

# Classroom revolution as curriculum embraces modern life

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

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The Government has unveiled a new curriculum to bring schools into the 21st century - giving more space for pupils to tackle controversial issues such as global warming and nuclear power.

Teachers will also be given greater freedom to break free from the traditional subject-based national curriculum for pupils aged 11 to 16, facilitating the introduction of topics which help prepare youngsters for adult life, Ken Boston, chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum - the Government's exams watchdog, said yesterday.

They will range from lessons on Britain's place in the global economy to individual economic well-being - which could include how to avoid debt and buy a home, respect for other cultures and even cookery - to help instil healthy eating habits into tomorrow's adults.

Dr Boston said the changes were necessary because the rise in education standards throughout the Western world was "slowing down".

"In some countries, it has reached a glass ceiling through which it cannot break," he said.

"The traditional approach to covering the syllabus has been exhausted: it has delivered all it can: it will work no more."

Under the shake-up, pupils could learn at their own speed - with some youngsters in a class given more taxing books to read such as the novels of Thomas Hardy while others were working on George Orwell.

The alternative, he argued, was to carry on with a system "where learning is not differentiated according to the readiness of the individual to learn".

That caused many youngsters to become disaffected "because the task is utterly beyond their reach and for others to be bored because it is too easy".

The shake-up, however, did mix the new topic-based approach with the traditional subject-based approach. In particular, ministers have listened to complaints about history where teachers have claimed that too many youngsters are starting with the Tudors in secondary school - having neglected the subject at primary school.

Topics in the new curriculum include studying the development of power in Britain from the Middle Ages to the present day to overcome gaps in children's knowledge and give them more of an understanding of Britain's cultural identity.

There was consternation, though, that Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler's names had been omitted from the list of historical figures to be studied, a decision described by the Conservative MP Nicholas Soames as madness. But the QCA and the Government pointed out that study of the First and Second World Wars was compulsory and it would be impossible to teach those topics without studying

Churchill and Hitler.

Andrew Adonis, the Schools minister, insisted yesterday that history would include studying developments from medieval times to the present day.

Lord Adonis lent his backing to the new curriculum at its launch at Lord's Cricket Ground yesterday. "There is a reduction in prescription from the centre and a modernisation of the curriculum to make it more relevant to the needs of young people in this world in the future," he added.

He argued that teachers could use the new time at their disposal to ensure extra catch-up lessons in the "three R's" for pupils who were struggling in English and maths - and also lessons to stretch the more able pupils.

Other measures in the curriculum include a reading list - including authors from different cultures for the first time such as Maya Angelou and Meera Syal, also known for her role as a comedian in the BBC TV series *Goodness Gracious Me*.

Andrew Motion, the Poet Laureate, sounded a note of caution about the reading list when he addressed yesterday's launch. "I've got nothing against the poets that are on the curriculum," he said, "but I think if it turned out that, for thousands of pupils each year, these are the only poets and no one has written poetry since Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin hung up their boots, that would convey the wrong message."

He welcomed the emphasis on creative writing in the document, arguing that secondary schooling had been "a bit like the sandwich in the middle" between primary schooling and university in which creativity had been stifled for a concentration on facts.

In languages, Mandarin, Japanese, Urdu and Arabic can be added to the list of those being studied as a result of a decision to relax the requirement that all youngsters should study a European language.

The package was given a cautious welcome by teachers' leaders yesterday - some expressing reservations as to whether there would be enough time to cover the topics without more relaxation of the demands of traditional subjects.

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association for Schools and Colleges, said: "This is certainly a move in the right direction. We know that schools are excited about the opportunity to be more innovative in how and what they teach 11- to 14-year-olds."

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, added: "Teachers need time in the school day to teach subjects such as financial capability and cooking."

"The job of revising the curriculum is only half done. National curriculum testing has an undue and damaging influence on what is taught in schools. We now need an independent review of national curriculum testing in secondary schools."

### **History of the national curriculum**

**1988** The national curriculum introduced as part of Conservative Education Secretary Kenneth Baker's Education Reform Act. It consists of 10 compulsory subjects and 10 levels of attainment to be reached by the time pupils leave school or go on to A-levels at 16

**1992** The first attempt is made to slim down the curriculum when Lord Dearing is appointed to hold an inquiry as it is too unwieldy. He recommends it should only take up 80 per cent of school time

**2002** Ministers take the controversial decision to stop compulsory lessons in modern foreign languages from the age of 14 in a further attempt to free up time. Non-academically inclined youngsters who drop the subject can spend up to two days a week on work experience instead. However, it leads to a major

reduction in take-up of French and German - forcing another government inquiry into how to offset the decline

**2007** Ken Boston, chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority - the Government's exams watchdog - unveils the new secondary school curriculum for the 21st century with more emphasis on topics and issues relevant to the modern world. It will come into force in schools in September 2008