Institute of Physics

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Durrants

Should children as young as 11 be taught about MMR in their science lessons?

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PUPILS will soon have to debate controversial topics such as the MMR vaccine in science lessons, leading to fears that they could be indoctrinated with Government policy.

Discussions of contentious political issues will replace rote learning of key scientific facts and figures to interest bored pupils.

Higher Education Minister Bill Rammell claimed too much emphasis had been put on learning important principles such as the properties of light and sound by rote.

He said the Key Stage Three curriculum, for pupils aged 11 to 14, will be made more relevant by including debates on issues such as genetics and the MMR vaccine.

But critics accused the Government of politicising lessons to deliver propaganda at the expense of learning the basics.

They warned that teachers could 'brainwash' pupils by providing a one-sided view of contentious issues such as whether babies should have the triple measles, mumps and rubella injection. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is reviewing the curriculum to streamline subjects and make more room for classes in the three Rs from 2008.

Science requirements will be slimmed down significantly, with more emphasis on real-world applications. Proposals include reducing detailed points on electricity and magnetism to a requirement that pupils understand 'electricity in circuits can produce a variety of effects'.

A comprehensive section on vibration and sound that includes the properties of light is omitted completely.

Mr Rammell said: 'There has been an overemphasis on rote learning of the facts and figures of science as opposed to what are the underlying principles and how we would relate them to modern society. What we have to do is ask what are those debates taking place about society involving science that young people are interested in?

'It might be a debate about the MMR vaccine, it might be about genetics. We've got to look at those issues that capture the imagination and interest.'

But Nick Seaton, of the Campaign for Real Education, said: 'The Government shouldn't be politicising lessons. This kind of issue-based science is just wasting time that should be used on learning the foundations.

'It's extremely dangerous. Well-educated adults can't always agree about things like the MMR debate so I don't know how teachers will expect youngsters to, unless they intend to brainwash them.'

Mr Rammell was helping the Higher Education Funding Council for England launch an £18million initiative to boost the numbers of pupils studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics at university.

It provides funding for four pilot schemes, including £1.785million for a three-year physics-based degree designed by the Institute of Physics.

The integrated sciences degree is aimed at the trend for students to take soft A-levels such as media studies that do not qualify them for tough university courses.

Students can take it even if they do not have physics and maths A-levels, which are usually the minimum requirements.

Four universities – London South Bank, Leicester, East Anglia and Surrey – will offer the degree next year.

The Institute of Physics blames poor careers advice, league table pressure and an 'unholy alliance' of schools and students 'trying to maximise grades at A-level' for the low numbers taking A-level physics.


Police smash gang who stole £30m from stately homes