretching the less able. Children enter primary school all keen and eager to learn, but they’re bored and demotivated by the time they leave secondary school. So we’re failing them all the time. We must not go on failing them’ (ibid: 85).

TVEI had its heyday in the period 1983–87 when it moved the agenda as far as upper secondary education was concerned (Yeomans 2002). It was the first curriculum intervention made by government (albeit an optional one) and Joseph achieved this through the Manpower Services Commission, which was funded by the Department of Industry – not the Department of Education. The introduction of the national curriculum (which Joseph considered would put the secondary school curriculum into ‘a straitjacket’) brought it slowly to an end. But it was TVEI that opened up the idea that ministers could make an impact on the curriculum of schools.

Replacing O-Level and CSE with the GCSE made a significant change in pupil success. In the mid-1980s the number of young people achieving grades A to C in five subjects was around 25 per cent of the age group: 15 years later it had nearly doubled. Over the same period the number leaving school without any qualification dropped from around 10 per cent to half that. This was a highly successful intervention by government into the structure of the educational system which enabled more young people than hitherto to succeed.
What the papers said:

Let the professionals get on with the job

If we need legal advice, who do we go to? A solicitor. The same principle applies whenever we need sound advice—we ask a professional. What’s so different about education? Why is it that, whenever politicians get into a panic about schools, professionals are the last people they turn to?

One aim of the TES’s Target Creativity campaign is to convince politicians they cannot afford to ignore teachers’ views, especially when they are at the top of their field. With this objective, we turned to some of the primary world’s most creative and successful teachers: dames and knights honoured for their achievement; heads praised for running high-performing and innovative schools; and award winning teachers recognised as the best in the profession.

We asked what they thought about the current regime of testing, league tables and targets in primaries and about the balance between teaching basics and other subjects. For good measure we also asked the chief schools inspectors for England and Wales for their views. Their verdicts are striking for their unanimity. It is time, say the professionals, to ease up on top-down targets and decision-making and give teachers the space and freedom they need to give children a rich and varied education.

TES (Jeremy Sutcliffe, features editor) 2 May 2003

Super-size class plans: sacked civil servants to assist in schools

Extra support staff would allow good teachers to teach “very large” classes under a government blueprint to streamline the public sector, revealed this week.

Sir Peter Gershon’s (a former chief operating officer for BAE Systems now heading the Office of Government Commerce) draft efficiency review (leaked to the Financial Times) suggests that some of the new high-level classroom assistants could come from the ranks of 80,000 civil servants who will lose their jobs if ministers follow his recommendations. It says that up to £2.2 billion worth of productivity gains could be made in schools through more use of support staff and technology.

John Bangs, National Union of Teachers head of education, said the report showed how Whitehall workload discussions failed to reflect classroom realities.

TES (William Stewart and Michael Shaw) 20 February 2004

Keith Joseph had a difficult time at the DES. As he told Clyde Chitty:

‘And you have to understand that when I was at the DES, there was that awful pay dispute going on all the time. And that soured relationships. I was in conflict in one way or another with all the teachers’ unions over pay and conditions. And I was criticized for not finding enough money for education’ (ibid: 85).

He left office at his own wish and was replaced by Kenneth Baker. In an interview with Peter Ribbens, Baker showed how his own education had influenced the way he acted as Secretary of State for Education. In my view this illustrates the danger of those who legislate from personal experience.

‘Politicians usually have decided views on education. In this they are much like those who work in education. All politicians have gone through the educational process. They have had first-hand experience of it. …One’s own education, I think, is very important.

I went to Holy Trinity, a state Church of England primary school which was in Southport. …It was a conventional education of a rather old-fashioned sort which was really rather effective. …The essence of that type of education was to embed in you the very basic, simple skills of reading and writing and arithmetic. I remember chanting mathematics tables by heart, learning poetry by heart, doing a lot of writing, spelling, punctuation, and things of that sort. It was a good education, I have no doubt about that at all’ (Ribbins and Sherratt 1997: 88).

Baker had a strong agenda for reform after he resolved the issue of teachers’ pay which had led to a national strike. He described it to Ribbens like this:

‘Suffice to say, I had to do some very tough things which didn’t make me loved by the teaching unions. We took away their negotiating rights but set up a system which ensured that teachers got better rewards than they had ever been awarded in the history of the profession’.
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

ANGRY HEADS FILE ORDER TO TRY HARDER IN BIN: BUT MINISTER DEFENDS HIS LETTER OF CONCERN OVER PRIMARY STANDARDS

Primary heads are binning a letter from education minister Stephen Twigg telling them that they must try harder to improve English and maths results. Mr Twigg wrote to heads saying he wanted to see “significant improvements” in tests this year. He said he was concerned to see that one in four schools is “underperforming”.

But heads say standards will rise more rapidly if they are left alone and that primary education is about more than teaching level 4, the expected standard for 11-year-olds, in English and maths. Angeles Walford, chair of the National Association of Head Teachers primary committee, said: “They need to leave us alone. We are all doing well, children are not failing, the only failure is the Government’s failure to see how successful the national literacy and numeracy strategies are. The worst thing is that teachers are leaving the profession, because they are fed up with being told they are failing and schools are failing”.

TES (Helen Ward and Warwick Mansell) 24 January 2003

FORCES GATHER AGAINST THE TESTING OF INFANTS

Criticism of the national tests has been stepped up as 600,000 seven, 11- and 14-year-olds sit their exams this month. On Monday, the new Primary Education Alliance will launch its campaign to abolish tests for seven-year-olds. The alliance says teacher assessment is more reliable than testing. A TES poll published last month found that a third of seven-year-olds suffered stress over the national tests and one in 10 had lost sleep.

TES (Helen Ward) 16 May 2003

ENGLISH AND MATHS DOMINATE JUNIORS

… No primary school subject in 1997 had less than 4 per cent of the timetable devoted to it – roughly one 55-minute lesson per week, but by 2002, three subjects – music, design and technology, and personal, social and health education – had dropped below this level and less time was spent on all subjects except English, maths and ICT.

David Bell, the chief inspector, condemned the “two-tier” curriculum earlier this year.

TES (Helen Ward) 19 March 2004

[As a result] during my first nine months I was able to establish educational policy for the following nine years, if you like; or even for the rest of the century and beyond. The fact that I was able to settle an industrial dispute that had gone on for so long greatly enhanced my reputation among my colleagues. I was seen as someone who could resolve things in education and who therefore had to be listened to. I then set about fashioning the other policies, including the curriculum policy’ (ibid: 98-99).

On the strength of his success in settling the teachers’ dispute (and getting extra funding for this from the Treasury) Baker redesigned the school education system of England and Wales. The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced a subject-based national curriculum, an assessment system based on standardised assessment tasks (SATs) – with results to be published in league tables, a formula-funded system of local management of schools, a class of schools that would be independent of local authorities (grant-maintained schools), and removal of catchment areas in order to create a market system for parents to choose schools for their children. It was the most massive intervention in the education system of the twentieth century and, in terms of curriculum and assessment, totally reversed earlier political notions that these should be left to the teachers, schools and local authorities.

The Guardian writer Nick Davies also interviewed Kenneth Baker in September 1999 (by which time he was Lord Baker).

‘He knows a lot of people tried to say that he was really just settling political scores, that his real agenda was to punish the teacher unions and to kill off the local education authorities, and that secretly the big master plan was to wipe out comprehensive schools by stealth. And now he’s laughing because the funny thing is – they were right!’ (Davies 2000: 39).

