

Stephen Curran: Labour’s plans for education only add up to bad news for children

September 16, 2024 | Dr Stephen Curran | Comment

Dr Stephen Curran is an education expert who advised on the 2014 syllabus.

Labour’s capitulation to the unions and its obsession with progressive educational theory is about to let down the country’s children.

I speak as someone who advised on the schools’ curriculum that was introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition in 2014.

And while it could have gone further, I watched as England rose up the international PISA rankings.

Now Labour wants us to follow Scotland and Wales, which both put progressive dogma over educational pragmatism and have slumped down the rankings.

I came from a working-class background and had to find ways of understanding the subjects I struggled with at school. I now have six degrees.

Those self-taught lessons led me into the teaching profession and from there into academia.

I wanted to impart what I had learned and from 2007 lobbied the then Labour government and the Conservative opposition.

To be fair to Gordon Brown’s government, it did listen. In meetings I had with them, they acknowledged that the progressive route – particularly in primary maths – wasn’t working.

That Labour administration introduced Academy schools as a way of improving outcomes and it did seem like it had the sense to put children’s futures first. “Education, education, education” was not just a soundbite.

At the same time, I held meetings with Nick Gibb, then the Shadow Schools Minister, and he asked me about the primary maths curriculum.

I told him that I didn’t understand what it was trying to do, and he agreed.

It had been the result of progressive educational theory. This has been quick to infect all areas of educational policy and should be resisted by government ministers.

I was later brought on to the panel advising on the maths element of the curriculum that was introduced under the Cameron/Clegg government.

It led directly to an improvement in children’s performance and educational outcomes.

My emphasis has always been on the basics being taught well at primary level, especially in English and maths. These are the foundation blocks upon which all subsequent education is built.

Maths prepares children for all the sciences and helps with music and design technology. English prepares children for all the humanities’ subjects and is important for every subject area.

In English, children should be taught and tested on grammar, syntax, punctuation, vocabulary, and spelling.

In Maths, children should be taught and tested on the four rules of number, fractions and decimals, how to find percentages, ratios, probability, basic geometry, and basic algebra.

When the last Conservative government took power, the curriculum ‘objective’ was for children to learn their times tables by the end of Year 6.

The new 2014 curriculum made it essential for children to learn their tables by the end of Year 4.

When these children reached the age of 14, England began to climb the PISA rankings.

The pragmatism of the last Conservative and previous Labour governments is in sharp contrast to Keir Starmer’s administration.

Early utterances by Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson show a likely turn in education policy to something that has already failed.

She has indicated that she wants to reduce testing and move away from the learning of times tables and basic grammar.

I fear she is being worked from behind by the NEU which, as we must all acknowledge, represents teachers, not children.

It wants more money for teachers for less work. It wants less rigour in the classroom. It wants fewer tests in case the results reflect badly on teachers.

The unions’ ‘pressure’ argument against testing is fallacious and ridiculous.

Children will face testing throughout their lives, and it is important to do at least one set of tests near the end of primary education.

It lets teachers, parents, the Government, and the children themselves know where they stand. And it is useful information for the child’s secondary school.

Good teachers conduct informal testing all the time to check if children have understood what they have been taught. Testing is essential.

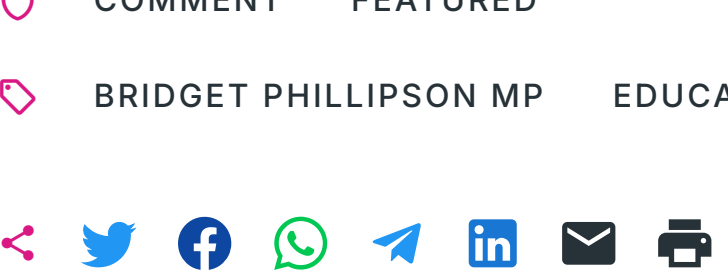
If Labour goes ahead with its union-sponsored progressive nonsense it will take our country backwards.

The Conservatives need to get a leader quickly to oppose these dangerous ideas.

