Thursday's Child

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Executive summary

Institute for Public Policy Research

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About the project

The research for this report was conducted between August 2007 and March 2008. We undertook two international research trips: one to Helsinki in Finland, and the other to the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Alberta. During these trips, we met with policymakers, teachers and students, and visited schools. We visited examples of good practice in English schools, and consulted with a range of experts, stakeholders and practitioners in England. The report was also informed by extensive desk-based research into UK and international evidence on how children learn and what makes for excellent and equitable school systems.

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The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors.

Executive summary

It is an exciting time to be thinking about educational reform. The last few years have witnessed important shifts in the political agenda impacting on schools in England. First, there has been a tangible change in how policy has emphasised the different objectives of the school system. Recent reforms have returned to the idea that schools have a wider role to fulfil than simply delivering on narrow measures of attainment. Focus is now on equipping young people with the skills they need to achieve a version of success more broadly defined. There has also been a move from the idea prevalent in the 1980s that educational reform should mainly be about curriculum, assessment and accountability. There is currently a recognition that focusing on these policy levers alone seriously undervalues the role of the teacher, which educational research shows has the biggest impact on learning in schools.

This report takes these two shifts as its starting point. It looks to the future of educational reform, underpinned by an understanding of the changing needs, goals and objectives of schools and sets out short- and long-term recommendations to address the barriers that prevent our school system from being world-class.

The current context for educational reform

How well is the English school system doing in the international context? There is concern that progress made in the late 1990s may have plateaued more recently. The jumps in attainment at ages 7 and 11 that were observed in the late 90s have levelled off since 2000. In international surveys, England performs poorly on some measures of attainment compared with other countries. The socioeconomic attainment gap is pervasive, with children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds performing more poorly on measures of attainment at every age – and socioeconomic background exerts a greater influence than in many other countries. There is also a pervading sense that problems exist in children's attitudes towards their learning. Attitudes towards reading in England are markedly poor compared with international averages, and there is evidence that children and young people in English schools have a tendency to view their learning in instrumental terms; in other words, as relevant to passing exams and moving onto the next stage.

There is also a vigorous debate underway about the broader wellbeing of children and young people, which was catalysed by the publication of the 2007 UNICEF report that put the UK at the bottom of the international league table on children's wellbeing. While this report was critiqued for being based on old data, it served to highlight existing concerns. Recent research from the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) and others has highlighted the growing importance of a range of psychological attributes, including motivation, agency and the ability to apply oneself, in determining young people's success across a broad range of outcomes. But some groups of young people are doing less well than others in this context, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The policy response so far has focused on parenting, the role of communities and levels of out-of-school provision for young people in local areas, but attention is also increasingly shifting to the role that schools and the education system have to play in this agenda.

The focus has turned in recent years to the quality of teaching, in light of evidence that a child's teacher is the most important school-level factor in understanding how they do. In the last few months, there have been compelling analyses of our system of recruiting, training and developing teachers that suggest that we lag behind our international competitors. This is why the recommendations from this document are grounded in reforms to the teaching workforce that are needed in the next few years in order to improve outcomes. However, looking to the future, a more fundamental rethink is also needed in some areas of education policy. Some of the recommendations below might seem ambitious in the current economic context, but they need to form the long-term direction of travel.

A mission statement for schools

While the core mission for schools has not changed over the past few decades, the focus on the education system as a lever for tackling the emerging challenges in youth policy has become more prominent. The primary objective of our education system should be equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need in order to succeed – not just in the economic sense, but also in other areas of their life, such as health and wellbeing, community engagement and forming positive relationships. Schools should foster an intrinsic commitment to education, and assist children and young people in developing the 'learning to learn' skills that will develop them into capable, efficient and self-directed learners. Schools also need to contribute towards the broader factors that enable individuals to enjoy life healthily and happily.

That said, it is important to recognise the limitations on schools. Child outcomes are the result of a complex equation that combines a child's experiences at home in the family, outside of school in the community, and inside school. Schools need to be supported in realising the objectives above by families, communities and other children's services – and vice versa. Support for families and communities is not the focus of this report, but has been the subject of much of ippr's previous work.

How should this update our view of what schools should do?

At heart should be a vision of schools in which young people's development across a broad set of skills – as independent learners, self-managers, enquirers and team-workers as well as the core skills of literacy and numeracy, and other individual subjects – frames their learning and assessment. Their progress should be holistically tracked over their school career by teachers who know them well. Just as personal development in the workplace is based on a model in which an individual's development is holistically appraised by both employee and manager, young people should be appraised regularly on their progress on the full breadth of National Curriculum skills by their personal tutor. Young people should play an important role in setting their own targets and development goals.

