Reform of the National Curriculum in England  
_Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers_  
16th April 2013

ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members’ conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

**ATL policy**

ATL’s education policy is underpinned by the professionalism of teachers. Teachers should be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in promoting social justice. ATL believes that:

- Education is about meeting the needs of every child and ensuring all can realise their potential, and develop as fully rounded citizens.

- The National Curriculum should be a curriculum for all children and young people in all schools.

- The National Curriculum should be a slim, skills-based framework, which has as its focus pupils’ needs and interests. Schools and teachers should have the professional freedom to develop the detailed content and pedagogy, collaboratively with other professionals, the local community, employers, pupils and families.
• A slim framework should mean defining essential content across all subjects and lined explicitly with aims. It should not mean cutting out or demoting individual subjects.

• A slim National Curriculum should give teachers space to innovate, to be able to support their pupils’ learning through an ever-changing society.

ATL response

We agree that the National Curriculum needs to be reviewed, slimmed down, and refreshed in light of the challenges of 21st century. The proposed new framework is a retrograde step, risking narrowing opportunity for many pupils, rather than enhancing and supporting it.

Instead of raising standards, there is a risk of inhibiting progress for large numbers of children, and labeling others as failures. The sheer volume of content of the core subjects in the new proposals at primary, coupled with the year on year specifications, risks unrealistic and inappropriate expectations of children at too early an age.

This consultation response draws upon comments and feedback from our members over the past few months. The development of the new National Curriculum has not been carried out in conjunction with teachers, working across a range of schools, and ATL is committed to ensuring that the views and experiences of our members are heard.

We share the Government’s commitment to raising achievement and closing gaps. ATL members have real concerns about the negative impact the proposals could have on pupils’ learning. It is obvious that many others in the field of education share those concerns.

We urge the Government to delay the implementation of the new National Curriculum, and to rethink the current aims, values and content of the programmes of study. The 2013-14 school year could then be used to trial different aspects of the Curriculum, gather feedback, refine and improve.

General points

The Aims of the Curriculum

There has been no wider debate over the aims and underlying values of the National Curriculum.

The aims set out in the proposals are limited, and will not have any positive impact on teachers’ planning or teaching. They say nothing about pupils’ learning or active engagement in creating, thinking and questioning. Nor do they give any indication of the purposes of education in developing pupils as active citizens, workers, or carers. It is unhelpful to suggest that teachers define aims based on content.
It is important to take time to achieve consensus with teachers, parents, employers and others, and produce clear statements that promote positive attitudes to learning as part of the National Curriculum.

The National Curriculum may be one aspect of a child’s education but this is so detailed that there is no space for much beyond it.

We are also concerned that entitlement for all should be at the heart of the National Curriculum, yet it will not apply in free schools and academies.

Although there is a statement of inclusion in the framework, overall, it appears to be a move away from an entitlement curriculum. There are doubts as to whether a knowledge driven curriculum, with little flexibility will help to facilitate an inclusive pedagogy.\(^1\) The relentless prescription at primary level suggests that once a topic is covered there is no need to revisit at any greater depth as pupils mature.

**Breadth and balance**

We believe that breadth and balance should be the guiding principles of the curriculum. Instead the proposals remain over-prescriptive, especially in the core subjects at primary level.

The level of detail – for example, around statutory spelling lists and details of arithmetic procedures – are likely to constrain curriculum innovation in schools, with insufficient room for other valued areas of learning. The lack of clarity over how attainment and progress will be measured will further exacerbate this issue.

The current proposals leave little room at primary level for teacher or school flexibility, indicating a mistrust of teachers and unwillingness to allow them to use their professional judgment and experience to teach children. ATL members feel that this level of prescriptive subject matter is the wrong direction for the curriculum overall.

A question that should have been asked earlier in the process is: what does freeing teachers to design a curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils look like? Instead, the level of prescription undermines any promise of freedom and space for innovation.

**Learning and teaching**

Too many of the proposals demand a narrow style of teaching and learning. Skilled teachers work with the whole range of children’s experiences, recognising that children do not learn in a linear fashion.

Year on year specification in the core subjects is unnecessary, and denies the need for pupils to revisit concepts at different stages. We believe the

approach should have been to identify essential concepts to be understood across a key stage. Whilst the framework document claims that there will be flexibility in each key stage, our members are sceptical about this in practice. If students haven’t mastered everything that is expected of them, there is little scope to go back and fill in gaps from previous programmes of study from earlier years or master concepts in different contexts.

