Speech: Nick Gibb: How can policy ensure education equity?

Thank you.

How can and should policy be developed to ensure education equity? A knowledge-rich curriculum should be at the heart of all schools. We believe that is key to ensuring education equity. Endowing pupils with knowledge of 'the best that has been thought and said' and preparing pupils to compete in an ever more competitive jobs market is the core purpose of schooling.

And ensuring that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have the same opportunities as their more affluent peers to benefit from the cultural capital of a stretching and rigorous curriculum is key to addressing the burning injustices in our societies and driving forward social mobility.

Designing and implementing these curricula should follow a thorough interrogation of the research. It is right that debates are had about what knowledge we wish to ensure all pupils possess. It is understandable that there are differing opinions about how best to prepare pupils for the challenges of the 21st century. But opinions must change as the facts change.

In 2010, the government came to office in Britain. We inherited a curriculum that was not fit for purpose. The national curriculum had been stripped of knowledge, leaving pupils without the cultural literacy they needed.

England was stagnating in the international league tables and too many pupils were leaving school ill-prepared to compete in our increasingly globalised world. Data from 2012 shows we were the only OECD country where the numeracy and literacy of our 16-24 year olds was no better than that of our 55 to 65 year olds.

We reformed the national curriculum, restoring knowledge to its heart and clarifying what we expected children to be taught. The issues with the 2007 National Curriculum were best summed up by the statutory requirement of secondary chemistry pupils to understand 'that there are patterns in the reactions between substances'.

In 'Could Do Better' Tim Oates used this example to highlight the vagueness of the 2007 curriculum, writing:

> This statement essentially describes all of chemistry. So what should teachers actually teach? What are the key concepts which children should know and apply?

The new maths national curriculum for primary schools provides many examples of the specificity and detail needed for a successful curriculum, such as the structured sequence of efficient written methods of calculation that pupils

are expected to have mastered at different ages.

But the curriculum does not sit in isolation. The government also embarked on an ambitious reform of our national qualifications. Grade inflation was rife under the previous government and too many pupils – particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds – were being entered into low quality qualifications. Public confidence in the education system had been knocked.

The government put an end to grade inflation and is introducing new GCSEs and A levels that put England's exams on a par with the best in the world. These changes are breathing life back into the country's education system.

However, the introduction of new assessments has also been important. The government has announced the introduction of a multiplication tables check for year 4 pupils – a short online assessment designed to support the curriculum stipulation that pupils should know their tables by age 9. The government is determined that no child leaves primary school without securing the basics of mathematics.

Already, the government has had success thanks to another curriculum change supported by a short assessment. Conscious of the overwhelming research in favour of teaching children to read using systematic synthetic phonics, the government embarked on a campaign to ensure every child is taught to read using the most effective methods. As well as requiring schools to teach using an evidence based phonics programme, the government introduced the phonics screening check – a short assessment of a pupil's ability to decode simple words.

The phonics screening check was introduced for the first time in 2012. That year, just 58% of 6-year-olds could correctly read 32 or more words from a list of 40. Thanks to the hard work of teachers and the government's drive for phonics, there are 154,000 more 6-year-olds on track to be fluent readers this year. The proportion passing the phonics screening check in year 1 has risen to 81%, with 92% having passed the check by the end of year 2.

The success of this policy has been confirmed by international results. The PIRLS international study of 9-year-olds' reading ability in 50 countries around the world showed that England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016, thanks to a statistically significant rise in our average score. And the data is clear on the role that the phonics reforms played in these results, with the report accompanying the results concluding that:

> The characteristics that were most strongly predictive of PIRLS performance included prior achievement in the Year 1 Phonics Check.

Thanks to the hard work of teachers and by twinning carefully sequenced, knowledge-rich curricula with wider support, the government is raising standards in our schools.

In carrying out the reforms implemented since 2010, the government was

careful to pursue evidence based policies. In the world of education, there are many voices who argue that the 21st century has somehow changed how education must be done. They conclude that the technological age necessitates a different approach to education. With the support of some in the business world, they encourage teachers to turn their attentions to developing the creativity, problem solving and critical thinking skills of their pupils.

Around the world, many educationists – and I see one or two of them here – promote skills-based curricula as the way to prepare pupils for life in the 21st century. Often, knowledge-rich curricula are derided as an impediment to helping pupils to become creative critical-thinking problem solvers, but this is to confuse means with ends.

The mistake made by these influential voices in education is to believe that creativity is a skill independent of subject domain-specific knowledge; that critical thinking can be taught discretely from the subject being thought about, or that one becomes a better problem solver simply by practicing solving problems.

Just as musicians become proficient by learning their scales, it is as important that pupils build up the underlying knowledge they will need. We cannot expect a pupil to think critically about the causes of the First World War without an understanding of the delicate balance of power that existed at the turn of the 20th century. And we will not prepare pupils to be the creative, problem solving mathematicians of the future without giving them a firm grounding in the foundations of mathematics.

This government in the UK is determined that the new national curriculum endows pupils with the knowledge they need, so that they are best prepared for the rigours of a globalised 21st century jobs market. But doing so must be done with due regard for the evidence. There are too many examples of governments around the world that have mistaken ends with means in the hope of preparing pupils for the 21st century, damaging educational standards in the process.

Writing for the London School of Economics, Professor Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh has been a vocal critic of movements calling for skills-based curricula, writing of the underlying philosophy:

> It belongs to that strand of curricular thinking sometimes known as constructivism. The essence of this view is that studying bodies of knowledge is pedagogically ineffective. Knowledge goes quickly out of date, and learning it is dull. Children emerge allegedly unable to think for themselves, unskilled for work in the new economy, and unprepared to act as democratic citizens. Instead, children should be enabled to construct knowledge for themselves.

This description exemplifies the belief system behind such changes. But this view is not supported by the international evidence. As Professor Paterson goes on to say, referencing teachers who are leading the knowledge-revolution

in England:

> It is increasingly clear from international comparisons that neglecting knowledge is educationally disastrous. One body of international evidence for that is assembled by E. D. Hirsch in his 2016 book Why Knowledge Matters. Especially cogent arguments in the same vein have come from two teachers in England who have become eloquent writers – Daisy Christodoulou's 'Seven Myths About Education' (2013) and David Didau's 'What If Everything You Knew About Education Was Wrong' (2015). The critique does not deny that skills matter, but rather says that the best way to acquire skills is through gaining knowledge.

This nuanced understanding of the relationship between knowledge and skills is crucial to approaching curriculum design. In particular, the importance of subject domain specific knowledge to skill acquisition and transferability should be more widely understood.

A successful curriculum should enable pupils to participate in the great conversations of humankind, and it should prepare pupils to thrive in an ever more globalised and competitive economy. Both of these ambitions require a curriculum designed to give pupils access to the best that has been thought and said. Pupils deserve a rich and stretching knowledge-based curriculum that provides them with cultural literacy and a foundation of knowledge to use and apply in a variety of contexts.

We should judge our curricula by their success in achieving these aims.

Thank you.