This is a vision that rests on multi-faceted reform. It depends on:

- High-quality teachers
- A national curriculum that frames the broader, holistic development of young people
- An assessment system that reflects this vision and develops and records young people's progress in all areas and skills, not just literacy and numeracy
- Grounding learning in a focus on young people's broader wellbeing – both inside and outside of school

- Reforms to learning during particular periods: to 5–7 learning to improve the foundation for later learning, and to 11–14 learning to facilitate teachers getting a more holistic view of pupil progress.

Teaching

Educational research is consistent on one thing: teaching is the most important factor in the impact that schools have on attainment. Excellent teaching can literally make the difference between a pass or fail at GCSE. Moreover, other areas of reform – to curriculum, learning and assessment – simply cannot be achieved without teachers. Improving teacher effectiveness needs to form the bedrock of educational reform over the next few years. The first priority for educational reform, therefore, needs to be tackling the barriers that exist to improving teaching effectiveness.

Unsatisfactory quality and selection processes

Teaching currently attracts candidates in the top 30 per cent of graduates in England, rather than only those with the very highest academic achievements. In comparison, teaching candidates in Finland currently hail from the top 10 per cent of graduates. Finland also tests prospective candidates for academic ability through a nationally set written test. In England, while some teacher training providers do set written tests, many do not, and this affects the quality of accepted candidates.

Inconsistent quality of initial training

Training providers are of variable quality, although the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) is effective at awarding funding to good providers over bad, and providers are vetted by the education inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Training overall is considered by teachers to be inadequate and too short in duration. It falls down in particular in the areas of psychological development and pedagogical techniques. This is largely because the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) course tries to achieve too much in too short a time.

Inadequate performance management

Appraisals are annual, rather than biannual or constant as in countries that achieve better results. Only 25 per cent of teachers report that they are regularly observed in classroom practice, despite this being a key driver of teacher quality, and many teachers report having poor managers. Very few teachers are fired for poor performance. Head teachers regularly complain that it is too difficult to remove poor performers and the overwhelming majority of those taken through capability review processes merely leave their school rather than the profession.

Inadequate professional development

Teachers report that only three per cent of their time is spent on continuing professional development (CPD), despite this being essential for effective teaching. This compares poorly with the best-performing international comparisons.

Problems associated with leadership

Head teachers complain of having too many day-to-day management issues, which undermine their capacity to provide adequate line management and inspirational leadership.

A concurrent ippr project[1] on effective teaching has made the following recommendations.

Recruitment
In order to attract higher quality candidates into the profession, specialist and employer-based routes into teaching should be widened. We should build on the success of Teach First by rolling out on a wider basis the Government's Teach Next pilots, which recruits those with previous professional experience to teaching. This should be complemented with a Teach Later scheme for older professionals nearing retirement who are keen to continue working, which could also go some way to fill gaps in vocational teaching.

Training
ITT should be changed from a one-year to a two-year qualification, with both years comprising a mix of training and classroom practice. Qualified Teacher Status should not be awarded until after a third induction year spent teaching in a school. This would make space for reforms to ITT to cover the content needed to facilitate the broader reforms in this report, including training on curriculum design, assessment for learning, teaching general skills alongside knowledge, and more training on age-specific child development and pedagogies.

Continuing Professional Development
The current five days of in-service training should be replaced with 20 days of compulsory CPD for all teachers. Ten days should be spent in school, and ten days outside via external training, conferences, school visits or visits to other countries. Control of CPD budgets and responsibility for vetting CPD providers should move to the TDA to improve quality.

Performance management and pay
Schools should be encouraged to adopt a biannual appraisal process to replace the current annual review. In light of evidence that classroom observation is the most effective way to improve poor teaching, all teachers should be required to observe four lessons taught by colleagues each term – for senior management teams, this figure should be eight. Performance assessments should include CPD requirements so that pay and progression becomes linked to undertaking CPD. Poor performers who are subject to capability review should be obliged to access appropriate training before they re-enter teaching.

Leadership
A new tier of management, staffed by expert head teachers, should be introduced at the local level, modelled on the system of school superintendents found in Canada. Local authorities should employ superintendents to work with groups of up to 20 schools. These superintendents would provide the challenge and support function to school leadership, building on the existing role of School Improvement Partners. They would be given a role in relation to accountability (see below).