Later “tasks” was changed to “tests” by unilateral decision of Kenneth Clarke as secretary of state – “to the shock of my officials” he said (Ribbins and Sherratt 1997: 156).
Davies gives an account of ‘what really happened after Margaret Thatcher told Baker in May 1986 that “Something had to be done about the schools”’. Davies sums up as follows:

‘It is a revealing story. On the face of it, a reform of schools would have to have, as its overriding priority, the welfare of children. And since this involved the construction of a new system to disseminate learning and knowledge, it would have to be built on a particularly strong intellectual foundation, a great deal of solid research and clear thinking. Not so. The most sweeping educational reforms this century, it transpires, had just as much to do with guesswork, personal whim and bare-knuckle politics’ (ibid: 39-40).

Some may argue that guesswork, personal whim and bare-knuckle politics with hardly any research or pursuit of professional judgement have continued to this day to be the hallmark of government intervention in the 23,000 schools of England – by both Conservative and Labour administrations. They can be seen in the setting up and development of Ofsted, the publication of school performance tables, the introduction and development of Fresh Start, performance management, specialist schools, literacy and maths hours, and the reform of teacher training, for example. On a smaller scale they were the basis for: Kenneth Clarke’s decision (1991) that contemporary events should not be part of the history curriculum; John Major’s decision (1991) that GCSE coursework should be limited to 20 per cent of the total marks; David Blunkett’s decision (1998) that all primary school children should do homework (starting with 20 minutes a day for five-year-olds); and Charles Clarke’s decisions to run as many as one thousand booster classes in the Easter holidays in 2003 for Year 6 children on the borderline of missing targets5 and asking local education authorities to identify by name the children in their schools who needed further support to achieve the expected levels of literacy and numeracy by the age of 11, and to regularly monitor their progress.

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5 The Ofsted chief inspector told The Times Educational Supplement (5 December 2003) that the £42 million allocated to this had ‘made little difference to primary standards’. 

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The Association of Teachers and Lecturers 25

The Guardian (Polly Curtis) 15 June 2004
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

AUTHORS UNITE AGAINST TESTS
We are children's authors and illustrators concerned by the growing domination of the school curriculum by national tests. We believe that there is a danger that Years 2, 6 and 9 are becoming years spent preparing for the tests. We think that children's understanding, empathy, imagination and creativity are developed best by reading whole books, not by doing comprehension exercises on short excerpts and not from ticking boxes or giving one-word answers. It is our view that reading for pleasure is being squeezed by relentless testing and we are particularly concerned that the tests and the preparation for them are creating an atmosphere of anxiety around the reading of literature. … We support calls by some teaching unions and by the National Association for the Teaching of English for the phasing out of the tests.

TES A letter from authors (14) against the SATs, 21 February 2003

ANNUAL TEST BILL NEARS £30M
The cost of England's testing system has risen to more than £30 million a year, official accounts of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority reveal. … spent on national tests for seven, 11 and 14-year-olds and baseline assessments for five-year-olds in 2001/2. …Phil Willis, Liberal Democrat education spokesman, said: “You have to ask what is the benefit of spending this phenomenal amount of money on testing.”

TES (Warwick Mansell) 24 October 2003

FIASCO OF £21 MILLION DRIVE TO BOOST 3RS: PRIMARY LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME HAS PRODUCED FEW BENEFITS, SAY INSPECTORS
Ministers need to rethink a £21 million scheme to improve the 3Rs in primary schools, inspectors said today. Most primaries failed to focus on raising standards, and some even lowered targets, according to Ofsted. Ofsted's evaluation of the primary leadership programme, which covers a quarter of English primaries, found some schools had focused on creativity at the expense of English and maths. It said the first year of the programme had produced few tangible benefits. The scheme had been introduced too quickly in a piecemeal fashion, leaving key staff without adequate training and information about schools they were supposed to support, inspectors said.

TES (Jon Slater) 20 August 2004

No one has counted the total number of government interventions in the work of schools since Kenneth Baker opened the floodgates in 1988, but in June 1999 opposition speakers in the House of Commons reckoned that David Blunkett, as Secretary of State for Education and employment had issued 322 directives to schools and local education authorities in the previous 12 months.

Is there any wonder that by 2003 there was evidence of many teachers leaving the profession? Professor John Howson, leading academic researcher studying teacher retention and recruitment, reported early in 2003: The seriousness of the staffing haemorrhage suffered by English schools is underscored by new figures from the Department of Education and Skills.

During the five years up to March 2001, more than 97,000 qualified teachers left teaching, some straight after completing their training. This equates to almost 25 per cent of the active teaching force...

More disturbingly, nearly 36,000 teachers aged 25 to 39 quit between 1996 and 2001 – an attrition rate of 7,000 a year’ (TES 14 February 2003).

From DfES statistics, Howson also showed that of 270 secondary headteacher retirements in 1999-2000, only 70 were at the retirement age of 60. The rest retired prematurely, with 40 of them due to ill-health (Howson 2002).

The problems of teacher retention were discussed in detail in 2003 in a 108-page report by Professor Alasdair Ross and Dr Merryn Hutchings, prepared for the OECD, entitled Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Ross and Hutchings 2003). This is some of their research evidence suggesting why teachers may decide to leave the profession before retirement age:

References in these quotations are in the original paper and not reproduced here.
Paragraph 404 Various surveys have shown that a substantial number of younger and mid-career teachers are leaving for other occupations. Hutchings et al (2000) and Smithers and Robinson (2001) both raised particular issues about the wastage rates in the early years of teachers’ careers that affect the general age profile of the profession in England, and particularly the maintenance of an adequate cohort of experienced teachers from whom leadership grades can be recruited. Much of their research evidence suggests that teachers are leaving the profession (rather than leaving a post) because of frustrations about their professional autonomy and their ability to be creative in their work (ibid). …

Paragraph 405 A review undertaken for the Teacher Training Agency in 2000 (Spear et al 2000) suggested that teachers were attracted to the profession because they enjoyed working with children and good relations with colleagues, and valued the professional autonomy and the intellectual challenge of teaching. Those leaving the profession did so as a result of a high workload, poor pay, and low status and morale…

Paragraph 406 …The quality of teachers’ working lives was surveyed by the National Foundation for Educational Research in 2002: this found that while teachers’ job satisfaction was higher than those in other comparable professions, they were dissatisfied with their salaries and with work-related stress. Many teachers wanted greater responsibility and involvement in the control of their work (Sturman 2002).

Paragraph 408 A survey of teachers by the General Teaching Council for England in late 2002 (GTC England 2003) suggests that 35% of the 70,000 teachers who responded are likely to leave the profession in the next 5 years. …Motivating factors included working with children (cited by 48%), the job satisfaction of teaching (32%) and the creativity and stimulation that it brings (25%). However, workload was seen as a demotivating factor (cited by 56% of respondents), followed by perceived overload of initiatives (39%) and the perception that teaching has a target-driven culture (35%).

High workload, loss of professional autonomy, lack of opportunity to be creative, overload of initiatives, and a target-driven culture, all arose from government interventions. Ever since the introduction of the Education Reform Act of 1988, concerns have been expressed, but by 2003, as the next section shows, this reached a crescendo in terms of opposition to targets, tests, league tables and inspection.