Learners should be at the heart of the curriculum, and there should be space to develop knowledge creatively, and foster a passion for learning. We agree with Professor Colin Richards that there is little role for pupil’s active learning in the new Curriculum or a sense of them being co-developers of knowledge.²

The current proposals favour ‘essential knowledge’ over concepts, skills and attitudes. This risks an increase in rote learning at the expense of understanding and critical thinking. Teachers know that children learn ‘through real world situations, and that through being creative, thoughtful and questioning, pupils make their learning make sense. If school learning fails to make connections with other parts of pupils’ lives, evidence suggests that it is children from poorer backgrounds who will be most disadvantaged as the risk of disengagement is higher amongst these groups.³

We question whether the emphasis on core knowledge will really help to prepare young people for 21st century employment. The CBI stressed the importance of personal qualities and attributes, alongside core subjects. They see education as being at the centre of growth.⁴ Current proposals to equip young people with knowledge will not make this happen. ‘Knowing more’ does not necessarily equate with higher standards.

Our members have stressed that the new National Curriculum risks ‘designing robots’, and will lead to a loss of enjoyment in learning. The focus on knowledge acquisition at the expense of learning to apply knowledge, which is likely to be replicated in the exams system will have a detrimental impact on pupils. It points to a 2-tier system where skills are valued less highly. We agree with the CBI that this will not aid transition to work.

**Coherence across the Curriculum**

There is a lack of coherence across the proposed National Curriculum. Our members have particular concerns about the transition between Early Years and KS1. At present, the early learning goals do not seem to relate to the Programmes of Study in Year 1 – for example, sound is a key feature in the EYFS, but then does not appear again until Year 3. The loss of this developmental approach is not helpful. As one Year 1 teacher commented:

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² Presentation at NAPE/ASPE ‘The Primary Curriculum’ conference, Feb 27th 2013

³ ibid

⁴ CBI (2012) *First Steps: A new approach for our schools*
At Foundation Stage, we are finding that pupils increasingly come into school with fewer basic social skills, inability to use scissors, glue, and a pencil effectively as well as problems with basics such as personal hygiene and dressing and undressing. It seems a huge leap to fulfil the requirements of the Foundation Stage and then jump on to the new requirements of KS1 from such a low starting point in many cases.

Another key transition point is from primary to secondary, particularly when free schools and academies are not expected to follow the National Curriculum. Beyond the core subjects, progression appears to depend on interpreting ‘simple understanding’ to ‘complex understanding’ – which is not helpful for pupils moving between schools.

Assessment

The assessment requirements should have been published at the same time as the National Curriculum draft framework. The lack of clarity over KS1 and KS2 tests, GCSE reforms, and accountability measures for primary schools mean that it is hard to comment in any detail.

Our members are concerned that the assessment measures will again be high stakes and target driven, further distorting the balance between core and foundation subjects, and meaning that there is still undue pressure on pupils and teachers at the key points of external testing.

We broadly welcome the move from levels, as these have had perverse consequences in the past. ATL would prefer to see key outcomes defined at stages, and encouraging all children to reach these. However, our members have also recognised that levels provide a common currency across subjects, and help teachers and senior managers to demonstrate pupils progress. We need further detail on what will be put in their place and how the attainment targets in the Programmes of Study will accurately measure achievement and progression.

Support for teachers

ATL feels that the current proposed timescales for implementing the new National Curriculum are unrealistic. With every subject and every year group all being implemented at the same time, schools will face issues with capacity and expertise to ensure this happens effectively.

Teachers need the space and discretion to teach in a way that is relevant to the populations of their classes. A rushed implementation of an overly prescriptive national framework will not allow for the development of local innovative options for the curriculum. Our members are concerned that local authority cluster meetings where the opportunity to make links with other schools around the curriculum are rapidly disappearing, so a partnership approach across a local area will be difficult to achieve in practice.

With the proposal to disapply aspects of the existing Curriculum from September 2013, there is the risk of a confusing interim period, especially
for KS2 children who will potentially be taught the new Curriculum, but
tested on the old one while we await detail of the new tests to be
introduced in 2016. Teachers will have to absorb the new content of the
Curriculum, while still teaching the old one in parts. At KS3, teachers will
be assuming knowledge that has not yet been taught. There needs to be
time for schools to put new arrangements in place, along with CPD for
teachers to help with the changes.

