

David Green

GUEST COLUMNIST



FIRST CLASS . . . Sun Saturday school, main image, our Hold Ye Front Page website, left, and Professor Brian Cox, below left



Our kids need learning not league tables

THE SUN was one of the first newspapers to realise that British children were falling behind those in other countries in the education rankings – and to play an active part in putting things right.

In June 2008, they helped the think tank Civitas establish a Saturday school in Wapping.

Many parents want to help their children but don't know how – and that's where the Saturday schools come in.

Parents drop their kids off on Saturday mornings and our teachers help them catch up with their English and maths in small classes of ten.

It's part of a network of 20 throughout the country, including Birmingham, Bradford and the North East.

Britain's record in the last decade has been shocking.

Rivals

The latest international comparisons show that in science, we've fallen from fourth in the world to 16th, in reading from seventh to 25th, and in maths from eighth to 28th.

It's not only a worry because our main economic rivals are likely to take our jobs if our young people are not up to speed in maths and science.

It also matters for our democracy.

We all need a shared stock of knowledge to play a part in the life of the country.

If our kids are not taught a bit about our history and the basics of science, English and maths, then it's hard for them to make sense of reading a newspaper or watching the

television news. And the more knowledge we have, the harder it is for political leaders to pull the wool over our eyes.

The Sun's Get Britain Learning campaign helps concerned parents to teach their children at home.

By enlisting inspiring scientists including Professor Brian Cox and setting up their Hold Ye Front Page website to portray the excitement of the key turning points in our history, the Sun has helped to reawaken enthusiasm for learning.

For the same reasons, Civitas has just published the first in a series of books for parents.

What Your Year 1 Child Needs To Know helps mums and dads work with teachers to get the best out of their children.

More than that, it shows parents just how much they can help outside school hours.

There are ideas for science experiments suitable for five and six-year-olds, including growing seeds in see-through containers – and right now there are loads of acorns and conkers that can be used.

There are easy-to-follow instructions for making a weather vane to show the wind direction, and ideas for experiments with magnets.

Some children struggle with maths, so there are lots of games to make maths fun.

In a plan to increase the

number of children passing exams, governments have published league tables so that parents can compare schools.

But instead of pushing standards up, they had the opposite effect. Schools were judged by how many children got grades A to C in their GCSEs – but head teachers quickly latched on to ways of fiddling the figures.

Not only were the exams made easier, there was another massive loophole.

Vocational subjects were treated as equivalent to GCSEs but they could be passed without sitting any external exams.

Subjects such as Information and Communications Technology (ICT) could be passed by doing easy things such as sending an email or finding a website in a browser.

A government report by public policy expert Professor Alison Wolf concluded that schools have been deliberately steering children away from qualifications that might stretch them "towards qualifications that can be passed easily".

Many children thought their teachers were advising them to take vocational courses because it would help them get a job – but they weren't.

Our young people were being pushed into courses that made the school look good, despite

reducing the students' job prospects.

The Coalition has put forward a solution called the English Baccalaureate – or EBacc for short – but critics say it will encourage different ways of gaming the system.

It requires passes at grade C or higher in a wider range of subjects: English, maths, two sciences, a humanity and a language.

But schools will be able to come top in the league tables if they focus only on children who they think will get at least a grade C.

Reward

Putting children forward who will get lower grades will make the school look bad.

Schools should be judged by their ambition for all their children.

They should try to help everyone achieve their personal best and aim to give every child a sound general knowledge.

That's what the Government says it wants, but it has chosen the wrong policy.

If it plans to keep league tables, it should reward schools that aim to develop the talents of every child by teaching the EBacc to every one of them.

It doesn't matter if some of them get Ds and Es – they will be able to lead richer lives and be better employees and better citizens.

● DAVID GREEN is director of the think tank Civitas.