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WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

SICK AND TIRED OF TESTS: AN UNHEALTHILY NARROW APPROACH TO EDUCATION

For some time, heads have been worried about the effects of exam stress on children as young as seven. Now, Young Minds, the charity which has representatives from 24 professional bodies in the mental health field, has voiced concerns about the effects on pupils of the testing and exam regime. It says that teaching ruled by targets and exams is an unhealthy narrow approach to education and reflects society’s emphasis on achievement at all costs. TES (Susannah Kirkman) 28 March 2003

TESTING MUST BE CURBED: THE GOVERNMENT’S POST-14 EXAMS INQUIRY Wants teachers burden to be lightened

The man leading the Government’s inquiry into the future of secondary education pledged today to cut testing, warning that over-examining is damaging children’s learning. Mike Tomlinson said that any reform must avoid “pushing more onto teachers”. He attacked the “adverse effects of large volumes of mechanistic assessment”, which showed more about pupils’ ability to pass exams than their potential. Pupils in England now sit more than 100 formal assessments, more than almost anywhere else. TES (Warwick Mansell) 13 February 2004

MINISTERS SHUN PLEAS TO AXE 2006 TARGETS: A SLIGHT IMPROVEMENT IN KS2 RESULTS THIS YEAR STILL LEAVES WEARY PRIMARY STAFF WITH A MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

Ministers have spurned pleas to abandon ambitious primary targets despite only slight improvements in this year’s test results. …This year’s provisional results at Key Stage 2 show that 77 per cent of pupils achieved the benchmark level 4 in English, up from 75 per cent in 2003. In maths there was a one-point increase to 74 per cent but in science a one-point drop to 86 per cent. Heads and education groups renewed their call for the abolition of the tests. …A government spokeswoman said: “The target of 85 per cent is achievable. If all schools performed as well as the top quartile of those in similar circumstances we would reach 85 per cent nationally.” …David Bell, the chief inspector, warned against a narrow focus on targets. Earlier this year, he said that the focus on English and maths was depriving schools of a rounded education. TES (Dorothy Lepkowska) 27 August 2004
Mounting opposition to government interference in children’s education: the evidence of 2003

In 2003 an astonishing number of bodies attacked the continuing use of tests for assessing children’s progress, particularly in primary schooling. The list included teachers and headteachers through their subject associations, their unions and professional bodies, and a new alliance: writers, academics and researchers, parents, and a mental health charity.

Some were concerned about stress on children, others on the narrowing of the curriculum to the subjects tested and the way these were being taught – with consequent loss of enthusiasm for learning, loss of creativity in expression, disinterest in reading for pleasure, and loss of opportunity for gaining deep understanding. Overall, from 2001 to 2002, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority spent £30 million on tests for seven-, 11- and 14-year-olds and base-line assessment for five-year-olds.

No one was against assessment as such, but many campaigners wanted assessment by government tests to be replaced by teacher assessment based on the professional competence of teachers and arising from their over-the-year knowledge of their pupils. A research study of 100,000 students in Worcestershire found that, for two-thirds of the primary school pupils, the findings of teachers’ assessments were identical to test results – and more so for 11-year-olds. (Who is to say, therefore, that the stress-inducing, snapshot-measuring test is a better assessment than that of the teacher over time?)

The media makes news out of test statistics to try to show trends in the national performance of schools, and politicians use these to boast about, or attack, government policies. But as Professor Roger Murphy pointed out, not only are SATs a very crude measure of particular performance, but changes made in the testing instruments (for educational reasons) invalidate year-by-year comparisons. A substantial research investigation by Alf Massey, for the QCA, showed how problematic (if not impossible) is the equitable setting of numerical marks for assessment levels.

With the National Union of Teachers deciding to ballot for strike action over testing, David Miliband, the Minister for School Standards, set out the Government’s case in the TES. He listed six ‘NUT myths’: First, that testing adds nothing to the education process. Second, that tests limit achievement by confining teaching to pre-set levels. Third, that testing and creativity are incompatible. Fourth, that tests discriminate against poor children. Fifth, that other countries do not test. Sixth, that the Government refuses to listen. In the days when teacher education included theoretical study, responding in depth to this list would have made an excellent student assignment. The minister gave brief (and many thought inadequate) responses to each ‘myth’, but added a comment which must have called forth howls of disbelief: ‘I understand the concern of parents that testing should not overwhelm schooling, but three tests in nine years is not excessive’.

Notwithstanding the formidable opposition to testing, the senior DfES official responsible for schools said in August 2003: ‘the Government is as determined as ever to press on’. Who said government listens?

2003 was a year in which ministers for several months continued brazenly to defend the use of targets and performance tables. But after a long siege by teachers, unions, and researchers, an attack by two select committees and the chief inspector of schools, and the stark statistics that 11-year-olds were not reaching the targets set for English and mathematics, they dropped these 2004 targets, but still expected schools to improve year-on-year.
In January 2003 Stephen Twigg became the minister responsible for primary schools and showed how ‘well informed’ he was by announcing: ‘No one seriously wants to go back to the days when there was no central direction, no setting of targets, no nationwide performance assessment.’ Twigg resolutely defended ‘these necessary goals’ until Charles Clarke, his boss, in May 2003 suddenly decided to transfer target setting to schools. There was a pertinent reminder of the perverse power of sections of the national press when the Sun described Charles Clarke’s minor changes as ‘a dramatic climbdown as a sop to classroom lefties’.

Diane Hofkins of the TES expressed the opinion of many primary school teachers when she wrote of targets: ‘They are no longer helping to raise standards, but are stifling opportunities for both teachers and children to be creative. …Bored children and stressed teachers will not create exciting primary schools able to prepare youngsters for this challenging century. Children need to learn to think, to make connections, to work together, to take risks, to discover their own talents. They need to read about all kinds of things and explore different media. They need space and time to have ideas and try them out. Fortunately, all this is the best way to raise English and maths standards, too’.

The author Philip Pullman put the same case with a front page headline in the TES saying, ‘free the caged minds of young teachers’. He said that teachers were not trusted to teach, and were nagged, controlled and harassed: they needed to be trusted. On the inspection front, the year 2003 included: a union challenge to the extent of accountability required of schools (21 different accounting bodies); Newcastle University research showing that Ofsted inspections have had no positive effect on GCSE results in the majority of schools; and an announcement by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education that it will investigate the cost-effectiveness of Ofsted. For its part, Ofsted started on its ‘light touch’ inspections with a topsy-turvy view of what ‘satisfactory’ meant.
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

FREE THEIR MINDS: OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE THAT THE GOVERNMENT’S KEY STAGE 2 TARGETS ARE BECOMING DESTRUCTIVE

The TES exclusive poll adds to the overwhelming evidence that the Government’s Key Stage 2 targets are becoming destructive. They are no longer helping to raise standards, but are stifling opportunities for both teachers and children to be creative. … Bored children and stressed teachers will not create exciting primary schools able to prepare youngsters for this challenging century. Children need to learn to think, to make connections, to work together, to take risks, to discover their own talents. They need space and time to have ideas and try them out. Fortunately, all this is the best way to raise English and maths standards, too.

TES (Diane Hofkins, primary editor) 2 May 2003

SATISFACTORY IS NOT ENOUGH

…Inspectors have been told to label teaching in some schools unsatisfactory where lessons are judged to have been "generally satisfactory". …

News of the move will be a shock for schools as Ofsted’s 2003 inspection framework has been billed as the start of a “light-touch” regime. It follows controversial comments by David Bell, the chief inspector, … in his annual report earlier this year, [when] he asked, “Is satisfactory [teaching] good enough given the demands of pupils and the rising expectations of wider society?” …

John Bangs, head of education at the National Union of Teachers, has written to Mr Bell voicing concern. “It appears to demonstrate an Alice in Wonderland situation where the meaning of the word satisfactory is the reverse of its original intention. … Nationally, the number of schools with pejorative Ofsted inspection reports could rise significantly”.

