

Lord Baker: The pandemic is a good opportunity to scrap my GCSE revolution

As Margaret Thatcher's education secretary, Lord Baker introduced 'all-or-nothing' exams for 16-year-olds – now he wants them abolished

By Luke Mintz
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Lord Baker argues that the current schooling system fails to cater for cross-subject topics like green issues

Lord Kenneth Baker was six in 1940, when he was evacuated from west London to Southport, a seaside town in the North West, to escape Luftwaffe bombs. He remembers beaches and “genteel” shopping arcades – but his clearest memory stems from his schooling.

Teachers at his Church of England primary nourished his childhood with a broad, balanced education. He had regular tests in maths and English, but they only formed a small part of his termly teacher's report. His school recognised the importance of practical subjects like carpentry, so non-academic pupils could flourish. He certainly did not encounter the rigid, all-consuming focus on external exams of the sort faced by some youngsters today.

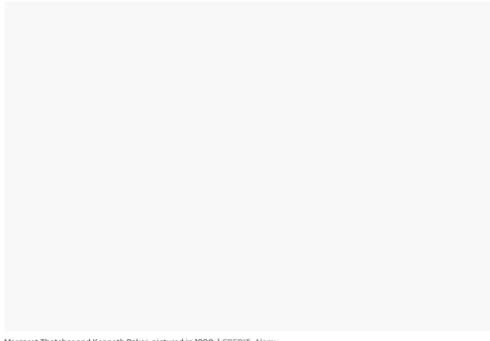
Lord Baker, who went on to serve Margaret Thatcher as Education Secretary between 1986 and 1989, now thinks his teachers might have got something right. In government, he oversaw the creation of the GCSE, which replaced O-levels as the national qualification for school leavers. Now, he wants them abolished – and thinks the pandemic is the perfect opportunity to kill them off.

“We're going to have a few years in which we've not had GCSEs, I expect,” says Lord Baker, 86, from his home in west London. “We have to seriously think about an alternative.”

For the second year in a row, [GCSE exams were cancelled this summer](#) because of Covid-19; grades will instead be decided by teachers. The qualifications now lie at the centre of a bitter back-and-forth between ministers, teachers and unions – and their future looks less certain now than at any point over their 33-year history.

On Friday, a survey found that more than half of schools plan to give pupils semi-formal end-of-year tests, despite promises from teaching watchdog Ofqual that youngsters will not be given “exams by the back door” after missing months of education. Earlier in the week, Ofqual announced they will carry out random spot checks on schools to ensure teachers are not inflating grades. Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary, insisted last month that GCSEs will “absolutely” return after the pandemic – but Lord Baker thinks this would be a mistake. “A conflict is going to arise quite shortly, and there's quite a volume of support now for abolishing GCSEs, from all sorts of people, including parents,” he says.

It was Baroness Shirley Williams, who served as Labour's education secretary in the late 1970s, and died earlier this month, who first got the ball rolling to end what some of both sides of political aisle considered a “class apartheid” between O-levels (mostly for pupils who passed the 11-plus) and CSEs (mostly for pupils who failed it). National Archive records released in 2014 show that Thatcher initially “did not like the sound” of GCSEs because she feared they would create a “can't-fail mentality”, but she was persuaded by her Cabinet. The first cohort of teenagers sat the new universal qualifications in 1988 – a landmark Lord Baker, who was Education Secretary at the time, remembers well.



Margaret Thatcher and Kenneth Baker, pictured in 1990 | CREDIT: Alamy

Back then, he explains, most UK children left school at 16. They needed a reliable, externally-assessed qualification to give employers. Now, thanks to a dramatic expansion in sixth-form education, and the raising of the minimum school leaving age to 18 in 2015, those figures have flipped on their head. Virtually all youngsters now remain in some form of education until they are 18, including the half who don't go to university. GCSEs have become a waste of time, says Lord Baker – a needless expense that forces undue anxiety onto [a generation already suffering after spending months away from their peers](#) in lockdown.

“There's no great need to have an exam at 16. We are the only school system in the world that exacts 16-year-olds to such challenging and difficult exams. There's no doubt whatsoever they cause anxiety and stress.”

Lord Baker thinks 16-year-olds should instead be given lower-stakes internal assessments, involving more dialogue between teachers and pupils, and with more interconnection between different areas of the curriculum. “Green issues are an interesting example. They're spread over several disciplines – biology, geography, technology. I've seen one estimate that the green economy will need 400,000 extra people in it by 2050. What will they have studied?”

And he's not alone. Last summer, a coalition of top state and private schools – including St Paul's Girls' School and The Latymer School in London, and Bedales in Hampshire – launched a campaign seeking an alternative to GCSEs. Eton College also joined the fray: the school's director of teaching and learning, Jonnie Noakes, says the new system should equip pupils as “fully flourishing human beings”, adding: “Because we're so focused on GCSEs, all those other really important responsibilities... are getting squeezed out.”

It taps into a wider movement across Western education, which argues that all-or-nothing exams like GCSEs and A-levels are a misguided way of assessing a child's overall ability, and are partly responsible for the crisis of confidence among young people – which was an issue long before the pandemic. In 2019, more than eight in 10 UK teachers claimed to have witnessed worsening mental health among their pupils over the previous two years, according to a survey of more than 8,000.

Instead, campaigners think children should be graded with more regular but much lower-stakes assessments. Tests should give teachers useful data on a child's progress, they argue – they shouldn't determine a child's future in one stomach-churning afternoon.

Lord Baker wants to see more focus on coursework, which was scrapped for most subjects in 2013 amid controversial reforms brought in by Michael Gove (and pushed by Gove's then special advisor, Dominic Cummings, who angered what his boss called the teachers' union “blob”, and wrote about wanting to turn Britain into a science-focused meritocracy full of resilient, “Odyssean” citizens).

“Bright students will always do well,” says Lord Baker. “They're going to come through any system. But others who aren't very academic liked coursework because they could show they were good at something, whatever it may be.”

He also thinks the Government's focus on Progress 8, a benchmark that judges schools according to their success only in core academic subjects, means pupils are missing out on the delights of creative and technical learning. “I introduced Design Technology, in which you can do all sorts of things: metals, electricity, some computing. But the uptake is now well down, meaning the less gifted children have lost out. Dance, drama and music have all dropped, too.”

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His recommendation will certainly prove controversial. Educationalist Dr Stephen Curran, who advised the coalition government on its new maths curriculum, thinks any system geared away from formal exams will only benefit children with well-heeled and “book-ish” parents. “All you have to do is attach a tutor to your kid and all the coursework comes in, giving the kid a grade A,” he says. “And now we've got the added problem of the internet, where it's possible to buy answers. The idea that we can protect people from every difficult experience in life is ridiculous. Tough experiences toughen people up.”

Tim Oates, meanwhile, director of assessment research at Cambridge Assessment, an exam board, described GCSEs in a *Schools Week* article earlier this year as an “extraordinary national success”, and said abolition “could leave serious gaps in our educational arrangements”, further shaking up a fragile, pandemic-weakened system.

Lord Baker predicts a battle. In a pandemic year in which we are reassessing so much about our society, he says, it is time to rethink exams, too.

Should GCSE's be scrapped, and if so, what would you want to see in their place? Let us know in the comments below

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