

# Key Stage 3 National Strategy: Myths and legends

Getting intended messages across is not easy when the messages are conveyed through several levels of a cascade. One misinterpreted message can be replicated many times over and even be amended in the telling. It doesn't take long to turn messages into myths, and myths into legends.

Here are some of the current myths about the Key Stage 3 Strategy, and the reality.

## **'The Strategy is prescriptive.'**

It's not. Your school's schemes of work prescribe what goes on in classrooms, but this is not what the Strategy does. The Strategy supports lesson planning by offering frameworks of objectives, set out year by year, for you to draw on. It offers training that you opt into on the principles and practices that are known to work, and consultants to help you to tailor and interpret the ideas in your own school.

## **'It's compulsory to follow the Frameworks and change our scheme of work.'**

It's not – the Frameworks are non-statutory. Indeed, there can be benefits in committing yourself to the development of your own detailed curriculum. But you need to be confident that your Key Stage 3 curriculum is just as strong and detailed as the relevant framework of objectives, particularly on expectations, progression and breadth of study. The Frameworks are well researched and help a department to put the programmes of study into practice. The support of consultants and training make them attractive. Take the views of the whole department before deciding exactly how to use the Framework.

## **'The Strategy stifles creativity – we have to teach to a formula.'**

You don't! The Strategy's training can help you to extend your repertoire of teaching strategies so that lessons can be more varied and stimulating for the pupils, and better matched to their learning needs. The Strategy promotes structured, well-paced lessons but use your professional judgement to determine the activities, timing and organisation of each part of a lesson to suit its objectives. In lessons of one hour, for example, there is scope for considerable creativity and variety, with a different interplay of work with the whole class, groups, pairs and individuals in different lessons.

## **‘The Strategy expects the earth tomorrow.’**

It doesn't. It expects a commitment to improve and realistic action points to bring this about. A piecemeal strategy is unlikely to work. We ask schools to plan and pace what they will do so that it is manageable. Some have started in Years 7 and 8 but many are looking across all three years of the key stage and are making priority changes in Year 9 as well. All are mindful that by September 2003 the Strategy needs to be working effectively throughout the whole key stage.

## **‘The training is one size fits all.’**

No, that's not true either. The initial audit of the standards, teaching and learning in your subject helps to identify development needs for the whole department and individuals. You then plan how these needs can be met through a mix of courses that different teachers can opt into and tailored in-school consultancy. The Strategy's package of materials and professional development programmes is substantial but you are invited to select what you need. The folders that can support whole-school INSET days or departmental meetings have a range of options to choose from so that you can build on what you have previously achieved. All these materials have been designed specifically to avoid teachers sitting through training they already have under their belts.

## **‘They think we're doing a bad job.’**

No one thinks that. But education badly needs ways of identifying, sharing and supporting good practice. An honest look at the videos and training will tell you that the ideas represent the best practice in schools that get great results, even in challenging situations.

## **‘The Strategy is only relevant to low attaining pupils and schools – we already have reasonable results.’**

The Strategy has something to offer all schools. The professional development programmes have been designed with different pupils and different schools in mind. Indeed, two selective schools that took part in the pilot found much that was relevant and that could be adapted to their specific context. For example, they used the Strategy's focus on teachers' questioning techniques to develop their pupils' understanding of complex texts and to develop their mathematical thinking.

## **‘It’s all political – just a way of making the targets.’**

Targets refer to numbers of pupils who improve, so it may be no bad thing to have them. It’s true that education enjoys political priority at the moment and there is money to raise standards. That’s why we have to be quick in getting the best practice into the system. The Strategy is not run by politicians but by professional staff, every one of whom has been a teacher. Their task is target-getting rather than target-setting.

## **‘It’s all too rushed and hasn’t been thought through.’**

We recognise that the Strategy may need additional time and commitment from teachers, particularly in the early stages. Implementation is phased so that not all strands have begun at once. The Strategy can be introduced according to a school’s circumstances. If necessary, you can focus on Years 7 and 8 to begin with. However, we don’t apologise for asking people to make a start on raising standards. The pilot of the Strategy in 205 schools in 17 different LEAs has helped to iron out wrinkles in the materials and training programmes and there have been positive responses to them, even in the early stages.

## **‘The funding is not enough.’**

The targets are challenging and we have some way to go to achieve them. The government and LEAs have committed almost £500 million to the Key Stage 3 Strategy in the three years to 2003–04. Every school with Key Stage 3 pupils receives part of this but each year some schools get extra funding to help them put their action points into practice.

## **‘There are too many initiatives.’**

We disagree. Schools need to make good use of the various initiatives that, while they may appear to be separate, all contribute to raising standards. Weaving them into a single school improvement plan combines their forces and gives them focus. The audit will identify action points, including meeting professional development needs, which will help to raise standards in Key Stage 3. These can be merged with other school action to raise standards, for example, in Key Stage 4, or with specific groups of pupils. The time and resources needed to carry out that action can be funded from any relevant ‘raising standards’ budget, for example, from the budget for Key Stage 3, Excellence in Cities or Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances.