TES (William Stewart and Michael Shaw) 5 September 2003

LIB DEMS WOULD END SELECTION AND TESTS

The Liberal Democrats have pledged to abolish selective schools and scrap tests for seven and 11-year-olds. … They would end testing and instead establish a national assessment and performance unit which would monitor pupils’ performance through a sampling system.

TES (Michael Shaw) 9 July 2004

The new inspectors’ handbook said: ‘teaching that is generally satisfactory with little that is better, merits a judgement of unsatisfactory owing to the lack of aspiration in teaching’. Was this a response to Charles Clarke seeking ‘more rigorous’ inspections? At any rate, it seems to be resulting in more schools than hitherto failing or showing ‘serious weakness’.

No wonder that a group of school leaders called for Ofsted to be scrapped while the DfES began to talk of school self-evaluation.

In December 2003 a chilling and bizarre TES front page article carried the headline: ‘Schools without teachers: DfES vision of a brave new world where children are increasingly taught by support staff’. A document written by a DfES official entitled Workforce Reform – Blue Skies had been leaked to the TES. It said: ‘The legal position …is that a maintained school must have a head with qualified teacher status (QTS), but beyond that the position is very much deregulated. The school need not employ anyone else – other staff need not have QTS and staff could be bought in from agencies or come in on secondment.’ A DfES spokesman said the paper had been produced without the authority and knowledge of ministers. But the frightening thought is that there are people in the DfES who must be totally lacking in understanding of what teachers actually do in school and what their roles are in the educational development of their pupils: instead government officials tend to see schools as factories where operatives can be hired on short contracts to deliver the curriculum.

A year of mounting criticism of government initiatives ended with the second report of the (independent) National Commission on Education asserting that ‘central control damages teaching’. Sir John Cassells, director of the commission, said in the TES: ‘If there is one over-arching message that keeps coming through, it is this: the concentration of educational decision-making at the centre has led to a situation where ‘command and control’ dominates, and this has now reached a point where it is seriously counter productive’.
Continuing concern about government interference in children’s education: the evidence of 2004

Professional concern about the pressure on children and teachers continued to be forcefully expressed during 2004 by representatives of a wide range of bodies: subject associations, unions, professional bodies, the General Teaching Council for England, charities and by researchers and parents. They weighed in variously against excessive testing, the development of a two-tier primary curriculum, bureaucratic workload, homework for young children, targets, league tables, value-added measures, central control and Ofsted inspections.

Eamonn O’Kane, in February 2004, shortly before he retired as general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers, said: ‘The blame for the rigidity of what is taught in schools cannot be laid at the door of teachers. Performance league tables and the pressure they place on schools to teach to the tests lie at the heart of the problem’.

At the Association of Teachers and Lecturers’ conference in Bournemouth 2004, general secretary, Mary Bousted, said: ‘New Labour needs to curb its ‘control freakery’ and obsession with charging ahead with policy without consulting those who have to implement it’.

Rona Tutt, National Association of Head Teachers’ president, when opening the association’s annual conference in Cardiff, attacked national tests that ‘have nothing to do with assessment for learning and everything to do with assessment for performance tables. What dehumanises schools is turning them into exam factories, using assessment for accountability purposes and sidelining professional judgement and common sense’.

In October when ministers showed reluctance to accept the Tomlinson proposal for a bigger role for teacher assessment, John Dunford, general secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, said: ‘this demonstrates a major lack of confidence in the teaching profession’.

But if this was representative of the infantry sniping at the high command, there was also evidence of the field marshals attacking each other and sometimes shooting themselves in the foot. In January, Sir Anthony Greener, chairman of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority had said he ‘condemned the disjointed initiatives and lack of vision of the Department for Education and Skills [and was] shocked by the number of overlapping organisations fishing in the same pond funded in part or wholly by public money’.

Also he was ‘horrified by the deluge of glossy reports on his desk and invitations to conferences whose deliberations led nowhere’.

In May 2004 Ofsted Chief Inspector David Bell admitted that changes at Ofsted could be responsible for the sharp rise in the number of failing schools. He said: ‘Inspectors may have misinterpreted the inspection framework introduced last September and focused too much on schools’ weaknesses’.
Fed up with cramming: staff don’t mind the KS2 tests themselves. What grates is the mammoth coaching burden and league-table pressure

Primary teachers are not opposed to tests for 11-year-olds but resent the time they have to spend on coaching and the intense pressure to do well, research [by the National Foundation for Educational Research] reveals.

It shows that children are now being coached for up to nine months before sitting the Key Stage 2 tests, with preparation often beginning at the start of the academic year. But the survey of 178 primary teachers views of the KS2 reading tests says that, overall, they were happy with the exams themselves. …

The study said: “In sharp contrast to positive descriptions of the test materials was an underlying feeling of resentment towards the assessment system. Removed from a pressurised culture of league tables and targets, Key Stage 2 reading tests are seen in a whole new light.”

John Coe, of the National Association for Primary Education, said: “These findings confirm what a flawed testing system we have and how children’s progress is being distorted. There is far too much coaching because government has stated that all children should have reached a certain level in the same school year.”

TES (Dorothy Lepkowska) 15 October 2004

Stop meddling

The Government should stop its constant meddling in schools or risk harming children’s education, a leading private school headteacher has warned.

Paul Moss, chairman of the Independent Schools Association, said that extra workload and the imposition of endless changes and new regulations has resulted in too great an emphasis on managing schools rather than teaching children.

“Teachers’ confidence, in private and state sectors has been shot by a succession of changes …No sooner have we mastered and adopted some new system, when another new idea, initiative or opinion changes it….”

TES (Neal Smith) 16 April 2004

Teachers risk losing pay over tests boycott

Teachers face having their pay docked if they go ahead with a boycott of national curriculum tests for 1.2 million pupils aged 7 and 11, their employers warned yesterday.

… The National Union of Teachers 42-strong executive voted unanimously to ballot on a boycott of next year’s English, maths and science tests for primary school children, saying they were too stressful.

The Independent (Richard Garner) 8 November 2003

Also in May, the Parliamentary Public Accounts Select Committee called for a radical overhaul of league tables in order to ensure that schools in deprived areas were treated fairly. In June the QCA announced that ‘children’s education is suffering as schools, desperate to climb the league tables, hothouse 11-year-olds for Key Stage 2 tests (and) schools are slashing time spent on non-tested subjects such as history and design and technology’.

By August the Government had admitted to flaws in the league tables saying that ‘value-added and traditional league tables exaggerate differences between schools and can be an unreliable indicator of their performance’. Then, in October, the House of Commons Education Select Committee accused Ofsted of contributing to the problems facing some of the country’s toughest schools. It added that at a cost to taxpayers of £207 million a year, Ofsted must prove that it offered value for money. Earlier, a report from Ofsted’s own staff, leaked to the TES in April, said that questionnaires returned by 2,000 Ofsted staff had revealed high levels of bullying, fear, stress and bad management. One in three wanted to leave, two in three had said that they felt unable to speak freely at work or share ideas about changing the way work was done, and nearly the same number were feeling so stressed that it was damaging their work, saying that objectives changed so frequently that they could not get work done.

There was much concern about the development of a ‘two-tier curriculum’ in primary schools. QCA statistics published in March showed that Key Stage 2 pupils were now spending half their lesson time learning English and maths, this having steadily increased over the last six years.

“...
The other subjects in the curriculum were all getting less time. David Lambert, chief executive of the Geographical Association, said that geography had been seriously marginalised and Roy Hughes, Chair of the Historical Association Primary Committee noted that the same had happened to history, adding: ‘Politicians claim they wish pupils to become engaged citizens, to access culture and to appreciate rights and responsibilities. History is likely to be a central element in access to any such rich curriculum. The Government needs, for a change, to take the long view and realise the importance of children accessing “the big ideas”’.

