

REVIEW - 2004: Weekly outings urged to help timid pupils

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Guardian coverage of a report by influential think-tank DEMOS - May 24 2004

Swapping a stuffy classroom for a trip to the funfair to study trigonometry or poring over maps in an airport arrivals lounge for a different take on geography should be a regular experience for every schoolchild, an influential thinktank will recommend to ministers this week. The proposals for weekly "school safaris" or expeditions aim to reverse the serious decline in school trips and outings and help children overcome fears about their local environment and the dangers of traffic.

Formal school visits and field trips have declined in popularity as a result of increased insurance premiums and union advice to teachers to avoid them because of fears of accidents and litigation. But a joint report by the thinktank Demos and the charity Green Alliance paints a picture of "children frightened by many things adults take in their stride, from busy traffic to news bulletins about terrorism". Regular "safaris" which would take youngsters out of the classroom and into the "real" world would be of great benefit to them, the report concludes.

The report will be launched on Wednesday by the education secretary, Charles Clarke, amid growing concern that youngsters are losing their connection with the natural environment because they have limited opportunities to play or learn outside.

Mr Clarke is not expected to endorse the report's recommendations, although he is likely to want to encourage the debate. "We are fostering a generation that is likely to face the toughest environmental challenges yet to be experienced by mankind, in terms of climate change and the ever-increasing pressure on natural resources," the report warns. "This generation, more than any other before it, will need the environmental awareness and citizenship that is instilled through self-exploration in childhood," it adds.

The report urges the government to rethink the way that open space and the environment can be used to teach subjects within the national curriculum, as well as helping youngsters overcome fears about their local environment and the dangers of traffic. The report notes that the number of children walking to school or playing unsupervised is steadily falling. In 1989, 62% of primary aged children walked to school, compared to 54% in 1999.

The report's authors, Gillian Thomas and Guy Thompson, said: "Out-of-classroom learning should not just be about one-off excursions to museums or galleries, though these are clearly also of value. "School safaris should occur on a weekly basis in all schools, and could involve children learning about trigonometry by going on funfair rides, or doing a geography lesson within an airport arrivals lounge."

It urges policy makers to improve children's environments as a way of increasing their broader understanding of green issues. One way to do this would be to promote an eco-friendly schools fund which would award money to schools for introducing innovations such as energy-efficient classrooms.

Among its further recommendations are that the government's Teacher Training Agency should change its training methods to give teachers the confidence to deliver out-of-classroom teaching. The new concept of "extended schools" open beyond traditional school opening hours - of which Charles Clarke is a fan - could also help encourage the idea of out-of-school learning, the report adds.