One option could be for the National Curriculum to be disapplied in its
entirety in 2013, so teachers could work with the new one where
appropriate. Again – the 2013-14 school year should then be used to
provide clear guidance on who will be tested on what, and when.

Our members have also highlighted that elements of the new National
Curriculum require new resources and materials – at a time when schools’
budgets are stretched. The 2013-14 school year would be an opportunity
for schools to work together, and with academics and other stakeholders,
to develop their own resources where they can.

The draft programmes of study

The consultation document asked whether the content of the draft
programmes of study, represent a sufficiently ambitious level of challenge
for pupils at each key stage. ATL’s policy is for a slim, skills based
framework, defining essential content, whilst still ensuring breadth across
the curriculum. The current programmes of study do not achieve this,
instead, leaning towards coverage rather than understanding or
application.
The programmes of study require a complete rethink – reducing the level
of prescription in the core subjects, reviewing the foundation subjects,
and looking at cross curricular links to ensure there is coherence and
structure across the curriculum as a whole. If the pitch of the programmes
of study are inappropriate, then there is a real risk of encouraging failure,
which could have long term consequences in disengaging pupils from
learning.
There are a number of issues with the content of specific subjects, and we
have summarised our main concerns below:

Maths

We are concerned about the lack of emphasis on mathematical thinking,
reasoning and problem-solving in the draft programmes of study.

At primary level, the expectations are untenable, and do not reflect the
variety of learning styles of students. The emphasis appears to be on
mastering arithmetic, with complex operations with high numbers
introduced before pupils have fully grasped the necessary mathematical
concepts and skills. As one Year 1 teacher stressed:

*It's just one more thing for children to feel that they are struggling
with, and will therefore knock their confidence, and their attitude
towards the subject.*
The changes will also require intensive training of primary school teachers.

**English**

We welcome the emphasis on reading for meaning and pleasure, and writing for range of purposes. Whilst we appreciate that ‘spoken language’ has been added back in at the beginning of the National Curriculum framework, we are disappointed that the Government has not listened to the many calls to reintroduce the discrete strand.

Spoken language should have a much higher prominence across the curriculum. It enables children to develop skills in providing focussed answers and asking their own questions, as well as using talk to narrate, explain, speculate, imagine, hypothesise, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, reason and justify. This builds on the ‘sustained shared thinking’ of the Foundation Stage.

We support the views of the National Association for the Teaching of Drama that drama should be included, as this has a key role to play in enhancing children’s language skills and confidence, and embeds important thinking skills.

There is no reference to media and multimodal texts. The curriculum needs to account for the wide variety of communication methods in the 21st Century.

The focus on ‘current phonic knowledge’ means that pupils could be denied opportunities to explore language beyond this, based on whether children should be ‘allowed’ to read or write particular words yet. Phonics is important in the teaching of reading, but is not the only factor.

**Science**

Our members feel that the programmes of study for Science have been dulled down in terms of content, particularly at Year 1. As one teacher commented:

> Science develops through experimentation and an understanding that what we know could really be overhauled at any minute - this is not the attitude that children will leave school with, if they are constantly learning and regurgitating fact after fact after fact.

We also support the Sex Education Forum’s campaign which cautions that the proposed Science curriculum threatens watering down existing sex education, rather than strengthening it – in particular as the proposals in

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5 Alexander, R (2012) *Improving oracy and classroom talk in English Schools: achievements and challenges* University of Cambridge extended version of a presentation given at DfE seminar on oracy
the Science Programme of Study is the only compulsory sex education at primary school level, and vital information about the body and sexual health has been left out

**History**

The History curriculum should be revised entirely, as the current drafts risk putting children off the subject for life, lack a global dimension, and do not promote understanding of how to critically review the past.

ATL members share the concerns that have been raised about the over-emphasis on British history; and the inappropriate pitch of the chronological approach for primary school children who will be expected to tackle ancient, mediaeval and early modern history between the ages of 7-11. As Professor Chris Husbands has recently pointed out:

“There's no evidence that teaching chronologically produces an understanding of chronology. What we want young people to have is a usable map of the past.”

Teachers are doubtful as to whether the amount of content can practically be covered, and that interesting cross curricular links (for example, with local geography and local history) have been lost.

