

Conference Report

A good local school for every child: will the Education Bill deliver?

25 March 2006, University of London, Institute of Education

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Conference Report

A Good Local School for Every Child: will the Education Bill deliver?

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First plenary session

Chris Waterman, Children's Services Editor of *Education Journal*, welcomed everybody to the Conference and apologised for the absence of Helena Kennedy as chairperson.

Professor Stephen Ball, in welcoming everyone to the Conference on behalf of London University's Institute of Education, commented on the huge diversity of the participants. He emphasised that the White Paper and the Education and Inspections Bill were just part of New Labour's transformation of the public sector. It was all part of a new concept of the role of the State in the provision of public services. All this was also part of Tony Blair's concept of a 'meritocratic society' and of a particular concept of the nature of human 'abilities'. One of the most chilling passages in the White Paper talks in terms of all children as being either 'gifted and talented', 'struggling' or 'just average' (page 20).

Professor Ball was followed by **Steve Sinnott**, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), who welcomed participants on behalf of the NUT. He argued that 'a good local school for every child' encapsulated the essential principle of comprehensive education. He specified four priorities:

- The promotion of social inclusion in all its aspects
- The ending of selection
- The principle of local accountability, and
- The abolition of the role of private sponsors.

He emphasised that there would be a vast improvement if schools *cooperated* a little more and *competed* a little less.

In closing, Steve Sinnott paid tribute, in particular, to the work of Melissa Benn and Fiona Millar, for their work on promoting comprehensive education. He thanked Sheila Dainton for the way in which she had overseen the organisation of the conference

Professor Ron Glatter talked about all the gross misrepresentation surrounding the Bill. There was very little research evidence that supported the contentions of the White Paper and of the Bill. Indeed, all the evidence showed that excellence and high standards were associated with the principles underlying comprehensive education. There was too little coherence in the system and no evidence that improvement and progress were associated with the idea of giving individual schools *more* autonomy. It was astonishing that the Prime Minister should compare the

introduction of Trust schools with the selling off of council houses, one of Margaret Thatcher's favourite initiatives.

Dr Bethan Marshall of King's College, London argued that if academic selection was a bad idea, the essential solution must be comprehensive education. What the White Paper and the Bill offered was the solution of the marketplace, with its notions of success and failure. Parental choice was a myth: in London, two-thirds of parents who indicated a choice of schools *failed* to get their first choice. Children were being turned into 'products' and the essential feature was the role of examination results.

Hamish McCallum was appearing as a student at Redruth School in Cornwall and as a representative of ESSA (the English Secondary Students' Association). He argued that all school students should be given the right to develop and prosper. He was concerned about the proposals in the Bill about *school behaviour*. The essential principle underlying school behaviour should be *mutual* respect between teachers and pupils. He was also concerned about the comments on the need to abolish 'junk food'. What was missing in the Bill was the role of school students in the formulation of policy.

Trisha Jaffe, headteacher of Kidbrooke School in Greenwich, said that it was really sad and tragic that it was *necessary* to hold today's Conference. She said that she was proud to be working at Kidbrooke School in Greenwich, the first purpose-built comprehensive school, opened in 1954. She thought that the Bill was invidious and would have a more *malign* influence on the education system than even the legislation of the Thatcher years. She was particularly concerned about the nature of 'trust schools', though not specifically referred to as such in the Bill. She argued that, had it not been for Britain's comprehensive schools, Tony Blair could not hit the target of 50 per cent of young people going on to some form of higher education. There was no clear idea in the Bill of what actually constituted a 'good school'. Everything seemed to depend on the percentage of sixteen-year olds gaining at least five A*-C passes at GCSE.

Mike Davies, principal of Bishops Park College in Clacton, Essex, began contrasting contrary sets of government policies and initiatives and suggested that far from a government proclaiming itself as 'best when it is bold', it in fact lacked leadership and coherent direction. In particular it found difficulty in endorsing the key principles of every child having 'equal value', social justice and recognising and celebrating a wider range of talents – the essential ideas of the comprehensive school. Mike highlighted a recent survey comparing attitudes of primary and secondary pupils. Asked if they were learning at school, enjoyed it and found it interesting the survey showed dramatic differences between primary and secondary pupils. The percentages of primary pupils responding positively were 65 per cent and above; for secondary the percentages were 18 per cent and below. He said we must listen more to the student's voice and that in addressing the issue of 'school' being seen by many as irrelevant, the Bill was far too timid, failing to tackle core issues of curriculum reform, pedagogic renewal and assessment for all. Even this timidity, however, was pale compared to the lack of trust that many had in relation to the political will to pursue natural justice and give every child a really good school through robust measures that would make for balanced intakes – the real key to raising standards rather than reinforcing selection and stratification.

