

WARM UP

1 What key differences/similarities are there between the education system in the UK and that in the USA?

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE UK AND THE USA

Education has always been a key issue for politicians, teachers, parents and society as a whole and there are currently many issues facing the state education sector in the UK and the USA. The UK is undergoing a period of controversial education reforms, particularly changes to examinations and the national curriculum, while the USA is having to face massive problems of inequality in its public education system.

Curriculum Changes 'to Catch up with World's Best'

[July 2013] Five year olds will start learning fractions and computer algorithms, as a more stretching national curriculum is announced for state schools in England. The re-written national curriculum sets out the framework for what children in England's state schools should be taught between the ages of 5 and 14.

Prime Minister David Cameron says this 'revolution in education' is vital for the country's economic prosperity. Education Secretary Michael Gove said the changes to the curriculum were necessary to keep pace with the achievement of pupils in other countries. 'No national curriculum can be modernised without paying close attention to what's been happening in education internationally,' said Mr Gove. He cited Hong Kong, Massachusetts, Singapore and Finland as 'the world's most successful school systems'.

The new-look curriculum puts a stronger emphasis on skills such as 'essay writing, problem-solving, mathematical modelling and computer programming'. For example, in maths pupils will be required to learn their 12 times table by the age of nine. Basic fractions, such as half or a quarter, will be taught to five year olds. In Design and Technology they will learn about 3D printing and robotics. In Computing pupils aged five to seven will

be expected to 'understand what algorithms are' and to 'create and debug simple programs'.

The opposition leaders, teachers' unions and teachers, however, have been critical of the new curriculum and the time given for its implementation. Brian Lightman, leader of the ASCL head teachers' union, said that one year to implement such ambitious proposals effectively was a tall order. Many unions and teachers have also questioned the level of political involvement in the process. They say that, unlike previous versions of the national curriculum which were written in collaboration with teachers and school leaders, these new proposals have been devised by government advisers and officials.

Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg said, 'David Cameron and Michael Gove have spent the last three years trying to personally rewrite the national curriculum – they should have listened to the experts in the first place. They have had to go back and change the study programmes for design and technology, geography and history after experts warned there were serious omissions and they were not suited to prepare young people for the challenges of the modern world.'

Source – BBC News – © 2013

READING COMPREHENSION

2 Read the text and answer these questions.

- 1 Which UK country will the new curriculum be introduced in?
- 2 What type of school and age group is it for?
- 3 According to Michael Gove, why did they have to change the curriculum?
- 4 Why did Gove mention countries like Hong Kong and Finland?
- 5 What should five to seven year olds be able to do in maths and computing?
- 6 Who has criticised the new curriculum?
- 7 How does this new curriculum differ to previous ones in terms of teacher involvement?
- 8 What parts of the curriculum did the government have to change and why?

For Each and Every Child

Education is the key to a strong democracy, economic competitiveness and a world-class standard of living. In recent decades, however, America has lost its place as a global leader in educational achievement in ways that will lead to a decline in living standards for millions of our children and the loss of trillions of dollars of economic growth. In spite of all of our initiatives and good intentions, our nation has been unable to ensure that each and every American child can attend a quality public school.

While some young Americans – most of them white and affluent – are getting a truly world-class education, those who attend schools in high poverty neighborhoods are getting an education that is closer to that seen in developing nations. In reading, for example, although US children in low-poverty schools rank at the top of the world, those in our highest-poverty schools are performing at the same level as children in the world’s lowest-achieving countries.

Our education system, legally desegregated more than a half century ago, is ever more segregated by wealth and income, and often again by race. Ten million students in America’s poorest communities – and millions more African American, Latino, Asian American, Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native students who are not poor – are having their lives unjustly and

irredeemably ruined by a system that consigns them to the lowest-performing teachers, the most run-down facilities, and academic expectations and opportunities considerably lower than what we expect of other students. Given that low-income students, English-language learners and students of color together form a majority of our young people and the fastest-growing population in the nation – and that America’s future economic and civic vitality depends on their success in an age of global competition – this is not only unjust but also unwise.

To achieve the excellence and equity in education on which our future depends, we need a system of American public education that ensures all students have a real and meaningful opportunity to achieve rigorous college – and career-ready standards. A world-class education consists not solely of mastery of core subjects, but also of training in critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as in 21st-century concerns like global awareness and financial literacy. Such high levels of education are key to self-reliance and economic security in a world where education matters more than ever for the success of societies as well as individuals.

Source: US Department of Education, ‘For Each and Every Child – A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence’, Washington DC, 2013.

READING COMPREHENSION

3 Read the text and decide if these sentences are true (T) or false (F). If there is not enough information, choose ‘doesn’t say’ (DS).

- 1 The USA has never been a global leader in educational attainment.
- 2 The various educational initiatives which have been introduced are a waste of money.
- 3 Most of the students who receive an excellent education in the USA are white and rich.
- 4 According to the report, there is discrimination in the US education system.
- 5 Schools in the poorest communities usually have better teachers and facilities.
- 6 Low-income students do not expect to do as well academically as other students.
- 7 The target of a good public education system is to have all students graduate from college.
- 8 A high quality education needs to include more than a good understanding of key subjects.

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SPEAKING

4 Discuss these questions in small groups.

- 1 Is education in your country controlled by central or local government?
- 2 What problems is the education system in your country facing?
- 3 Have there been any recent changes to the system?
- 4 What changes would you like to see? Why?