This set of reforms will boost the quality of teaching in English schools. However, teachers are bound by the contexts in which they teach, including their school context and national policy. Reforms to teaching alone will not therefore deliver a world-class education system for the 21st century. In the longer term, we need to look at the framework in which teachers operate.

1. *Those Who Can?*, by Julia Margo *et al*, 2008

Curriculum, assessment and accountability

If the aim of future educational reform is to broaden the development of young people, we need to first turn attention to the curriculum. The published curriculum frames learning in classrooms across the country. But understanding the 'lived curriculum' as experienced by teachers and learners means looking more broadly: curriculum, pedagogy (styles of teaching and learning) and assessment are all elements of the school system, which, filtered through teachers and school structures, interact to produce the learning experience of pupils.

An effective curriculum needs to be grounded in, and reflect the normative objectives of, the school system. It should be framed by the set of skills young people need to achieve success. Moreover, it also needs to ensure that there is flexibility for users of the curriculum – schools, teachers and students – to tailor it to their needs, in light of evidence that both teachers and pupils gain from greater flexibility.

The new Key Stage 3 curriculum that will frame learning in secondary schools from September 2008 onwards is a positive move in this direction. It is framed by a set of six 'personal, learning and thinking skills' to develop young people as independent enquirers, creative thinkers, team workers, reflective workers, self-managers and effective participators. It also includes more flexibility for schools.

This approach needs to be extended to the whole 5–14 curriculum, which should be underpinned by the vision of schools equipping young people with the wider skills they need to achieve the success set out above.

But reforms to the published curriculum are not enough to broaden the focus of learning in schools. They need to be complemented by reforms to Initial Teacher Training so that courses include more content on curriculum design and skills development.

In the long term, they also need to be supported by reforms that broaden assessment to facilitate keeping track of how young people, teachers and schools are doing, not just on the core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, but also on the broader National Curriculum skill set. The evidence that assessment systems have had a real impact on teaching and learning by orientating them around what is tested, particularly in primary classrooms, adds further impetus for reform.

Teacher-based assessment needs to have a more prominent role in measuring individual pupil progress across the National Curriculum skill set. Across 5–14 learning, children should have one teacher at any one time responsible for monitoring their holistic development across the curriculum skill set, as well as across core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and subjects. Each child should have appraisals with their teacher during which their holistic development is discussed and pupil self-assessment plays a role.

To support teacher-based assessment, there should be a greater focus on assessment, including assessment for learning, in ITT and CPD. To assist teachers in calibrating their assessment, there should be a national bank of tests and tasks for teachers to use in making their assessments, and locally based moderation between groups of schools working together.

In assessing how schools and teachers are doing, there remains a role for national testing, but its scope must be broadened to test for as broad a range of skills across the National Curriculum skill set as possible. We therefore recommend that the Department for Children,

Schools and Families (DCSF), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) investigate the development of national testing that would test for a broader range of skills.

But these test results should only form part of the range of measures on which schools are held accountable. As the curriculum broadens, it will become increasingly important that schools and teachers are held accountable, not just on narrow measures of academic attainment, but on the broader range of objectives schools are expected to deliver on. There should be a standard range of measures across which outcomes are reported for each school, including: the results of broader national tests; the results of teacher-based assessment of pupil progress; the extent to which schools are fulfilling broader objectives, such as provision of physical education, access to cultural experience and citizenship and participation; and measures of parental and pupil satisfaction for each school. Alongside the support and challenge function, school superintendents (a role set out above) should be responsible for compiling these measures into an annual report in conjunction with schools.

Social and emotional wellbeing

Improving attainment and improving child wellbeing need to go hand in hand, as recent policies have increasingly recognised. But there remain questions about the role of the school in responding to concerns about young people and delivering the Government's five 'Every Child Matters' objectives.

Putting a concern for wellbeing at the heart of the education system requires an integrated approach to children's and young people's welfare that:

- is preventative, facilitating intervention at the earliest possible stage before children's needs escalate.
- is multi-disciplinary, opening up access to the most appropriate provision for each child regardless of which service it is situated in.
- engages with families, schools and teachers in recognition of the importance of home and school environments.
- starts when children are young, and takes a long-term approach.

Wellbeing in the classroom

The school environment is the most important school-level component of the emotional and social wellbeing of pupils and teachers. Classroom environments that foster warm, personal relationships and strong bonds between teachers and learners best promote social and emotional wellbeing. There needs to be a greater focus in ITT and CPD on how to promote these classroom environments and facilitate social and emotional learning; for example, how to use group dynamics effectively in classrooms. Teachers should also receive training on how to pick up issues as soon as they arise.