Melissa Benn said that she thought of herself as an angry parent who wanted a better education system. She was interested in the language of the current debate noticing an essential *blandness* in modern political language. Everyone mouthed the same, often meaningless, slogans: the need to end selection; every child matters, etc. The essential divide was between those who wanted to separate, select and divide and those who wanted all children to be educated together. There was also a conflict between the idea of public provision and the involvement of private enterprise in State education. There was enormous confusion about what constituted a 'good' and 'happy' school. There have been changes between the publication of the White Paper and that of the Bill, and the Bill is not quite what Tony Blair originally intended. We need to think about three principles:

- educating our children together
- endorsing the neighbourhood principle
- promoting a comprehensive curriculum.

Fiona Millar pointed out that there had always been *diversity* in the education system. In some respects there was now *less* choice, since most secondary schools had to observe the provisions of the National Curriculum. Choice of schools was an illusion. A recent *Which?* Survey showed that 95 per cent of parents simply wanted a good local community school for their children. Yet many parents could not get their children into the local school and many schools were using all forms of covert selection. The crucial debate now centred on *admissions*. We need to know what the Admissions Code will look like. We need to talk far more about the role of parents and the role of the community. It was crucial to keep up the pressure on the Government. There were enormous challenges ahead.

Second plenary session

Margaret Tulloch, Secretary of Comprehensive Future, welcomed participants to the afternoon session. She explained that the purpose of this session was to look at the proposals in the White Paper and the subsequent Education and Inspections Bill from two perspectives: that of local authorities, and national politicians. Margaret pointed out that the conference steering group had hoped this would be a cross-party debate. However, several members of the Conservative Party, including David Willetts, the Party's education spokesperson, had declined an invitation to attend.

Councillor Raj Chada, Leader of Camden Council, said that he was speaking from a Camden perspective. Camden shared the Government's concern to achieve the highest possible standards for all children. The Council already enjoyed excellent relations with its schools, and there was a strong collegiate atmosphere. It might be a good idea to have strong autonomous schools, but these needed to be brought together in a strong collaborative network. Why did the Government emphasize autonomy: what was Camden doing to hold schools back? Trust schools caused concern, as did the proliferation of faith schools. The Government's education proposals could affect the creation of social cohesion in a community.

Dr Robert Garnett, Chair of Confed and Director of Children's Services and Lifelong Learning for Hounslow, said that Confed welcomed the idea of 'personalisation'. It also welcomed the

emphasis on the role of parents in creating 'well-disciplined' schools. But there was also much to worry about. The Government had once claimed to be concerned about 'standards, not structures', but this no longer seemed to be true. The Bill was an attack on the idea of local democratic accountability and this could act to the detriment of the weakest and the most vulnerable in society. It was surely the local authority which was there to safeguard the interests of all children; only chaos could result from the proliferation of admissions authorities. And how are sponsors of trust schools and academies to be made accountable to parents? Under the new rules, the strong will flourish and the rest will suffer.

The talk by **David Chaytor MP** received a fairly hostile reception from some sections of the audience. This was largely because he believed that the Bill constituted a real improvement on the White Paper and that it would be further improved at the committee stage in the Commons. He also claimed that the publication of the White Paper had at least triggered a very constructive and exciting national debate. There were at least *two* crucial areas where things needed to be tightened up: (1) the future role of the local authorities; and (2) the whole question of admissions policy. It was totally unacceptable that the Secretary of State should have a veto over the creation of new 'community schools'. It needed to be recognised by opponents that new trust schools had few powers not currently available to foundation schools; but there needed to be clearer rules as to who could become sponsors. It was also important to argue that if we rule out the introduction of selection *in the future*, it becomes very difficult to defend *existing* selection procedures.

Sarah Teather MP, the newly appointed education spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, argued that there were 'positive' elements in the Bill, including the clauses on discipline and nutrition. The main problem with the Bill was that there was no clear sense of direction: was it about collaboration or competition? The Bill gave schools greater control over their admissions policies which would *entrench* social segregation, rather than deal with it. The one freedom that schools *did* want was over the curriculum, which the Bill said nothing about. Once again, there was the lack of a positive response to the Tomlinson proposals.

Final plenary session

In drawing the conference to a close, Chris Waterman summarised key issues arising from the morning discussion groups. Each of the ten groups had addressed the same question:

A Good Local School for Every Child: how do we achieve it; what changes are needed to the Education and Inspections Bill?

Chris selected the following 'sound bites' from reports of the morning discussions:

- oppose 'tripartite' approach to 14-19
- social cohesion, not diversity
- nurture the grass roots
- London is neither the centre nor the whole of the universe
- 'democracy not donations'
- schools aren't factories

- parents don't want choice – just a good local school
- don't give away the 'community silver' (to trusts acquired by schools)
- do faith schools help build communities?
- you can't trust trusts
- the sub-text is privatisation

How might we achieve it?

He then presented a selection of suggestions as to how *A Good Local School for Every Child* might be achieved:

- smaller local schools
- schools serving their community
- sort out admissions
- abolish selection
- unpack 'choice and diversity'
- talk to the students
- local systems, not individual schools
- 'no school is an island'
- 'benevolent' federations
- no majority interest on governing bodies
- involve the school workforce.

What changes are needed?