But if English and maths were getting the lion’s share of time there was disquiet about their achievements. Stephen Twigg, the minister responsible for primary education, said in March that ‘the Government’s message of “literacy, literacy, literacy” was a mistake’ since for the four past years KS2 results had remained static with 75 per cent of pupils gaining level 4 in English. (In August the 2004 results were announced: English up to 77 per cent.) In October, Paul Andrews, Chair of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics Council, said that: ‘children must be helped to see maths as a creative, imaginative and problem-solving set of challenges’. He added that it was not only taught because it was useful but that it should be a source of delight and wonder, offering intellectual excitement and appreciation of its essential creativity. But the testing regime, he argued, was acting as a barrier to this – and so should be abolished.

But was the Government listening to concerns that their testing regime was also putting restrictions on the time available for other subjects than maths and English? It seems not, since, in July there were strong rumours that soon primary schools were to be spending an hour a week learning a foreign language. Charles Clarke was reported as saying that he would consider making this mandatory ‘if schools were seen to be dragging their feet’.

### What the Papers Said:

#### The Happy Majority: But Teachers Are Not Satisfied With Pay or the Government’s Education Record

Mori pollsters found that 89 per cent of teachers in England and Wales were satisfied with their jobs … [but] a majority (51 per cent) were dissatisfied with the Government’s performance on education. … John Bangs, National Union of Teachers head of education, said: ‘Despite difficult circumstances, largely created by the Government, it is always worth remembering that teachers went into the profession because they wanted to help change people’s lives and it is a tribute to them that they can be so enthusiastic about the job.’

_TES_ (William Stewart) 12 December 2003

#### Free The Caged Minds Of Young Teachers: Prize Winning Novelist Calls For Ministers To Stop Harassing Staff And To Trust Them

Lack of intellectual freedom, rather than low pay and high workload, is turning the brightest undergraduates away from teaching, Philip Pullman, the prize winning author says. …

He told the _TES_ that fear now dominates the classroom: fear of exams, of league tables and of school inspectors. Teachers are worn down by the need to deliver a government-imposed curriculum. “Teachers are not trusted to teach,” he said. “They’re nagged, they’re controlled, they’re harassed. They have to be inspected all the time. Set them free. Trust them.”

_TES_ (Adi Bloom) 4 April 2003

#### Creativity In Maths Is The Solution

Your article on maths and science is important. The dearth of teachers, recruitment and retention continues to be of great concern. This is exacerbated by the pressures placed on teachers in relation to class sizes, constant scrutiny by government and media, testing and inspection regimes and the plethora of “new” initiatives, each of which creates a commensurate increase in paperwork.

To make long-term inroads into maths teaching recruitment, the current generation of children must be helped to see maths as a creative, imaginative and problem-solving set of challenges. _Learning maths must be seen as a pleasurable pursuit_, as something worth doing in its own right. … Mathematics is not only taught because it is useful. It should be a source of delight and wonder, offering pupils intellectual excitement and appreciation of its essential creativity. The complexity is how teachers are encouraged to make maths creative when tests form such a major part of classroom activity. … The testing regime, which acts as a barrier to so many potential students of maths, should be abolished.

_TES_ Paul Andrews, Chair, Association of Teachers of Mathematics council, 22 October 2004
What the papers said:

Headteachers unite to fight SATs

Headteachers joined forces (as the Primary Education Alliance) yesterday to step up pressure on the government to scrap national tests for seven-year-olds in England, amid signs that ministers are likely to resist full-scale abolition in favour of easing ambitious national education targets. … The tests leave youngsters ‘disillusioned, demotivated, and disaffected’ they said. …Ministers face growing concern among parents and teachers about the impact of tests for seven, 11 and 14-year olds, and the threat of a boycott next year by members of the largest classroom teaching union, the National Union of Teachers.

The Guardian (Rebecca Smithers) 20 May 2003

Test obsession is killing creativity

The cost of this obsession with tests is dreadful. The curriculum has been narrowed. …If SATs really raise standards why do they not exist in Scotland and why are they being dropped in Wales? If they work why does Finland, top of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development rankings, not have them? Teachers and writers … want a genuine rise in standards. SATs have not and will not deliver this. It is time to trust teachers through a system of moderated teacher assessment.

TES (Alan Gibbons, Coordinator of Authors Against the SATs) 28 November 2003

Fault may be ours, says Ofsted chief: David Bell issues new guidance in a bid to stem the growing tide of failed inspections

Chief Inspector David Bell has sent new guidance to his staff after admitting that changes at the Office for Standards in Education could be responsible for the sharp rise in the number of failing schools. Inspectors may have misinterpreted the inspection framework introduced last September and focused too much on schools’ weaknesses, he said.

Mr Bell’s latest guidance follows Ofsted’s annual report, which revealed that the number of inspection reports failing to meet the expected standard rose by more than 50 per cent during the past two years. In 2003–4, 93.1 per cent of reports were satisfactory compared with 95.6 per cent in 2001–2 and a target of 95 per cent. There has been a 35 per cent increase in the number of schools judged to be failing since the new framework was introduced.

TES (Jon Slater) 7 May 2004

Schools continued to be inundated with documents despite attempts to reduce bureaucracy. A TES report in May 2004 showed that in the previous year the DfES, Ofsted and the QCA between them had sent 1,855 pages of documents to secondary schools and 1,213 to primary schools.

As in the previous year there was an element of the bizarre in one strand of government thinking. In February 2004, Sir Peter Gershon (a former chief operating officer for BAE Systems and now heading the Office of Government Commerce) produced a draft efficiency review which was leaked to the Financial Times. He suggested that good teachers could teach ‘very large’ classes if new high-level classroom assistants were to come from the ranks of 80,000 civil servants who would lose their jobs if ministers followed his recommendations. He said that up to £2.2 billion worth of productivity gains could be made in schools through more use of support staff and technology.

It is not clear what ministers thought of that idea. Meanwhile they were busy making speeches about ‘personalised learning’, which seemed to be New Labour’s big idea in education for a third term of office. Curiously, a conference organised by the Institute for Public Policy Research in March, attended by academics, representatives of unions, think-tanks, the DfES, the Cabinet Office and Downing Street, concluded that the concept remained unclear. Martin Johnson, at that time an IPPR research fellow, pointed out that the concept had not been generated by research or by practitioners explaining new practice. Rather, it had been introduced almost entirely via ministerial speeches. In essence, it was political.
However, research had cast doubt on the validity of work on different learning styles that form one of the main planks of the drive towards ‘personalised learning’. The argument was that students learn in a variety of ways and therefore teaching methods should vary accordingly. But a study commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (and led by Professor Frank Coffield of London University’s Institute of Education) reported in May 2004 that many of the methods, or instruments, used to identify pupils’ individual learning styles were unreliable, and had a negligible impact on teaching and learning.

Other substantial research studies underpinned concerns about current schooling. In research commissioned by ATL, Mary Jane Drummond, formerly of Cambridge University, and Professor Janet Moyles of the Anglia Polytechnic University found that techniques used to educate three- and four-year-olds had not been extended to four- and five-year-olds in the second year of the Foundation Stage. Instead teachers were being pressured by Key Stage 1 colleagues to prioritise achievements such as numeracy, literacy, and familiarity with routines such as lining up in the playground. This reflects what a TES editorial described as the ‘disconnection’ between the play-based Foundation Stage and the subject-based national curriculum of KS1. A survey of 500 teachers by researchers Sue Palmer and Pie Corbett expressed similar concerns: ‘We’re pushing young children too soon into the manipulation of pencils instead of the manipulation of language. Too much pressure from further up the school on Reception and Year 1 classes – expecting too much formal work too soon’.