Welfare support in schools

The links between schools and outside-school children's services are often poor. There is plentiful evidence that this gap can be filled by putting trained welfare professionals in schools on a full-time basis. They can improve children's and young people's wellbeing by providing non-stigmatised, low-level preventative welfare support. While some schools have introduced this kind of role, we are a long way from this being accessible in all schools.

School counsellors should, therefore, be introduced in all schools, targeted initially at schools in deprived areas. These counsellors would have a qualification in counselling and conducting group work with young people in schools on issues such as anger management, self-esteem and peer relationships, and would be trained in an understanding of out-of-school services so they could act as a bridge between the school and these services for children and young people with more serious needs. They would work alongside existing welfare support roles focused on home-school support, such as Parent Support Advisers. These counsellors would be recruited and trained by the local Children's Service (see below).

Out-of-school welfare services

The majority of schools do not feel like they can rely on external services. This is because they are currently too disparate and are focused on children with the most serious and complex needs at the expense of prevention. The way in which resourcing is structured compounds these problems: resourcing for preventative interventions tends to either get lost in general school budgets or is very initiative-based. More stable, ring-fenced sources of funding are directed at diagnosis and support for children with the most serious needs through the statutory statementing system. Although there have been some initiatives to promote multi-disciplinary working, they have not resolved these problems.

The vision for the long term should be to draw together out-of-school children's services under an umbrella service: the local Children's Service, which would ideally be co-located and draw in services such as the educational psychology service, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, child health services, and social work. Funding for this service should be drawn together and centralised at the local level and access should be free at the point of delivery to schools to guarantee access across the country, rather than relying on schools to buy in services for their non-statemented pupils. This is one model of delivery that has been recognised in the Government's Children's Workforce Strategy Action Plan.

Each Children's Service should staff multi-disciplinary teams that would each serve a cluster of schools. This team would have on it at least a child psychologist, a psychiatrist, a social worker and a nurse. In the most deprived 20 per cent of areas, these teams should serve no more than four schools to ensure that teams can be physically present in their schools at least one day a week.

Improving the foundations for learning: rethinking 5–7 learning

In the past decade, there has been increasing focus, both in academic research and public policy, on the early years of child development up until the age of five. This has been a very welcome development, but if we are to sustain gains made through the introduction of policies such as Sure Start and increased access to early learning experiences, we need to turn attention to a child's first two years of primary school. Social mobility levels are low in the UK by international standards and the evidence is that the gap widens during the first few years of school.

Learning in these important years needs to focus on:

- The development of cognitive skills. It is too simplistic to assume that cognitive development can be reduced to the linear acquisition of a single skill set, such as the ability to read. Learning is a complex process that involves the acquisition of many 'prior' skills, such as oral language, conceptual ability, motor skills and imagination. These are the foundation for acquiring core skills like literacy and numeracy. Thus 5–7 learning needs to

focus on these precursor skills as well as more tangible outcomes, such as reading ability.
- The 'school readiness' skills that research has shown are needed to flourish in formal learning environments, such as behavioural skills, the ability to pay attention, to concentrate and to motivate oneself, and the social skills needed for children to interact with each other in group settings.
- Improving a child's self-concept as a learner and encouraging intrinsic motivations to learn.
- Instilling a sense of fun and enjoyment around learning and engaging young children with their learning as early as possible.

As important as these end objectives, however, is the way in which young children are taught. A rich evidence base suggests that young children learn best through a variety of pedagogical methods, and that learning through educative play – play structured by adults and involving a mixture of adult- and child-initiated interaction – should form a substantial part of their curriculum.

This finding jars with the current National Curriculum that frames the learning of five- to seven-year-olds, which is structured quite rigidly around the 11 National Curriculum subjects and emphasises learning literacy and numeracy through formal instruction at the expense of speaking and other cognitive skills and more varied pedagogical methods. This curriculum contrasts starkly with many international examples, such as the Finnish curriculum for five- to seven-year-olds, in which there is a much greater emphasis alongside cognitive development on school readiness skills and instilling a love of learning.

A new curriculum for five- to seven-year-olds should reflect the above objectives; focusing on early cognitive development, social and behavioural skills, and instilling enjoyment of learning. It should be rooted strongly in a commitment to a greater range of pedagogies, with learning through educative play at its heart. Learning should be structured around flexible themes rather than rigid subjects.