Suggestions made in the morning discussion groups included the following:

- replace diversity with social cohesion
- remove the Secretary of State's veto on community schools
- the admissions code – make it tough and make it stick
- abolish all selection
- take Black, minority and ethnic issues seriously
- remove 'foundation schools with a foundation' (trust schools).

What actions are required?

- local meetings reflecting local feeling
- make MPs feel the wind of change by:
 - sending emails
 - writing letters
 - attending surgeries
- preach to the unconverted!
- stand up and be counted.

Next steps

- a report of the conference would be available for inclusion on the websites of all participating organisations
- all conference participants would receive an email of the concluding powerpoint presentation
- the education alliance supporting the conference would held to ensure that lobbying on the Bill was coordinated effectively
- there would be continued cooperation between the partners involved in organising the conference
- the situation would be reviewed after the third reading of the Bill.

Afternoon Discussion Groups

Diversity in the secondary sector

Facilitated by the Centre for the Study of Comprehensive Schools (CSCS)

- 1 Diversity means a number of different things, eg:
 - a. diversity of providers (of schooling);
 - b. diversity (and enrichment) of experiences available to individual learners.
- 2 As regards diversity of providers there were contrasting views. As expressed by Steve Sinnott, CSCS *et al*/if new providers can offer enriched opportunities for learners, that may be acceptable **PROVIDED that appropriate systems of local (democratic accountability are in place** ensuring continuing representation of legitimate stakeholders (eg local people who pay taxes, parents, school staff).
- 3 Offering learners a diverse range of experiences, opportunities to vitalise education and help release talent is to be welcomed. These opportunities should be offered in the school but education is far more than school; we need to pursue the 'extended schooling' agenda, the notion of 'collegiates' (Brighouse: 'No one school can offer everything a pupil needs') and the CSCS concept of 'learning communities' where all institutions (not just formal providers of education but clubs, arts societies, businesses, etc) see themselves as having an educational function. Neighbourhood initiatives, SureStart etc, were cited as examples of additional diversity being a positive influence.
- 4 It was suggested that a competitive system of diverse **providers** had the effect of reducing diversity of experience for young people as all schools focused on the narrow requirements of the SAT, etc driven curriculum. The Bill threatens to further entrench conformity.
- 5 The term diversity has been corrupted for political ends to give the (spurious) **appearance** of variety, choice and enrichment. The specialist school initiative was cited as an example of diversity but largely without choice. Diversity is good **if it is accessible** to people. There is no evidence that diversity of providers will give greater choice/opportunity to individual users of the education system.

- 6 It was noted that government policy was perceived to derive from 'The Business of School Improvement' produced by the CBI which conceives of a competitive market environment which doesn't in fact exist. Will the new local commissioners seek to pursue that agenda at the expense of bad provision for **all**, especially the least privileged?
- 7 The issue of faith schools was raised (by a member of the Leicester Inter Faith Fellowship). While all members of that group pay tribute to the potential value of faith schools, eg adherence to social values, etc all were worried about polarisation and establishment of mono-cultural schools. The Leicester Mercury conducted a survey in which 81% opposed faith schools. If schools which promote sound, faith-based values exist they should offer the benefits to people of all faiths (including secular ideologies).
- 8 This issue of polarisation was pursued as a generic issue. Estelle Morris was quoted, '...competitive diversity creates failure, we must promote collaboration... we can't afford continuation of damage where schools are labelled failing – it's the children who suffer...'
- 9 A member from Milton Keynes said they had sought the opportunities offered by trust schools for more collaboration (in a selective LEA). There was sympathy for this individual problem but doubt expressed about the likelihood of trust schools enhancing collaboration generally.
- 10 A sub-theme of the whole day was 'marketisation and choice direction of travel'. With reference back to point (4) above, it was felt that the underlying continuing trend was towards further marketisation and abolishing comprehensive education.
- 11 Reference was made in point (1) b) to offering learners more choice and diversity: what a missed opportunity it had been to reject Tomlinson.
- 12 A teacher from Dunstable spoke of the benefits of collaboration, offering choice and diversity to pupils in middle schools in Dunstable (in circumstances where there was no sense of competition).
- 13 A teacher from Bolton, observing that there was no consultation with the profession, referred to a survey (by NUT?) in which 92 per cent of respondents (32 per cent return) said they'd be prepared to strike against the introduction of a favoured 'trust school'.
- 14 The final, concluding, point (Hewlett, Glatter *et al*) was that the agenda of reform had been hijacked by the Government and what one observed at today's conference (in regard to diversity and the wider agenda) was a reaction (to the Bill) which appeared simply negative: there was an appearance that those who objected to government proposals (caricatured as rebels/totem worshippers/Neanderthals/Maoists) had no idea about how the system could be improved other than harking back to some comprehensive ideal. Boxed into a corner merely defending the status quo they appeared to the Government conservative and clueless. It was incumbent on those who objected to the Bill to make the running, to produce a new reformist agenda which was forward-looking – which, for example, re-looked at the term 'diversity' and re-presented it as part of an imaginative set of reforms which would enrich education for the **learner** by improving what went on in the schools and outside the schools – through 'extended schooling', etc initiatives and getting local business on board along with faith groups, arts, cultural, sports organisations along the lines of genuine local collegiates/learning communities.

