

What role should government play in education?

A country with educated citizens equals a fair, efficient and successful society for all, and as such, it is in all government's interest to include itself and invest in education.

In the United Kingdom, government involvement in education started with the Elementary Education Act of 1870, setting up boards to open new schools, and taking over the running of existing ones, to provide education to children between the ages of 5 and 13. Seventy years later, the 1944 Education Act introduced the tripartite system which meant that a secondary school education was no longer only reserved for the privileged few. These two important milestones enabled universal education in Britain and must be seen as a hugely important and worthwhile role for government.

Fast forward 70 years to the present, however, and you will find a teaching profession in despair of government involvement in education. With governments and ministers changing as often as the weather, so too are educational policies. The building blocks of the British education system have been stripped to the foundations in the last few years, peeling away layers applied by government renovations of the past. Teachers now spend so much time and effort putting the latest government initiatives into practice, that actual teaching has become a rare luxury.

In secondary education, the curriculum and subsequent exams have been remodelled in the style of O levels, which were discarded back in 1987 for a more inclusive and fairer system. Meanwhile, frustrated primary teachers are forced to spend their time testing five and six year olds in the phonics of made up words, rather than actually teaching them to read.

Not only does government interference take the flexibility needed to teach away from teachers, but it also raises the ethical question of who has the right to decide what children learn. Do we really want The Right Honourable 'whoever happens to be in the job at the time' to dictate what our children do or don't know?

Initial intervention by the British Government in the field of education may have given opportunities to all and helped build a greater society, but more recent continuous meddling in the school curriculum and methods of teaching has placed education in a holding pattern, flying aimlessly around in circles. Unless there can be cross-party agreement on a long term direction for education and trust given to teachers to do what they are trained to do, the whole system could simply crash and burn.

The role of governments around the world should be in making sure that free quality education is provided to all of its citizens, and continuous involvement in this area is a logical and social investment. However, the day to day running of schools should be left to those trained to do so. We have world class teacher training programmes throughout the universities and schools of this country, and teachers eager to train the minds of the future. All that they need, is the funding and the freedom to do it.