Curriculum reform needs to be supplemented by reforms to training. The evidence suggests that teaching through play – as much as other forms of pedagogy – is a demanding skill in which teachers need to be trained. A 'kindergarten' postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) for teachers of three- to seven-year-olds should train teachers to teach through a range of developmentally appropriate pedagogies, including learning through play. The CPD of infants' teachers should be similarly focused and there should be greater professionalisation of the teaching assistant workforce in infant classrooms, with more training for teaching assistants on play-based approaches to learning. The QCA should invest more in providing resources for schools in developing literacy and numeracy through play.

There is also evidence that reducing infant class sizes can improve children's progress, particularly for those hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reducing class numbers does, however, carry significant resource implications. We therefore recommend that government should add to the evidence base by piloting in some deprived areas smaller infants class sizes of 13 to 17 in conjunction with the reforms above.

11–14 learning

In the last few years, there has been a growing policy focus on young people in light of evidence that social change is increasingly affecting their experiences of adolescence. But in terms of education reform, 11–14 learning has not enjoyed the same prominence as primary reform and the 14–19 agenda.

Yet the first few years of secondary school are a time when young people undergo a number of important transitions, including the physical and hormonal changes associated with puberty, the shift from a family-based orientation to an orientation based around a peer group, the development of their own value systems, and increased freedom to make their own decisions – not to mention the transition from primary to secondary school. We have long known that these years can be a danger point. For a significant minority of young people, they are a time when progress in learning slows and engagement with their learning falls, and are characterised by higher levels of exclusions, youth offending and anti-social behaviour.

The culture and structure of the typical primary and secondary school vary markedly. Primary schools tend to be much smaller and the dominant model is one in which one teacher teaches his or her pupils across most of the National Curriculum for the bulk of the time, usually in one classroom. In contrast, secondary schools are much larger institutions and on joining secondary school, 11-year-olds come into contact with up to 13 subject-specialist teachers each week, and are taught in a moving cycle of rooms.

Effective teaching becomes more difficult in this model because it takes longer for secondary teachers to familiarise themselves with their pupils' attributes and needs. Moreover, the way in which secondary schooling is structured would make it more difficult for teachers to develop a holistic view of pupil progress across the whole National Curriculum skill set, as well as in individual subject knowledge and skills.

In the short term, the emphasis must be on improving the quality and status of teaching 11- to 14-year-olds in light of Ofsted evidence that teaching quality in these years suffers, partly as a result of low status. There should be more specialised content in the ITT and CPD of secondary teachers on early adolescent development and how to facilitate pupil autonomy and real-world relevance in the classroom – both of which are particularly important for young people of this age.

In the long term, however, the assumptions on which the traditional structures of 11–14 learning are based need to be revisited. Lessons can be learned from innovative ways of structuring early adolescent learning abroad, particularly in the US and Australia. These models are based on reducing the size of learning communities (see below) within schools and the number of teachers young people come into contact with.

We recommend that government should invest in piloting new structures of 11–14 learning in which young people are taught in smaller learning communities of around 100–120 students within larger schools. Each of these communities would be taught across the National Curriculum, across the duration of these years, by a team of four to five teachers.

This kind of model does, however, require teachers to be able to teach in more than one curriculum subject; for example, across Science or across the Humanities. Any pilot should therefore be run in conjunction with a provider of ITT and a PGCE that enables teachers to maintain two, or even three, subject specialisms.

Changing the terms: the structure of the school year

We inherited the long summer holiday from a time when the school year was structured around the agrarian summer picking season. There are currently strong arguments for rethinking the structure of the school year. Some groups of young people are spending more

time than ever before unsupervised, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – yet we now have an increased understanding of the greater structure and provision children and young people need in their spare time. A long summer holiday can be an impediment to children's learning, again particularly for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The summer holidays are a time when levels of youth offending increase. Uneven term lengths in the current system can also make curriculum planning more difficult for schools, and the long autumn term can be tiring for students.

We should move towards a nationally set, standard school year for all publicly funded schools, with a more even spread of time in school throughout the year. One model would be a five-term school year, with:

- five terms of eight weeks each, with two terms before Christmas and three after
- each term separated by a two-week break
- a shorter, four-week holiday over the summer, at the end of the school year, running from mid-July to mid-August.

Conclusions

This package of reforms is ambitious and forward-looking. Many cannot be introduced overnight – or perhaps even in the course of one parliament. They present a challenge to established thinking in some areas of education policy. However, if we are serious about providing young people with the best education possible, it is becoming increasingly important that these issues are tackled head-on. This is the challenge to government, policymakers and politicians from across the political spectrum in years to come.