Underachieving groups

Facilitated by Human Scale Education (HSE) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT)

The group addressed the following question: What evidence do we have about the particular needs of underachieving groups, and to what extent do the proposals in the White Paper/Education and Inspections Bill address these needs?

Introducing the discussion, Human Scale Education (HSE) made the following main points:

- There is a good deal of information at national, local and school level about *gaps in attainment*, as measured by national tests and examinations. However, not enough is known about *underachievement*. How do we know that those with the highest attainments are not underachieving?
- The White Paper is based on two simplistic and highly contestable assumptions: pupils come in three distinct groups ('gifted and talented, struggling, or just average'); ability is limited (ie something that can be fulfilled).
- The proposals for raising standards set down in the White Paper are not based on thoroughly evaluated evidence of 'what works', and would not stand up to an EPPI-style scrutiny.

HSE's view is that a constructive alternative to current proposals would include: smaller classes, smaller schools and smaller-scale learning communities; a greater emphasis on the values of democracy fairness and respect; more opportunities for students' views to be listened to and acted upon; a stronger focus on the quality of relationships in schools; a more holistic approach to learning and teaching, with a thematic approach to the curriculum and more cross-curricular teaching. At a national level, there should be greater emphasis on early years (particularly pre-natal to age three); adult education (especially for adults with low levels of skill or formal education); the role of community; and more 'joined up' thinking.

In the United States small schools and small learning communities have done much to raise the performance of children of colour and children from deprived backgrounds who have traditionally underachieved. Such benefits spring from the close relationships between teacher and student that are made possible by smaller learning groups and the close attention that that can be given to individual learning needs.

A full copy of Human Scale Education's briefing paper on *Underachieving Groups* is on HSE's website: www.hse.org.uk

On behalf of the NUT, John Bangs drew attention to the relevance of international studies, and in particular the ongoing OECD **PISA project** (Programme for International Student Assessment).

Evidence from the PISA study demonstrates that:

- Students whose parents are working in less prestigious jobs and have lower levels of educational attainment tend to perform less well at school than students who have high

- levels of educational qualifications and are working in prestigious occupations (184 PISA 2000).
- Education policy in such countries might attempt to moderate the impact of socio-economic background on student performance by reducing the extent of segregation along socio-economic lines or by allocating resources to schools differentially (211 PISA 2000).
 - PISA also suggests that the effects of social clustering are longer in school systems with differentiated types of school than in systems in which the curriculum does not vary significantly between schools (Schleicher EI Journal).
 - Students tend to do better on average in countries with more autonomy, particularly in choices of courses and in budget allocation (177 PISA 2000).

The OECD's 2001 publication *What Schools for the Future?* proposed five possible scenarios.

Scenario 1: "Robust Bureaucratic School Systems"

- Strong bureaucratic and robust institutions.
- Vested interests resist fundamental change.
- Continuing problems of school image and resourcing.
- Possibilities for 'playing the system' are important in ensuring the continued support of schools by educated parents resulting in greater pressure for the exercise of choice.

Scenario 2: "Extending the Market Model"

- Widespread dissatisfaction leads to reshaping public funding and school systems.
- Rapid growth of demand-driven 'market currencies', indicators.
- Greater diversity of providers and professionals, greater inequality.

Scenario 3: "The Re-Schooling Scenarios"

- Schools as core social centres.
- High levels of public trust and funding.
- Schools as centres of community and social capital foundation.
- Greater organisational/professional diversity, greater social equity.

Scenario 4: "Schools as Focused Learning Organisations"

- High levels of public trust and funding
- Schools and teachers network widely in learning organisations.
- Strong equality and equality features.

Scenario 5: "Learner Networks and the Network Society"

- Widespread dissatisfaction with/rejection of organised school systems.
- Non-penal learning using ICT potential reflects the 'network society'.
- Communities of interest, potentially serious equality problems.

FINLAND – OECD COUNTRY-WIDE REVIEW 2001

- Network of interrelated factors.
- Focus on students' own interests and leisure activities.

- Rich range of learning opportunities provided by schools.
- Focus on parental support and involvement.
- Focus on social and cultural context of learning.
- Basic services – free warm meals, school health services for all students.
- Provision of social, psychological and pedagogical support for students with special needs.
- Extensive network of community libraries.
- High levels of teacher qualification.
- Prestige of literacy culture and education.
- High teacher expectations.
- Pedagogical experimentation.
- Reading campaigns.

SOLUTIONS

- The NUT's 'Bringing Down the Barriers' model.
- Recognition that schools help regenerate communities socially and economically.
- Comprehensive model-equality built into organisational model-baseline model of equitable funding and additional funding to meet additional need.
- High levels of teacher skills and knowledge continually renewed.
- Enhanced social and community environment within schools combined with autonomy.

