

The 1988 Education Reform Act

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) was the most influential piece of educational legislation since the 1944 Education Act. Within the act, a number of key themes can be identified:

- The **Assisted Places Scheme** was expanded (we'll come back to this)
- A National Curriculum was developed to make sure the same things were taught throughout schools.
- Pupils would sit tests (SATs) at 7, 11 and 14 and these would be used to draw up **league tables** which would inform parents of each school's performance.
- Power moved from LEAs to schools.
- **Marketisation.**
- Establishment of **City Technology Colleges**

Marketisation

The 1988 Reform Act was introduced under a Conservative government with a commitment to an "education market place" which was driven by competition, diversity and choice. The same forces that allow businesses to either succeed or fail – consumer choice – would, therefore, drive education.

In the case of a business, failure or success is down to the service it provides to its consumers. It has been argued that this arrangement effectively mean that better businesses – which offer a higher quality service – succeed, whilst those that offer crap service fail. This idea of "survival of the fittest" results in the surviving businesses being those that offer the best service (at least according to people who believe in capitalism).

The conservatives thought that the same process could be adapted to the schooling system – and that it would similarly offer better schools with better value for money. The "consumers" of this new system were to be the parents of students, and consequently, **parental choice** was an important element of the act. Where possible, parents were to be allowed to choose the school they prefer for their children. Schools, for their part, were required to produce information to help with the choice: each year, schools must publish a prospectus which includes their exam results and National Curriculum test results, together with information which allows parents to compare the school with both national and local results.

Parental choice was to have a direct impact on schools, with every extra pupil bringing extra funds to the schools budget. In theory, the "right to choose will encourage schools to aim for the highest possible standards" (DfEE 1994, p18). Schools will compete with each other in order to attract pupils (and money) and in the process standards of education will rise.

The emphasis on competition and choice may, however, have a number of negative consequences. Parents often

look closely at examination results when assessing and choosing schools. But a simple league table which tanks schools in terms of results can be very misleading. There is evidence some of the best schools in Britain do poorly on this kind of league table as they do not take into account the social background of students. Some schools could be doing incredibly well if we take into account these factors. However, they still rank badly in the league table and consequently lose students (and money) to other schools. Parental choice could, therefore, have a negative effect if good schools in poor areas are losing pupils to less effective schools in better off areas. The losers will be the lower working class in the less desirable low-income areas.

"Opting Out"

As part of the aim to make the British Education System more diverse – and consequently increasing choice – the ERA established two additional types of school; the **Grant-Maintained School** and the **City Technology College**.

The first of these schools are outside of local authority control, and instead are funded directly by the Department of Education with part of their money coming from industry. They teach the National Curriculum with an additional emphasis on maths, science and technology.

Grant Maintained (GM) Schools are those that have "opted out" of local authority control and are financed directly by central government. These schools are self-governing and take decisions about employment of staff, the curriculum, the provision of goods and services and the way pupils are selected for entry. The Conservative party supported the development of GM schools, saying that they allow more scope for them to "specialise" which widens the choices available to parents. For instance, schools can specialise in particular subjects or types of student such as the "more academically able" (sound familiar?).

Critics have argued that both of these types of school have introduced a means of "back door selection". They see a return of the grammar school (which the Tories always liked anyway) in the guise of the GM school. Furthermore, there is no need for a selection process like the 11+ as the government will have provided this evidence with a National Curriculum Test at age 11.

Some commentators have argued that this would inevitable lead to the return of the Grammar / Secondary Modern divide. According to Simon Jenkins in the Times:

"There will be three categories of secondary education in Britain: private schools for the rich, "opted out" government schools for the less rich but clever, and local council schools for the poor and rejected."

Exam Tip

- This is a really good quotation to try and learn.
- Examiners will give you credit if you can use quotes in your exams – even if you don't get them exactly right.

The National Curriculum

Prior to 1988, the decision as to what to teach within schools (the curriculum) was largely down to LEAs – with the only compulsory subject being Religious Instruction. With the 1988 act, however, the government began to tell teachers and schools what to teach in the form of the **National Curriculum**. This consisted of the **core subjects** of English, Maths and Science together with technology, a modern foreign language in secondary schools, PE and (up to the age of 14) history, geography, art, music.

In order to monitor schools, and provide parents with data to inform their choice of school, students were to be tested on the core subjects at ages 7, 11 and 14 using the **Standard Attainment Tests (SATs)**

It has been claimed that the national curriculum was a positive step towards equality of educational opportunity. For example, science was traditionally seen to be a “boys subject” – it is now compulsory for all students. It also prevents schools in less affluent areas becoming tempted to offer a “less demanding” menu of subjects. On a practical level, the National Curriculum also meant that every school taught the same subjects and the same topics within each subject (i.e. **subject content**). This meant that if a child moved school, they would not be overly disadvantaged.

The National Curriculum is not, however, without its critics. Some point out that the Keystage 2 and 3 SATs (taken at 11 and 14) are tiered in terms of difficulty – with teachers selecting and entering students for “appropriate” difficulty based on their view of their ability.

There is also some evidence that National Curriculum testing has led to an increase of setting. Because schools are provided with data on which students are the “high-flyers” and which are “low-attainers” they may be more tempted to place them in ability groupings for subjects. Studies suggest that setting has a detrimental effect on the progress of those in lower sets and that a disproportionate number of students from working class background end up in lower sets. In this respect, the National Curriculum might be seen to be a backward step in equality of opportunity.

Test Your Understanding

1. What were the main “themes” in the 1988 Education Reform Act?
2. Write a brief definition of the following terms:
 - a. **National Curriculum**
 - b. **SATS**
 - c. **League Tables**
 - d. **Grant Maintained (GM) Schools**
 - e. **Marketisation**
 - f. **City Technology Colleges**
3. What is meant by the “market ideal”?
4. How did the conservatives think this translated to education?
5. What would the consequences of marketisation be?
6. How can marketisation impact on schools in poorer areas?
7. How might house prices be affected by the marketisation of schools?
8. How might this also be a problem in the comprehensive system?
9. How can the last two points be linked to problems of claiming that British schooling is meritocratic?
10. How could the 1988 Act be seen to be reintroducing selection?
11. Does this undermine the comprehensive ideal? How?
12. In what ways can the 1988 ERA be seen to remove power from local authorities?
13. What was the reason given for this?
14. Draw a quick picture (like what we did in class) to illustrate Jenkin’s fears about the education system post 1988.
15. What were the “core subjects”?
16. What subjects were compulsory up to 14?
17. How did SATs and League tables fit with the Conservative ideal of marketisation?
18. What positive points of the national curriculum are provided?
19. How might the fact that all schools offered the same subjects and taught the same subject content aid parental choice?
20. What are the problems of the National Curriculum?
21. Briefly draw a chart to record the positive and negative aspects of the different features of the 1988 Reform Act.