A TES poll of 700 parents in March 2004 found that three-quarters of them wanted national tests for Key Stage 1 to be abolished.

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The Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Continuing concern... the evidence of 2004

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MPS TAKE A SHOT AT TARGETS: ‘A DAMAGING BLAME CULTURE IN EDUCATION’

Targets have become the focus of a damaging blame culture in education [the public administration select committee] will say next week. MPs say the need to hit targets has harmed teacher morale. They want a more relaxed approach, saying targets should simply be a guide rather than a stick to beat them. They will say that it was absurd that former education secretary Estelle Morris felt forced to resign just because school literacy and numeracy targets were missed.

The report comes after Education Secretary Charles Clarke told MPs this week that he wanted fewer targets.

TES (Michael Shaw and Karen Thornton) 18 July 2003

PRIMARY NEEDS TO GET PAST BASICS

Pressure on primaries to improve literacy and numeracy is producing a two-tier curriculum, David Bell, the chief inspector, said this week. A widening gap between standards in English, maths and science and pupils’ achievements in other subjects, was highlighted in his annual report. …

Eamonn O’Kane, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers, said: “The blame for the rigidity of what is taught in schools cannot be laid at the door of teachers. Performance league tables and the pressure they place on schools to teach to the tests lie at the heart of the problem”.

TES (John Slater) 6 February 2004

LOST THE PLOT

Literacy has both a public and a private pay-off. The first empowers us in society; the second enriches us as individuals and encourages us to think for ourselves - unless, of course, the latter is deliberately “educated” out of us for the convenience of those who’d really rather we didn’t. …

I am concerned that in a constant search for things to test, we’re forgetting the true purpose, the true nature, of reading and writing; and in forcing these things to happen in a way that divorces them from pleasure, we are creating a generation of children who might be able to make the right noises when they see print, but who hate reading and feel nothing but hostility for literature.

Guardian Education (Philip Pullman) 30 September 2003

The Evidence Informed Policy and Practice Centre (EPPI) gave the TES in October 2004 a preview of its systematic review of research on the impact of the numeracy hour and the Government’s numeracy strategy on KS1. It found that whole-class teaching could shatter the confidence of low-attaining five- to seven-year-olds and act as a brake on their achievement. Pupils at the top of the class lose out as teachers struggle to engage children of differing abilities. It also found that improvements in the maths test scores of seven-year-olds were a result of teachers teaching to the test rather than any increase in pupils’ understanding.

Peter Tymms and Colin Dean of Durham University, in a study commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers, claimed that primary value-added measures were misleading, biased against more able pupils, and would never be able to reflect accurately the efforts of most schools. The main problem with the system introduced in 2002 was the small size of many primaries. Value-added data was published for schools with as few as 11 pupils in a year group, which the study said could lead to ‘wild fluctuations’ in the figures from year to year. It recommended that data should not be published for schools with year groups of fewer than 50 pupils. They estimated this would rule out more than 80 per cent of primaries. Schools with many able seven-year-olds were also penalised. Under the value-added system pupils who move from level 3 at seven to level 5 were judged to have made average progress. They could not register a better-than-average value-added score. Also, high pupil turnover meant that some schools had value-added scores that did not reflect their efforts. But School Standards Minister, David Miliband, said that value-added information had been widely welcomed as a significant step forward.

Guardian Education (Philip Pullman) 30 September 2003

Value-added is a measure of improvement in assessment scores over a period of time.
A study by Leeds University researchers of 115 Year 2 teachers who were able to change their Key Stage 1 test timetable and base their final assessment of their seven-year-old pupils on their own judgement, found that most turned down the chance. This led Professor Ted Wragg to say: ‘People’s confidence has been shot to pieces. This is what happens when you browbeat a profession for a long time. The high stakes of league tables and inspections have created a cowed profession when people for formal purposes follow everything to the letter, terrified of putting a foot wrong. It’s like Brave New World where the people become defenders of the system that oppressed them. It is a 21st century tragedy. The profession has to stand up and say to politicians to go and boil their collective heads’.

Nevertheless, the outcome of this ‘government experiment’ (trialed by a large number of KS1 schools) was that Stephen Twigg announced that the existing regime of KS1 national tests would make way for teacher assessment. ‘We are putting all our faith and trust in teachers,’ he said. ‘The trials have shown that teacher assessment is robust and we have confidence in the profession.’ Under the changes, seven-year-olds would still be expected to complete the national tests in English and maths. However, teachers could decide when and how to administer them and the results would no longer be published separately from an overall teacher assessment of the pupil’s progress. The changes were welcomed by teaching unions and educationalists.

It was not as substantial a change as that happening in Wales, where there were no tests for seven-year-olds (nor league tables) and a system of moderated teacher assessment at ages 11 and 14 was to be introduced, with a skills test in Year 5 mapped against national curriculum subjects to help teachers pinpoint children’s learning needs and improve transition to secondary school.

This was a result of a review group chaired by researcher Richard Daugherty whose conclusions were endorsed by the Welsh curriculum authority. The TES editor commended Welsh Education Minister Jane Davison for tackling questions that dared not even be posed in Westminster. The editorial said that essentially we had a Victorian elementary education system in England and 15 years into the reign of the national curriculum, it was time for a major inquiry asking fundamental questions about how to prepare 21st-century citizens.

It was, of course, the Tomlinson enquiry that asked such questions in terms of 14-19 year olds. Under those proposals, GCSEs and A-Levels would be replaced by a four-level diploma qualification by 2014. The highest A-Level equivalent would be assessed mainly by external exams. But lower levels, including those taken by 16-year-olds, would predominantly be graded by teachers based on pupils’ work during the course. Almost as soon as the report was published in October, government ministers were rejecting its most radical aspects. The TES reported this as follows: ‘Ministers are extremely nervous about the bigger role for teacher assessment in the new diploma system, which would be implemented by 2014. The Prime Minister said that the diploma would not replace GCSEs and A-Levels, while David Miliband, School Standards Minister, said the titles of current qualifications would be retained. Charles Clarke, the Education Secretary, said that any new system would be based on traditional, externally-assessed exams, though the report suggests that teacher assessment would dominate’. The TES went on to say: ‘The Government risks a confrontation with much of the education world if it vetoes the teacher assessment plan. Organisations ranging from England’s General Teaching Council to universities, private schools and headteachers’ leaders have backed the move’.

So, what might government do?
The evidence that government intervention has raised educational standards is strong: the evidence that this is now becoming counter-productive is even stronger. It is time for government to legislate from a statement like this:

In celebration of the achievements of government and teachers in creating excellence in the national school system, and to ensure the continuation of this process, the Government is now determined that:

- while it remains the lawful duty of the Secretary of State for Education to promote the education of the people of England and the progressive development of institutions devoted to that purpose;
- and recognising that the actions of government in recent years have substantially raised the standards of pupil achievement at all ages, have enhanced the quality of school management and governance, and have enabled parents to have choice of schools for their children and the information needed both to exercise that choice and to follow their children’s educational progress;
- and recognising the pedagogic competence of the members of the teaching profession in terms of their wisdom, humanity, morality, knowledge, skills, and ability to enthuse pupils with the same qualities; their personal commitment towards the development of all pupils in proper relation to their talents, abilities and potential; and their role in enriching and deepening national culture, by what they teach, what they do and what they are.

