

Prime Minister Urged to Honour Education Pledge on Oracy

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A coalition of prominent figures has urged Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer to uphold his election pledge to make confident speaking and listening, oracy, a core part of England's national curriculum. The appeal comes via an open letter signed by around 60 advocates, including author Michael Rosen, former political strategist Alastair Campbell, and ex-education secretaries Charles Clarke and Estelle Morris.

The letter, coordinated by oracy charity Voice 21, emphasises that oracy should be regarded as the “fourth R” in education, alongside reading, writing, and arithmetic. It criticises the omission of oracy from the interim report of the government’s curriculum review earlier this year, raising concerns that the commitment may have lost momentum. The final report is expected in the autumn.

Supporters of the initiative argue that structured speaking and listening skills are critical in a fast-changing world shaped by artificial intelligence, polarised public discourse, and social inequality. They contend that the ability to articulate ideas clearly, listen actively, and debate respectfully is fundamental not only to personal development but also to social mobility and democratic engagement.

In response, the Department for Education has pointed to its ongoing investments in early language programmes, such as the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, and pledged to review teacher training frameworks with a focus on oral communication. Officials say confident communication will be considered within the broader curriculum development process.

The issue gained political traction when Sir Keir declared in 2023 that oracy would form part of Labour’s education mission. At the time, the proposal was praised by education think tanks and social mobility advocates as a way to narrow the gap between state and independent schools. However, little substantive progress has been made since Labour entered government, raising doubts about the seriousness of the pledge.

Critics have flagged practical challenges. Embedding oracy into mainstream education will require teacher retraining, curriculum adjustment, and time in an already stretched school timetable. Some suggest benefits may take years to materialise, far beyond the current Parliament.

Nonetheless, advocates maintain that giving young people the tools to communicate is a long-overdue reform. With political scrutiny growing over Labour's follow-through on its manifesto promises, oracy may become an early test of the government's credibility in delivering education reform. Whether Starmer acts decisively or allows the issue to drift remains to be seen.