ISSUES

- Do 'Good Local Schools' create ghettos by reflecting geographic and social disparities of wealth? Do we need social engineering to rectify that?
- Is there a solution based on economic regeneration focused on whole communities and financial and learning resources focussed on the most socially deprived schools?

Discussion

In the short discussion that followed, the following issues were raised:

- 1 The new proposals for 14-19 education in the Bill, and the division of the curriculum, where students on vocational 'pathways' learned through experience and did not have the same choice or opportunities as other students.
- 2 The institutional racism endemic in schools and the need to get this issue back on the public agenda. Early predictions on student ability are being lived out in a negative way for ethnic minorities.
- 3 A high proportion of students whose second language is English, Bangladeshi boys in particular, are not succeeding in terms of the Government's yardstick. Why isn't much more money being poured into these schools?
- 4 Serious doubt about the present Government and disappointment in their record to date.
- 5 Refugee children are very keen to learn but more resources are needed.
- 6 Some hope perhaps for low achievers with the current review of the Key Stage 3 national strategy which would allow a more flexible approach to the curriculum.

Special needs issues

Facilitated by Disability Equality in Education

- Does the Education Bill offer anything for students with special needs and their parents?
- Will children with SEN lose out even more if the school system becomes more fragmented?
- What will parents' rights be in the new disciplinary climate?

There are 1.4m disabled children in schools, of whom 14 per cent are in special schools. Inclusion is therefore an issue for mainstream. New 'trust' special schools would reverse progress made so far on inclusion. Loosening local authority control will have an adverse effect on the 20 per cent of mainstream schools which are currently making inclusion work. Disabled children should have the right to attend their local mainstream school.

The Bill gives teachers more power to tackle bad behaviour, including use of restraint. But it doesn't address causes: the Audit Commission found that 60 per cent of permanent exclusions from secondary schools and 80 per cent from primary involved children with SEN or disabilities.

This is a Bill of sanctions, rather than support. Parenting orders punish families with problems. Much better to take the Every Child Matters approach and offer appropriate support.

Schools should not be fining parents for their child's non-attendance as it will destroy relationships. Fining is a job for local authorities.

Statements are not funded equally across local authorities. Difficult to standardise as local authorities are at different levels of delegation.

Southwark will have six academies and two local authority schools. Some schools change to academy status to gain funding. Same may happen with trusts.

Some schools have succeeded in engaging students and doing away with restraint by personalising the curriculum and changing attitudes.

Schools with the correct attitude can be inclusive of even the most 'difficult' children. There should be more emphasis on expertise which will make inclusion work.

Would like to see guarantee in Bill of more teachers trained to deal with SEN. Also of continuity of support for students.

Parents need to know there is a good inclusive school for their child or they may feel they have to opt for a special school.

The exclusions process is becoming embedded into identifying children with SEN. The Bill refers directly to this and strengthens it. Should be amended to remove this. Academies exclude

disproportionately and can ignore Tribunal decisions. Bill should give local authorities stronger role to coordinate admissions, hard to place children etc.

The Bill is a wasted opportunity to spread good practice.

What will this mean for students?

Facilitated by the English Secondary Students' Association (ESSA)

In the short time that we had, we looked at student voice and student participation, different ways of infusing them within schools, and how they can be of benefit to students, teachers and the whole school community.

When people think of participation in schools, student councils are often the first, and sometimes the only thing brought to mind. This was discussed, and it was agreed that school councils can be very successful if certain criteria are met. For instance, representatives must be democratically elected, and they must have autonomy over the agenda and budget, etc.

However, school councils are just one of many ways of infusing a school environment with student voice. We discussed a few examples of good practice, including students on governing bodies and students interviewing prospective staff. A number of people in the group had used this in their schools, and commented on the students' ability to identify qualities that were sought after, and the positive impact this feedback has on the process of recruiting staff.

It was agreed that in order for these initiatives to be successful, it is very important that the outcomes that students come up with are given proper consideration and are not dismissed. Students are extremely perceptive and can easily tell if their opinions are only being asked for the sake of ticking off 'student voice' on their list of things to do.

The White Paper claimed, *"The number of school councils has increased substantially. Pupils can have a real say in how they learn and achieve and can be much more involved in how the school is run"*. However, these sentiments were not carried forward into the Education Bill. All the participants present agreed on the huge importance and benefits of student participation, and that there needs to be a systematic way of ensuring that student participation is an integral part of every school.

The group discussed the prospect of making student participation a statutory requirement. It was thought that legislation stating that the views of students must be taken into account when decisions are made in schools, would help to improve the level of involvement of students. Every school is different, and so schools should have the flexibility to choose how to implement student voice; in other words there is no single quick fix solution. There must be careful checks in place to ensure that schools adopt this in a non-tokenistic way, where teachers and students work together, and not separately to improve their schools.

Fair admissions and the Education Bill

Facilitated by Comprehensive Future and Stop the Eleven Plus

NB All admissions provisions in the Bill, eg banning interviews etc apply only to maintained schools ie not academies and CTCs (unless they are added by amendment).