As the Historical Association have also highlighted, the resourcing and training implications – ‘primary teachers are largely non-specialist, secondary teachers would need to scrap many of their existing resources and completely re-write their schemes of work’.

One of our members commented:

> Does it really matter if children can remember the names of every king or queen in the 18thC? What we need to be doing is getting children interested in history, and teaching them the skills so that they can find out about all those kings and queens if they wish.

**Citizenship**

We welcome the fact that Citizenship is still compulsory at KS3 and 4, but we have concerns that the broader angle has been lost in the reduced programmes of study. The emphasis appears to be on financial management and volunteering, leading to a risk that important aspects of citizenship education such as human rights are overlooked. We are concerned that citizenship appears to have been lost at primary level.

**Modern Foreign Languages**

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We support compulsory MFL at KS2. Research shows that it is beneficial for pupils to learn languages at an early age.\textsuperscript{10} However, we also know from our members that primary schools have struggled to recruit specialists who can teach languages.

Our members have also highlighted the importance of making sure that there are strong with local secondary schools, as pupils could end up studying one language at primary, and then not be offered the same one at KS3.

We are concerned that the choice of languages listed is weighted towards traditionally taught ones, rather than community languages. This choice needs to be clarified.

**PE**

There are concerns that some schools have experienced their sports fields being sold off, and curriculum time for sport has been reduced – despite the emphasis on competitive sport in the framework. Our members feel that the importance of PE on the curriculum needs to be matched with a core of committed sports teachers who can provide opportunities to develop fitness for all levels of ability. The current aims in the National Curriculum for PE are unrealistic without this in place.

**PSHE**

We believe that PSHE should be a statutory part of National Curriculum and are disappointed that the recent review into PSHE has again rejected this as an option. The absence of a rigorous framework in the proposals is a missed opportunity to strengthen the position of PSHE in the curriculum. PSHE helps to meet the requirement to promote wellbeing and advance equality of opportunity, as well as the broader National Curriculum aims of promoting spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. It also enables pupils to become successful learners and responsible citizens.

ATL would like to see a broader sex and relationships education entitlement in the National Curriculum, as well as equal access to careers education and work related learning.

**RE**

ATL Conference called for Religious Education to be included in the National Curriculum.

We believe that there should be a consistent entitlement to RE for pupils, with sufficient allocation of curriculum time and resources and adherence to a coherent set of national standards.

\textsuperscript{10} ATL response (2012) Consultation on (1) the draft Order making Foreign Languages statutory for Key Stage 2; and (2) a proposal to require schools teach one or more of seven languages at Key Stage 2 December 2012
It is worrying that the recent APPG on Religious Education report specifically outlined that ‘a range of government policies, notably those relating to the EBacc and GCSE short courses, are contributing to the lowering of the status of RE in some schools leading to a reduction in the demand for specialist teachers’.11

Computing

ATL members are concerned that there is too much emphasis on computer science and programming, rather than creativity or digital literacy. Experts consulted as part of the drawing up of the programmes of study have also made this point.12

It is important to recognise that programming skills – whilst important – are not the only requirement that most businesses need. There are still pupils who do not have access to a computer at home, so ensuring that basic skills, and how to use different software must be covered, so these pupils are not disadvantaged. The proposals will also require extensive retraining for staff which needs to be taken into account.

To conclude, we are calling on the Government to:

- **Delay the proposed statutory implementation** of the new National Curriculum in September 2014, to give time for a complete rethink of the current aims, values, and content of the programmes of study and to allow proper time for local area and school level curriculum planning, feedback and refining during 2013-14;
- **Give more time and support** for schools to develop resources and provide high quality CPD;
- Allow for **further debate** on the content of the National Curriculum as proposals for assessment and accountability are developed;
- Include a **clear oracy strand** within the English curriculum and reinstate drama as it plays a key role in enhancing children’s language skills and confidence;
- Include a greater emphasis on **mathematical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving**;
- Revise the **History curriculum** entirely, moving away the narrow focus on British history, and age inappropriate content for primary school children.
- **Review the foundation subjects and cross curricular links** to ensure that there is greater coherence and structure across the Curriculum as a whole, and more emphasis on concepts and skills, and pupils’ progression.

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11 APPG on Religious Education (2013) RE: The truth unmasked: The supply of and support of Religious Education teachers