It is now the time to reinvest teachers and schools with the power to determine the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment procedures that they judge locally to be appropriate and in the best interests of their pupils.

To this end it is decided that:

**Action Plan**

- Ofsted inspections of schools shall cease, but local education authority inspectorates shall identify and support such schools that are in difficulties, and support self-evaluation in all schools;
- the national curriculum and related teaching strategies shall no longer be obligatory, but may be varied according to schools’ own decisions;
- teacher assessments shall replace all external assessments of pupils until GCSE and these assessments shall be communicated to each child’s parents regularly;
- government shall no longer set targets for pupil performance;
- league tables of assessments shall no longer be compiled, but in their place schools will be expected to publish termly reports by their governing bodies of school work and progress, making these available to the public;
- a Central Advisory Council for Education shall be re-established to advise parliament, government, the general public, local education authorities, schools, teachers and governors on significant issues and in particular to monitor standards achieved in the various basic skills taught in schools through a robust sampling procedure.
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

HOMEWORK FAILS THE TEST: LIBBY PURVES

Homework, certainly for the under-12s, is a sacred cow which is way overdue for the slaughterhouse. We have allowed it to creep downward through the age range until it now afflicts even children of six and seven.

Government prod-noses are forever preaching the importance of homework and setting silly targets about how many minutes per day each should do, but that is because they do not understand much about real children and wish to appear to be “doing something” and “driving up standards” without actually spending money or paying more teachers. …

But from my observation, what really happens is that, more often than not, teachers set homework, not because they think it will improve children’s learning, but because the school policy says they have to. Young children bring home dreary, repetitive, joyless tasks which teach them nothing new.

TES (Libby Purves) 7 May 2004

TOO MUCH PRESSURE NOT ENOUGH CARE

“Why should a five-year-old have to catch up when they have only been alive five years?”

This heartfelt cry from an infant teacher sums up the feeling of many who work with young children. …Teachers said the national literacy strategy had increased subject knowledge and professionalism, added to their repertoire of methods and raised the status of English teaching. But when asked what was still wrong with primary literacy, a large number commented on the early years.

One said: “The powers that be must understand that we’re pushing young children too soon into the manipulation of pencils instead of the manipulation of language. Too much pressure from further up the school on reception and Year 1 classes – expecting too much formal work too soon.”

Another said: “Resolve the conflict between the foundation stage curriculum, which is child-centred and where the emphasis is on experiential learning, and the national curriculum in Key Stage 1 which is driven by assessment target setting and the need to ‘cover’ objectives.”

TES (Diane Hofkins) 11 June 2004

OFSTED COULD DO BETTER, SAY MPS

The Office for Standards in Education is underperforming and must try harder, a survey [by npfSynergy] of 125 MPs suggests. Only a quarter of MPs believe the inspectorate is effective, putting Ofsted mid-table in a league of government-funded bodies.

TES 9 July 2004

This action plan should be introduced for primary schools now; because government is still in the throes of changing the secondary school system, it might be appropriate to wait perhaps a couple of years before implementing all these points in secondary schools. There is justice in this since the national curriculum entered primary schools first.

Stopping Ofsted inspections is the key to demonstrating trust in teachers. It is necessary not just to remove the terror that these induce in many teachers, but to convince schools that the array of regulations that government has issued in the past 15 years, and defaulting on which may lead Ofsted inspectors to condemn a school, are now open for a school to judge whether they are necessary in terms of the best interests of pupils and parents. (The announcement that Ofsted inspections are to be made shorter, but more frequent, will probably tighten the inspectorial grip on schools and certainly not encourage schools and teachers to think for themselves about their work.)

Allowing the curriculum to be determined by the school will not lead to fundamental changes in the teaching of the basic skills – these are firmly rooted in the education system – but will enable schools to make the most of the specialist interests and skills of individual teachers and the educational opportunities of their local environment – again in terms of the best interests of their pupils.
WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:

PANIC TEST CRAMMING EATS UP TIMETABLE: EXAM AUTHORITY CONCEDES THAT DESPERATE EFFORT TO BOOST SCORES IS NARROWING KS2 CURRICULUM

Primary pupils are spending two hours a week doing practice papers for national English tests, the Government’s qualifications watchdog has admitted.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority believes children’s education is suffering as schools, desperate to climb the league tables, hothouse 11-year-olds for Key Stage 2 tests.

The first official survey of revision time found that, in the run-up to the spring assessments in Year 6, 75 per cent of schools now spend a 10th of all teaching time practising for English tests alone. … And, despite repeated warnings to keep practice to a minimum, many schools spend further time drilling children for the maths and science tests. The QCA said it was unlikely that conventional English lessons were being cut back to make room for practice. Instead, schools were slashing time spent on non-tested subjects such as history and design and technology. …

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said: “It’s naive of the QCA and the Government to say to schools, ‘Do not invest inordinate amounts of time practising for these tests’. League tables and funding and status depend on schools’ performance. Until that changes, schools will continue to devote this amount of time to preparation.”

TES (Warwick Mansell) 11 June 2004

IS OFSTED A HUGE WASTE OF MONEY?

MPs plan to investigate whether the Office for Standards in Education is wasting its £197 million annual budget. The House of Commons education select committee [plans] “to consider the cost-effectiveness of the inspection regime given that the number of schools performing well is increasing.”

The announcement follows complaints last month by Peter Housden, director general for schools at the Department for Education and Skills, that the education watchdog was too expensive.

TES (Michael Shaw) 25 July 2003

FOUNDATION CRACKS NEED REPAIR

… If [the Government] hoped the profile would ensure that the foundation stage curriculum was properly taught, then it’s time they learned to have greater trust in teachers. The bigger issue is the disconnection between the play-based, foundation stage and the subject-based national curriculum.

TES (Editorial) 21 May 2004

The introduction of systematic assessment of pupils in the basic skills is perhaps the greatest achievement since 1988. It has enabled each child’s progress to be monitored over the years and ensured that work can be tailored to educational need effectively. This is what is meant by ‘assessment for learning’ and it has made a substantial difference to teaching, particularly in primary schools.

The class teacher uses it in planning the work over a year and then passes onto the next class teacher the assessments of each child, so that momentum in learning is maintained. But it does not need external testing. The tests at seven and 11 have come to dominate the work of schools and occupy an inordinate amount of time and effort. They distort the whole ethos of a school – especially when the results for each school are published in newspapers in league tables. When first introduced they served to train teachers in making assessments, but this is no longer needed and new teachers receive training in this.

What is needed is for teacher assessments on the basic skills to be communicated to parents, so that they know how their child is progressing. Written reports to parents have improved markedly over the last 16 years and schools can be relied on to continue this practice without enforcing legislation. League tables are pernicious. Fine distinctions between the ratings of one school and the next, or between one year and the next, are meaningless since individually children differ and collectively – as a year group – these differences can add up to distinctions which mislead the general public. The use of such tables to try to show trends over the years in educational achievement is also unsound because it is an impossible task to ensure that the standards of one year’s tests are strictly comparable with another. While politicians glory in drawing attention to rises and falls in nationally averaged results, academics know that the small changes that occur year-by-year may be no more than artefacts of the system.
Of course, parents need to know how one school compares to another, in order to make appropriate choices for their children, but they would learn much more by reading the term-by-term reports published by governing bodies – as suggested in the ‘Action Plan’ on page 38. It is these which should feature in local newspapers, not league tables.