Selection

Ministers continue to draw attention to the prohibition on selection by academic ability on the face of the Bill. However this merely repeats previous legislation in the School Standards and Framework Act. Unless there are changes existing selection will remain - ie fully selective local authorities, partially selective ones, partially academically selective schools and aptitude selection.

15 English Local Authorities have fully selective systems, Bexley, Bournemouth, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Kingston, Lincolnshire, Medway, Poole, Reading, Slough, Southend, Sutton, Torbay, Trafford and Wirral. Another 21 have some grammar schools with several having fully selective areas - Barnet, Birmingham, Bromley, Calderdale, Cumbria, Devon, Enfield, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kirklees, Lancashire, Liverpool, North Yorkshire, Plymouth, Redbridge, Stoke on Trent, Walsall, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Wolverhampton, The Wrekin.

Labour policy allows selective entry into grammar schools to remain unless a majority of local eligible parents vote for it to change or grammar school governing bodies decide to change their admission policies to admit children of all abilities. No governing bodies have done this. Before a ballot can be held 20% of eligible parents in the areas concerned must sign a petition calling for a ballot To require all of the 164 grammar schools in England to take children of all abilities would need 47 petitions and ballots.

As well as fully selective schools some schools designated as comprehensive select partially on ability. Schools are also allowed to select on aptitude, setting entry tests for admission. This is despite recommendations from the Education and Skills select committee to end the practice.

- So after nearly 9 years of Labour government more children face selective entry tests for secondary education than before. Selection by entry test is ending in Northern Ireland. Wales and Scotland are fully comprehensive. England will never have a fully comprehensive system under the present arrangements to end selection, through parental petitions and ballots and appeals to the adjudicator. There was strong support for the Comprehensive Future's aim that MPs should take the opportunity of this Bill to end all existing selection by ability and aptitude.

Schools as admission authorities

Despite concessions made before the Bill had a second reading, which require admission authorities to act in accordance with the a new Code of Practice on School Admissions, there will still be a situation that some schools will be able to set their own admissions criteria and decide if applicants meet them whereas other schools will not. Recent research (Professor Anne West LSE for the Greater London Authority) showed that own admission authorities were more likely to select on ability or aptitude, selection on aptitude is increasing and that some own admission authority

schools were using covert methods to select their intake eg questionnaires for parents and meetings to get round the ban on interviews.

Comprehensive Future wants to see:

- a menu of permitted oversubscription criteria on the face of the Bill such as distance to school, catchments areas, siblings etc
- Admission authorities having to comply with the Code of Practice
- local authorities administering admissions ie deciding if applicants meet the admission criteria, not the admission authority schools.

There was not time to discuss these aims in detail but there was support for them.

Admission Forums

Admission forums were introduced by the School Standards and Framework Act. The Bill will give them an increased role. They will have representation from all schools and will be empowered to report on admissions in their areas. There was doubt expressed that under current arrangements the forums would have the capability to carry out this work. There could be an administrative paralysis.

Comprehensive Future wants to see:

- The local authority having the duty to produce the report. Admissions forums should have a duty to accept (or reject), consider and act on it ie complaining to adjudicator.

There was agreement on this.

Banding

There was strong support from a few members of the group for banding to get a balanced intake. More expressed the view equally strongly that this means more tests for children and that if all the ways schools currently have of ensuring they have a favourable intake are removed most schools in London, for example, would have a more balanced intake. Schools which would still have a larger proportion of children needing more support should have more funding. We should go for localness not banding. If schools are big enough there will be a balanced intake. Parents mostly want a local school. In Lambeth children are sitting up to 10 tests. In Hackney academies are using banding in a way which excludes local children. Newham uses feeder schools, which seems to work well.

More types of banding will be lawful under the Bill and easier to introduce. This could mean there will be a chaotic banding free-for-all with the possibility of different policies in neighbouring schools ie banding on intake, across two schools, across an LEA or line with national levels.

Adjudicators

Kent is an example of the hierarchy created by selection as parents fight for places in the pecking order of schools. Recent decisions by adjudicators in Kent are supporting parents who want a grammar school education to have two choices, ie being able to have their second preference

elevated to a first preference if their child does not get into the grammar school and their second preferred school gives priority to parents putting the school as first preference. This is contrary to previous decisions. Although equal preference may be a fairer system in non selective areas, in selective areas parents who want an all ability school should not be ousted by parents for whom the school is second best to a selective school.

Parents have only very limited rights to complain to the adjudicator eg if their local school introduces banding or selection on aptitude.

- Comprehensive Future wants to see parents having a right to complain directly to the adjudicator. There was insufficient time to discuss this in detail but there were no objections to the idea.

Implications for School Governance

Facilitated by the National Governors' Association (NGA)

This group addressed the following questions:

- Will the stakeholder model of governance be undermined by the Bill?

