
A Charter for Primary Education

This is the text of A Charter for Primary Education, which is jointly backed by a number of groups and individuals, including the Socialist Teachers' Alliance (STA), the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), John Coe of the National Association of Primary Education (NAPE) and children's author Michael Rosen. It was launched at a very successful STA conference held in London on 15 June 2013.

Introduction

The coalition government is reforming education at breakneck speed. The Secretary of State Michael Gove is ignoring research evidence – such as the highly respected Cambridge Primary Review – and he is refusing to engage with professional and parental opinion about what makes a good primary education. It is time our voices are heard.

Following on from the successful Lambeth Primary Schools Conference in December 2012, we are launching this Primary School Charter. It is an attempt to generate a wider debate across society about what sort of schools we want for our children. If you would like to amend it, or have new ideas, email: primarycharter@yahoo.co.uk

We are particularly keen to hear from parents and governors, as well as professionals working in education.

Children's Learning

Successful learning and development takes time. Good primary teachers are aware of different children's ages, developmental levels and learning processes. They pay heed to children's existing knowledge and understanding and cultural backgrounds.

Learning never takes place in a vacuum. Learning in symbolic forms (abstract language, mathematical symbols, scientific rules, etc.) should build upon and work with the child's experience, use of the senses, and creative and experimental activity. Rote learning without a proper understanding lays a poor foundation for future development.

Play is the most fundamental way in which children develop an understanding of the world around them. It is through imaginative role play

that children gain a symbolic realisation of possibilities. It is at play that children are most free to talk.

It is through talk that children are most able to deal with problem-solving and the interpretation of the world around them. Play must form an integral part of children's learning throughout the primary years.

Children have the right to a broad and balanced curriculum that allows them to develop their talents in all areas. The arts, humanities and physical education must all play an equal part with those subjects currently described as 'core'.

Key Skills

It is a central role of primary schools to help all children become fluent and effective communicators, in speech, writing and other media. Children learn to be effective communicators in an environment based on trust and cooperation. They cannot fully develop these skills in an environment where there is a fear of failure.

Schools should help children develop their use of Standard English and, as far as is practical, other language forms (vernacular, family, or heritage languages).

The fostering of a love of books and literature is the fundamental building block in learning to read. The teaching of reading should go far beyond the simple functional skill of decoding words. Children should be encouraged to develop their own tastes and make their own choices about reading in an environment free from the pressures of tests and targets.

Similarly, schools should develop pupils' engagement with mathematics and other symbolic systems (maps, diagrams, images etc), as an enjoyable experience, and so that they acquire tools for understanding the world.

Values and Democratic Citizenship

Primary schools should promote values based on human rights, equality, democracy, diversity, environmental viability and peace. They should develop positive attitudes associated with mutual respect and support, personal fulfilment, critical understanding, creativity and hope.

Children should come to understand their world as it is now, and begin to form views of how it might be. These should be promoted through the curriculum, the ethos of the school and through practical engagement, as appropriate to the age and maturity of the children.

Culture and Community

Primary schools should relate to the lives and knowledge of their families and their communities, while opening up wider cultural horizons through enjoyable participation and learning. This includes local, national and world history,

geography and social studies; an introduction to scientific knowledge; diverse forms of cultural expression; physical and other leisure activities; and belief systems.

Management and Measurement

The quality of primary education, and the capacity of teachers to relate to children, is distorted by a draconian surveillance system such as Ofsted, which divides, demoralises and distracts. Excellence, engagement and human flourishing cannot be achieved by diktat. The current system of assessment and inspection, performance pay and performance review must be replaced by staff development networks and learning communities, which encourage peer observation, teacher research, critical questioning and collaborative planning.

The time-consuming and expensive system of data collection, designed for punitive purposes, should be dismantled. Data collection and monitoring should be focused on the need to provide support discreetly and respectfully, to pupils, teachers and schools, and particularly to assist disadvantaged young people and others who may be under-achieving.

There is a pressing and urgent need for local governance to be shaped to overcome destructive competition. In the interests of the children we teach, there should be a focus on cooperation between all providers of education and a true and democratic partnership with families and the local community.