The best opposition to Labour’s plans for education are parents. It must be communicated to them that Labour will harm their kids.

Labour must leave the syllabus alone.

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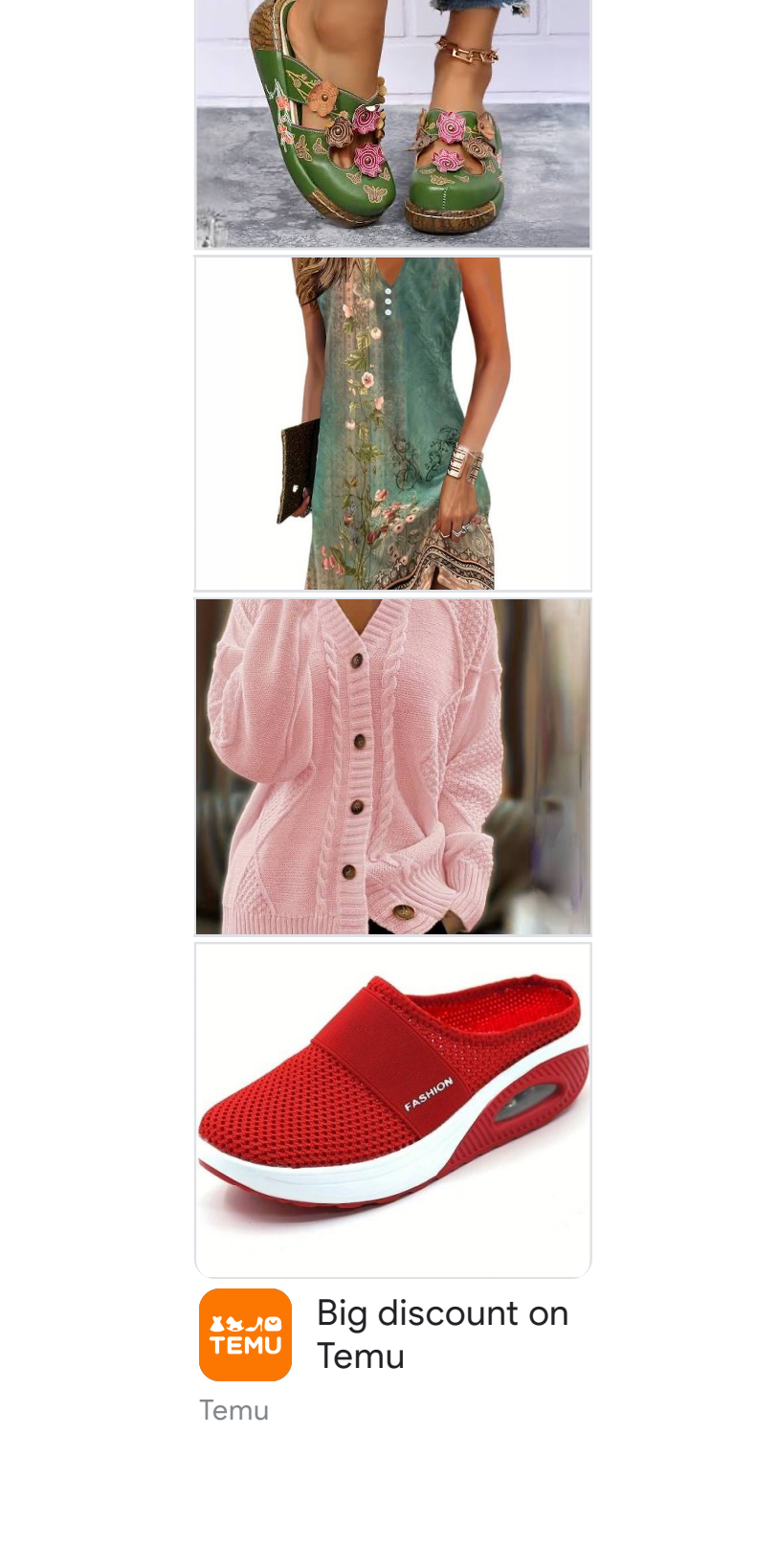
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