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Radical schools reform plan in UK

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A recent poll by Gallup showed that proposal to raise standards of education across the board with a national core curriculum and national written tests at seven, 11 and 14 have substantial support among parents in UK.

This is hardly surprising since many of the proposed reforms build on long-established principles and ideas in education.

First, the Bill will give parents more influence over their children's education — a principle enshrined in the 1944 Education Act where it states that pupils are to be educated in accordance with their parents' wishes.

Alas, Rab Butler, in drafting his Act, failed to take into account sufficiently two important and closely related factors.

First, he did not seem to recognise fully the natural instinct within every parent to strive to do their best for their children and, at the same time, create the right conditions for children to maximise their potential.

Second, he did not recognise that the type of organisational structure needed to deliver the promise could serve to stifle that natural instinct.

For the 1944 Education Act to work, at the time, enormously

powers had to be vested in local education authorities to support and deliver the promise of free secondary education for all.

In common with much of the rest of the Welfare State established at or about the same time, no provision was made for consumer influence, little for real choice and none for participation by parents in the running of the education service.

Incredibly, it was not until more than 30 years later that these anomalies started to be addressed with the wide-ranging recommendations of the Taylor Committee in 1977, implemented in due course in the 1980 Education Act.

Having a national curriculum and maintaining proper national standards of educational performance are not new ideas either. In 1976, with Shirley Williams as Secretary of State for Education, the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, went to Ruskin College, Oxford, to launch his 'great debate' on education.

What did he say? ... the basic purposes of education require the same essential tools.

These are basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together, respect for others, respect

for others, respect for the individual. This means acquiring certain basic knowledge and skills and reasoning ability ... the strong case for the so-called "core curriculum" of basic knowledge.

Next, asked Callaghan, ... what is the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance?

Benchmark tests at seven, 11 and 14 are simply a means of doing this — to check on each child's progress, to ensure that any problems are diagnosed as soon as possible and that appropriate action is taken.

These will not be examinations of a pass/fail nature but nationally prescribed tests as part of a system of classroom assessments. It must be common sense to want to know how each child is progressing.

The aggregate of these tests locally will enable parents and the wider community to get some idea of what is happening and, by aggregating the results of all LEAs, better able to know how the nation is doing.

The difference between Callaghan's proposals and today's is that he talked about what

needed to be done — it is

Government is doing