

**LIVE** BBC NEWS CHANNEL

Page last updated at 13:38 GMT, Friday, 1 August 2008 14:38 UK

[E-mail this to a friend](#)[Printable version](#)

What is the future for schools?

By Mike Baker

The 20th anniversary of the far-reaching 1988 Education Reform Act, which was commemorated this week, seems an appropriate moment for a pause for reflection on where we should be heading with schooling.



The Act, which introduced the national curriculum and its associated school tests in England and Wales, was a pivotal moment. Central government took unprecedented powers to decide what and how children should learn.

Ever since getting their hands on the levers of control, successive governments have never relaxed their grip.

But do we still need a national curriculum? And why are schools still based on a 19th century model when we are now several years into the 21st century?

As it happens, these were also the questions aired at a gathering of education experts I attended recently in the unlikely setting of the north tower of London's Tower Bridge.

The event was part of Horizontal - it stands for 'horizon scanning: technology and learning' - a futurology project funded by the Department for Children Schools and Families and organised by Professor Stephen Heppell.

Bridge to the future

The issues it set out to address - what shape education should take in the future - are as relevant to England and Wales, and the rest of the UK, as they are to both advanced and developing nations around the world.

The setting was inspirational and apt. We were inside Tower Bridge, high above the river Thames at the heart of London, with road and river traffic teeming far below.

“ There was a time when every country aspired to have a national airline in much the same way as they felt the need for a national curriculum ”

It was inspirational because it offered new perspectives on familiar and traditional objects.

It was apt because when Tower Bridge was designed it was an example of an innovative solution to a long-term problem: how to keep London's increasingly busy road traffic moving without disrupting a busy river port.

The experts came from all over the world. They were educators and economists, teachers and administrators, bankers and entrepreneurs. Some inhabited the world of centralised, tax-funded government provision. Others belonged to the voluntary sector. Yet others were active in the for-profit world of private enterprise.

Discussion focussed around why schooling had failed to change radically when so many other spheres of life had been transformed.

As Professor Heppell noted there was a time when every country aspired to have a national airline in much the same way as they felt the need for a national curriculum.

RELATED INTERNET LINKS

[Mike Baker](#)
[Department for Children, Schools and Families](#)
[Horizontal](#)
[Not School](#)

The BBC is not responsible for the content of external internet sites

TOP EDUCATION STORIES

[Call for fairer student bursaries](#)
[Half young children underachieve](#)
[Oxford laments finite talent pool](#)

[News feeds](#)

MOST POPULAR STORIES NOW

[E-MAILED](#) [READ](#) [WATCHED/LISTENED](#)

[Thousands face axe in HBOS merger](#)
[Murdered 'angels' family tribute](#)
[Wrong home gutted when owner away](#)
[Deal a humiliation, says Mugabe](#)
[Hackers infiltrate Palin's e-mail](#)

[Most popular now, in detail](#)

News Front Page

[World](#)[UK](#)[England](#)[Northern Ireland](#)[Scotland](#)[Wales](#)[Business](#)[Politics](#)[Health](#)[Education](#)[League Tables](#)[Science/Nature](#)[Technology](#)[Entertainment](#)[Also in the news](#)[Video and Audio](#)[Have Your Say](#)[Magazine](#)[In Pictures](#)[Country Profiles](#)[Special Reports](#)[Related BBC sites](#)[Sport](#)[Weather](#)[Radio 1 Newsbeat](#)[CBBC Newsround](#)[On This Day](#)[Editors' Blog](#)[Site Version](#)[UK Version](#)[International Version](#)[About the versions](#)

Globalisation

Now most have accepted there is no need for a government-owned, nationally branded airline. Why then do we still feel the need for our own distinctive national curriculum rather than taking a 'pick 'n mix' selection from the best bits of curricula around the world?

As Professor Heppell noted, modern economies do not try to do everything any more. There are just a handful of countries that continue with car-making, or try to excel at film-making. The rest import cars and films from those places acknowledged as the world's best.

So why don't we do the same in education. If a country, Finland for example, has found a schooling model that consistently leads the world, why don't we import it either wholesale or at least in parts?

Or, more radically, if a private school chain from Sweden or the USA has developed an effective model why don't governments hire them rather than persisting with their own failing models?

Is providing charitable donations of second-hand computers to schools in the developing world really the best way to stimulate education reform? Or should governments offer contracts to the private sector to make investments in the country's educational infrastructure in return for a long-term payback as a more educated and prosperous nation starts to buy its products?

These are, of course, controversial questions. They raise ethical issues. They rarely prompt easy answers. But it does seem right to be asking them.

User-generated learning

As Professor Heppell pointed out other sectors have been transformed by technological change. Take broadcasting, for example.

Two decades ago, or even less, it was nice and simple: the broadcasters made programmes for the audience. No one strayed much over the dividing line.

Now not only do the established broadcasters appeal for, and broadcast, 'user generated content', but they are losing out to the likes of You Tube where users provide their own material.

Or, closer to the world of learning, look at what has happened with encyclopaedias. Once families saved up to fill a whole shelf at home with several volumes. Then these were condensed onto a single CD-Rom for a smaller price. Now it is all free online and - with Wikipedia - you can even add your own entries.

So why has this not happened with schools? Why, despite the rhetoric about personalised learning, do we still have national curricula and national testing?

Why, for that matter, are schoolrooms still much the same in terms of size, shape and focus as they were 150 years ago when mass education began in Britain and learning methods were so different?

Political grip

One answer to emerge from the event was that, unlike many industries, education is still firmly in the grip of governments.

The consensus was that governments are generally not very good at innovation or risk-taking. Nor do they tend to take the long view (the sponsoring of this event by the DCSF being a notable exception) as they work to four or five year cycles.

Where new technologies have been used they tend to reinforce existing teaching and learning methods rather than taking us off in new directions.

The model for schooling still very often involves gathering large numbers of children together into a single building, dividing them into groups by age, and placing an adult with some textbooks in front of them.

Yet the evidence around us shows that young people, and increasingly adults too, learn from their peers. If they want to find something out they go on the web, searching for a user group or search engine, rather than asking a nearby figure of authority.

Of course, there are problems with this. You can get the wrong, or false, answers. You can fail to understand the information or its context. But shouldn't we take more note of how young people learn?

When they get a new mobile phone or computer, they never read the manual. They learn by doing or by asking their peers in online communities.

This may not work for all young people but it can be great for those who find conventional schooling unbearable.

Take the 'Not School' initiative that has had great success with pupils who have been excluded from school. Instead of putting them all together in a special unit, it created a virtual school, where pupils learned from home, interacting over the Internet.

So, 20 years on, is the Education Reform Act still the right approach? Or is it time we broke out of a 19th century model of the teacher at the front of each class, delivering a prescribed curriculum, and constrained by regular pencil and paper national tests?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I'd be interested to hear yours. It's something to contemplate over the summer school holidays.

 [E-mail this to a friend](#)

 [Printable version](#)

Bookmark with:

[What are these?](#)

[Delicious](#)

[Digg](#)

[reddit](#)

[Facebook](#)

[StumbleUpon](#)

FEATURES, VIEWS, ANALYSIS



[Going undercover](#)
Reporter joins Army to investigate bullying



[Seeking Moby](#)
From quarry to eco-symbol, what whales mean to us



[Coming home](#)
Birthplace of Paralympics welcomes Games

[SKIP TO TOP](#)

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

[E-mail news](#)

[Mobiles](#)

[Alerts](#)

[News feeds](#)

[Interactive TV](#)

[Podcasts](#)