There was some discussion about the true understanding of governing body responsibilities and how governance in general is understood. There was a considerable debate on the role of parents and whether the parent voice is being heard on governing bodies, and whether parents on governing bodies are properly representative. Also the challenge of engaging the disenfranchised was raised, particularly in relation to the first parent-sponsored school where some really creative (and time consuming) approaches have been made to parents. The point was made that the composition of the governing body has been changed over the past ten years showing that the government has the power to alter the governing body already. Generally the view was against parent councils as there are serious concerns that self interest will dominate. Despite flaws, it was felt that the stakeholder model is valuable and should be retained.

- Should one sector have the majority of votes on the governing body?

Sometimes parents and governors in general may be too close to the school to be properly challenging. Governing body self evaluation is revealing that some governing bodies are not acting strategically enough; nor are they challenging and supporting their schools rigorously enough. It may be that sponsors have the single minded vision necessary to move their school forward. However the issue of sponsor accountability was raised.

- How should schools be accountable to the communities that they serve?

Inevitably the demise of the Annual Report and Meeting for Parents came up, and some governing bodies are continuing with it in order to be accountable. Others are making representative governors available at other school, community and local authority events.

The role of the private sector in schools

Facilitated by the Campaign for State Education (CASE) and Alasdair Smith

Privatisation has an impact on other schools and leads to a loss of democracy.

Need a national Campaign against Academies - to bring them back into local authorities.

The evidence that Academies raise standards is not convincing.

They are more selective, exclude more children, are less democratic and only have one elected parent on the Governing Body the majority of whom are appointed by the sponsor. Sponsors have control of the Governing Body and the curriculum. Teachers work longer hours and pay and conditions have to be negotiated with each Academy - TUPE conditions have worsened.

The issues are likely to be the same for trust/foundation schools.

OfSTED may require a failing school to become an Academy or trust school or close.

Concerns about the 14-19 agenda and trust schools - may become more vocational.

Need to open up discussion about proliferation of faith schools - the Bill is likely to result in more faith schools; ULT (United Learning Trust) wants to take over more schools.

Private infiltration into education impacts on the power of local authorities.

There are important equity issues.

The Government's agenda is linked to the international trade agenda.

Trans-national capital - loss of exemption when not totally public - fears about Academies and trust schools.

Hackney has been hit by a juggernaut of five Academies who are creaming off children and there are no 'weapons' to use against them.

The sponsors main interest is money.

There has been a campaign in Brent against a second Academy - a demonstration was held on a sports field with caravans and tents, and in Islington there have been lobbies, meetings on estates where the Academy is to be sited, and bad publicity about the sponsors, occupation of their office in the City.

Parents are dissatisfied if they cannot get their children into the Academy.

In Ealing the principal of the Academy is a former NUT delegate.

Academies are intended for deprived areas but those already open are not always in deprived areas.

Blair's mission to support the underachieving is ideological not economic.

If 200 Academies are opened, all 'accountable' to the DfES, it will be the largest 'local authority'.

The Government promotes the view that 'private' is better than 'public'.

Sponsors are awarding contracts to their friends - and circumventing equal opportunity policies.

We need

- * a campaign to retain nationally agreed pay rates
- * a national campaign and demonstration
- * to counteract the myth that 'there is no alternative'.
- * to highlight the 'sleaze' factor.
- * to ask Parliamentary questions
- * to find out how many students are from the EU.
- * to argue for new schools to be subject to the Freedom of Information Act.
- * a national advertisement in the press.

Implications for primary schools

Facilitated by the National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)

- 1 A diminished local authority responsibility is not welcome. Primary schools wish to retain the network of support and exchange of information provided by authorities.
- 2 It is possible that sponsors will seek to establish authority over a secondary school together with a partner primary school or schools. Primaries wish to remain an integral part of community services. The Every Child Matters policy would be at risk.
- 3 Even where primary schools remain relatively untouched by sponsors the Bill could have the effect of divorcing secondary and primary education thus making transition between the sectors even more difficult to achieve.
- 4 The Bill would lead to a strengthening in the pecking order of local secondary schools [foundation considered superior to community]. This would result in increased pressure on primary schools to prepare children for the entrance requirements of foundation schools with consequent damage to the quality of primary education.
- 5 The development of a strong tradition of teacher/parent partnership in primary could be weakened by transfer to foundation schools where parent representation on governing bodies would be almost entirely in the gift of the sponsors.
- 6 The Bill would have the effect of increasing selection by aptitude. Such selection is considered a euphemism for selection by general ability and is strongly opposed. Primaries are comprehensive schools and their pupils should go on to fully comprehensive secondary schools.

Amendments for which we should campaign:

- (a) There should be more specific discrimination between primary and secondary schools (particularly on p.2 of the Bill).
- (b) An amendment should be proposed which would have the effect of abolishing selection by ability in the 10 per cent of local authorities which retain such selection.

Campaigning

In addition to alerting primary practitioners to the dangers implicit in the Bill the campaign should focus on Labour MPs. It is considered that a substantial majority of members would rally behind a clear move to abolish all selection by ability. Almost certainly this would lead to the withdrawal of Conservative support at the third reading resulting in the failure of the Bill.