The re-establishment of a Central Advisory Council would ensure that the collective wisdom of all engaged in education can be marshalled without the shadow of party politics or the survival strategies of those in power. In particular, the brief to review national standards through a robust sampling process – perhaps along the lines of the Assessment of Performance Unit (which the Thatcher government disbanded) – would give this council oversight of trends.

It is important to recognise that schools today are very different from those which were challenged by government in the 1980s and early 1990s. Teachers are much less isolated and tend to work more collaboratively. They have become skilled at assessing the progress of their pupils and planning their teaching accordingly. Headteachers receive training in management. Governing bodies now govern and, in most schools, are seen as the essential link between the community and the school. In all schools the parents receive useful reports of their children’s progress. Nationally, there is a General Teaching Council to focus on professional issues. And government has raised the level of school funding so that more and better resources for learning are available.

Another significant change that has started to come about since the 1970s is that classroom practice is based more on research and less on fashion. Teachers and educational researchers have begun to work more closely together.

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The re-establishment of a Central Advisory Council would ensure that the collective wisdom of all engaged in education can be marshalled without the shadow of party politics or the survival strategies of those in power. In particular, the brief to review national standards through a robust sampling process – perhaps along the lines of the Assessment of Performance Unit (which the Thatcher government disbanded) – would give this council oversight of trends.

It is important to recognise that schools today are very different from those which were challenged by government in the 1980s and early 1990s. Teachers are much less isolated and tend to work more collaboratively. They have become skilled at assessing the progress of their pupils and planning their teaching accordingly. Headteachers receive training in management. Governing bodies now govern and, in most schools, are seen as the essential link between the community and the school. In all schools the parents receive useful reports of their children’s progress. Nationally, there is a General Teaching Council to focus on professional issues. And government has raised the level of school funding so that more and better resources for learning are available.

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**WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:**

**GOVERNMENT MISSES KEY TARGETS FOR 11-YEAR OLDS: FAILED ONCE AGAIN**

The government has failed once again to meet its targets for results in primary school tests in England and has a mountain to climb to achieve its goals for future years, official figures published yesterday reveal. Seventy-five per cent of 11-year-olds reached the expected level four in English and 73% in maths. The 2002 target required 80% to make level four in English and 75% in maths. In science, for which targets have not been set but where results have risen fastest, 87% reached level four – a one-point rise. …

*The Guardian (Will Woodward) 20 August 2003*

**EXAM FEARS HAUNT PUPILS: TEENAGERS ARE TROUBLED MOST BY SCHOOL WORK, NOT BULLYING, SAYS CHILDREN’S CHARITY**

Young people are more worried about exams than they are about bullying, relationships or problems with parents, according to a study by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. A third of 11- to 16-year-olds are in a state of constant anxiety, says the society. Concerns about exams and homework are top of the list of children’s worries. The society found that one in nine children describe themselves as “extremely worried”. The report offers fresh ammunition to those who argue that the Government’s drive to raise attainment along with an increasing focus on academic standards and testing puts too much pressure on children.

*TES (Jon Slater) 23 January 2004*

**INSPECTORS MAKE BAD SCHOOLS WORSE: MPS SAY OFSTED MUST PROVE ITS VALUE FOR MONEY**

England’s inspection regime was this week accused of contributing to the problems facing some of the country’s toughest schools. Being branded failing can send schools into a spiral of decline, making it harder to recruit good staff and high-achieving pupils, an influential committee of MPs said. It urged the Government to do more to help schools with problems and welcomed moves towards more self-assessment which are being introduced next September.

The House of Commons education select committee said that the Office for Standards in Education, which costs taxpayers £207 million a year, must prove that it offers value for money.

*TES (Warwick Mansell) 1 October 2004*

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In a world where the advancement of all-round education becomes predominantly the responsibility of teachers, research has a fundamental role. It is beginning to look like this. Research in universities and research institutes comes up with general findings of ‘what may work’ which are communicated to schools and teachers. These findings are then taken up by teachers (in what is termed ‘practitioner’ research) who put them to the test and discover what works for them in their schools and classrooms. Feedback to the original researchers and ideas for new general enquiries are part of the process. It puts teachers firmly in the driving seat while recognising that educational research is the most enduring and successful way of ensuring progress towards the ever-changing ideals of high-quality learning.

Research includes the search for new understanding, leading to new practices and policies and the evaluation and redevelopment of existing practices and policies.

It is a slow process – but one that safeguards the education of our children, and ensures that major funding of new initiatives is wisely spent. To be successful it requires teaching at all levels to be a research-informed profession.

But at present the pressures of inspections, external tests, targets and league tables continue to reduce the time, energy and courage teachers need to engage in such exploratory work. Research will have a much greater impact when these pressures are gone.
When Tony Blair spoke of ‘education, education, education’, what did he mean? Everyone agrees that education in schools is about the nurture and development of every child – cognitively, socially, emotionally, physically, spiritually, creatively, culturally and holistically – and that experience of today is as important as preparation for tomorrow.

But somehow this is forgotten when ministers push their pet schemes, when political parties eye the votes, when inspectors tick their schedules, when administrators prepare their league tables, when curriculum specialists prepare their syllabuses and when test designers draw up their tests. But teachers don’t forget: they know that the whole child is their concern.

Government intervention in education has raised certain standards in schools, but is now becoming counter-productive.

It is time to stop: day by day it is teachers who know best what their pupils need. It is time for parliament to require government to trust teachers and to transfer to them the power to exercise that trust in the best interests of the pupils and parents whom they serve.

Professor Michael Bassey 2005

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**WHAT THE PAPERS SAID:**

**WRITING MARKS DENY THOUSANDS LEVEL 4**

Around 6,000 11-year-olds were denied level 4 in English this year because of changes to the way the test was marked, government officials have admitted. … Statisticians estimate the results would have gone up by 1 percentage point if the old mark scheme were still in use.

*TES (Helen Ward) 29 August 2003*

**‘WE NEED THIS LIKE A HOLE IN THE HEAD’: AS TEST PAPERS GO ON SALE, FEARS GROW FOR PUPILS UNDER PRESSURE FROM PARENTS TO PERFORM**

Teachers have attacked the BBC and the Government’s exams advisers for putting pressure on children by selling last year’s primary test papers. Advertisements for the test books from the BBC and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority urge parents to ensure their children succeed in national tests at the ages of seven and 11.

David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said, “We are supposed to be playing down the tests, not adding more stress to seven and 11-year-olds. We need more pressure from parents like a hole in the head.”

*TES (Michael Shaw) 20 February 2004*

**‘COWED’ TEACHERS LACK CONFIDENCE: MANY TEACHERS TURNED DOWN THE CHANCE TO RELY ON THEIR OWN ASSESSMENT OF PUPILS AND RELIED INSTEAD ON MAY’S TESTS**

Infant teachers lack the confidence to rely on their own judgements rather than national tests, Leeds university researchers say. … Professor Ted Wragg said: “People’s confidence has been shot to pieces. This is what happens when you browbeat a profession for a long time. The high stakes of league tables and inspections have created a cowed profession when people for formal purposes follow everything to the letter, terrified of putting a foot wrong. It’s like *Brave New World* where the people become defenders of the system that oppressed them. It is a 21st century tragedy. The profession has to stand up and say to politicians to go and boil their collective heads.”

*TES (Helen Ward) 23 July 2004*

**MISSING THE MARK AS RESULTS STALL**

More than half of the targets set by ministers to drive up school standards will not be hit, the Government has admitted. This year’s results for 11-, 14- and 16-year-olds are unlikely to have risen enough to fulfil ministers’ expectations.

*TES (Jon Slater) 4 June 2004*
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by Professor Michael Bassey for The Association of Teachers and Lecturers