



# THE SUNDAY TIMES

## THE SCHOOLS BLOG



This week, a parent asked me what I thought of Michael Gove's proposal for an "English baccalaureate" at GCSE level, especially as at my school, boys and girls in the sixth form follow the International Baccalaureate with huge success.

It made me reflect on the basic principles of education. What do we want from it, and what should it prepare us for? When do we stop needing to use words or numbers, for example? "Never" might seem to be the obvious answer, but for the great majority of children in our schools, the formal study of mathematics and their own language tends to come to a juddering stop at 16. For far too many children, these subjects have never been mastered at even the most basic level. As for studying a modern language after year 9 - I'm afraid that became optional years ago, when the government responded to a dearth of languages teachers by simply removing the need to teach languages beyond 13. The predictable result is what we see today: an even greater crisis in modern languages. And science? Half of all schools last year entered no pupils at all for all three sciences.

As boys and girls leave our schools to compete in a global jobs market, they will have good cause to rue the way politicians have tried to camouflage the poor quality of our schools' education programmes, mangled and misdirected by government for a generation or more. The disguise has taken many shapes: dumbed down syllabuses, inflated results, so-called vocational subjects that no employer actually wants, and the systematic bullying of universities that requires them to ignore the fact that pupils may not have learned anything much in their thirteen years at school.

It is only the realisation that our children will be competing in a truly international jobs market that has forced us all to take a hard look at what a modern UK school education actually offers our children.

So I am glad that Michael Gove has decided to introduce what he calls an English baccalaureate. This one act could rekindle the tiny, dying flame of the "liberal education" that Matthew Arnold fought for so eloquently in the Victorian age and that we see today only in the very best schools - far too many of these being independent and thus financially out of reach of most parents. In 1868, Matthew Arnold, poet, critic, and son of Thomas Arnold, pioneering headmaster of Rugby School, described a national curriculum that went on to shape what we might now see as one of the greatest improvements in our educational history. Arnold wrote that pupils should study their own mother tongue, a modern language, history, the science of nature, and mathematics. The testing regime itself was far less important to Arnold than the substance of what was imparted - a far cry from today's "test, retake and remark" culture.

Gove appears to share Arnold's enlightened belief in the importance of breadth in learning. The English baccalaureate will be awarded to any pupil who gains good GCSE passes in English, mathematics, science, a language and a humanity - close to the combination Matthew Arnold proposed, and that sixth formers at my school are well used to through studying the International Baccalaureate.

My school, King's College School, in Wimbledon, has already committed itself to preparing boys and girls for the competitive world in which they will be seeking jobs. But by adopting the International Baccalaureate, we also believe we are following another great English tradition. We are pleased that the IB makes our pupils attractive both to universities in the UK and abroad. We are delighted that they seem to fare better when they seek jobs after their degrees, too. But for my colleagues, the joy of a baccalaureate approach is to see open, appreciative minds make connections between the subjects they study, between themselves and others, and between their street or town and the world that lies beyond. A baccalaureate, a liberal education as imagined by Arnold, should be the means of opening minds, encouraging the humanity that underlies learning, and preparing our children to be contributors to a richer and varied society than the one we seem ourselves to inhabit.

If Michael Gove can help make this rich and broad education a reality for children at all of our schools, then he will join an incredibly short list of education secretaries who have actually made schools better.