Giving parents a voice

Facilitated by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA)

Overview

The White Paper promised “a school system shaped by parents”, with “real” choice and diversity. Will parents genuinely have more of a say, or are the White Paper’s proposals for parents’ councils an ill-considered attempt to restore a voice for parents in the context of its promise to expand parental rights?

Introduction

Annette Wiles (NCPTA):

- The Education White paper promised a school system shaped by parents by enabling every school to become a Trust, the continuation of Academies, 1 year for failing schools to improve, parents able to demand new schools, new vocational 14 – 19 education, lighter touch inspections etc.
- What will the Bill deliver for parents? There is no guarantee that demand for new provision will be met. Only Trust schools are required to have parent councils. Schools will only “need to have regard” to parents’ views. Termly information / agreements are already in place, as are home-school agreements. Parenting orders which can be used to criminalise parents are to be extended.
- There has been a failure to consult parents. The DfES did not consult parents prior to the Bill. This only happened in the 6 weeks after the Education Bill was published.
- There is a difference between “parental involvement” and “parent power”. The latter seems to be about only offering “high stakes” opportunities for parents (ie: parent councils) as opposed to a wide range of ways and support for all parents to get involved in their children’s education. Important to acknowledge that parents are not a homogeneous group.
- Evidence to say that the DfES has got it wrong on what parents want: NAO report (Jan 2006) highlighting that between 10 and 20 % of governor places remain vacant. PTAs most often cite lack of parent support as a key reason for their demise. *Which?* research shows that parents do not want choice, but want a good local school.
- There is currently no holistic approach to involving parents or empowering less articulate parents. Desforges emphasised the importance of engaging parents if schools are to achieve. This works if parents can support their children, but some don’t have the skills or confidence. Action needs to be taken to empower all parents to be involved in learning.
- The NCPTA’s recommendations include needing to have a shared understanding of what parental involvement means and innovation through “pathfinders” projects to achieve a multi dimensional approach which targets hard-to-reach parents. There is an argument for compulsion on schools going hand-in-hand with dedicated funding and training for school staff.

Judy Harrington (CASE)

- Outlined concerns about parents’ involvement in Academies, especially as these are outside the education law that operates for maintained schools e.g. on exclusions and SEN. Academies are only bound individually through their funding agreements. Judy handed out copies of a draft parents’ charter.

- There have been a number of government initiatives which have reduced the voice of parents and undermined accountability to parents e.g. only 1 parent governor in new Trust schools, removing the requirement for an annual report and AGM, no Ofsted meeting with parents.
- The Steer Report on Behaviour – the White Paper talks about implementing its key recommendations. It is excellent report with some 70 recommendations focussed on a large range of behavioural issues. The Bill has focussed on teachers' right to discipline and parenting orders – the latter are very punitive. One lost recommendation is for a Pupil Parent Support Worker in every school by September 2007. The White Paper only promises to increase the numbers of such workers. Surely this would be very good for parent involvement. Similarly, community worker posts are being funded through the New Deal for Communities. One such post is certainly working very well in Judy's local primary school.

Comments

- Engaging parents is often about ticking boxes on self evaluation forms, rather than meaningful engagement. Hilary Chamberlain said schools are becoming obsessed with portfolios under the new Self Evaluation Framework. She expressed concern that the focus is now on ticking boxes rather than about the quality of what happens.
- Involvement is also often about telling parents what is happening, not consulting with them.
- It is difficult involving some parents e.g those in disadvantaged secondary schools. Secondary school experience is very different from primary and most people who become involved in secondary schools are not frightened of them.
- Valerie Coultas talked about some of her experiences of being a parent at an Academy, including the principal not allowing a parents' evening. This has led her to develop a parents charter which she would like adopted as a universal minimum standard for the role of parents in education.
- Valerie also talked about her experience as a teacher in disadvantaged schools and how to get people involved. She has a memory that under the Inner London Education Authority there were more PTAs in secondary schools. Does this mean ILEA did more parent outreach? What made this more successful? A particular challenge is to get parents who feel scared involved.
- The issue of the unreliability of children in passing on information to parents was highlighted – pupil post is most unreliable in secondary schools. Valerie said form tutors do phone parents at home but staff need time for more personal contact with parents.
- The Bill doesn't address real issues of social disadvantage - "sink schools" with no money and no status. Often parents are not in a position to improve the situation. Middle class parents organise and can be effective fundraisers. Valerie said she can predict the size of a PTA from the proportion of children on Action+ and free school meals.
- Hilary Chamberlain had seen a Pupil Parent Support Worker post advertised (as part of a job share with a learning mentor role) but on low wages. The post holder needs to be able to engage with the local community but also have the salary level / clout to influence headteachers and governors. There is also a risk with parental involvement being assigned to one post. This needs to be a whole school initiative, with shared responsibility.
- Parents are needed on governing bodies, subcommittees etc.
- There is no LEA driven strategy around family learning meaning that this crucial means of engaging hard-to-reach parents remains ad hoc and is failing to maximise its potential.

- There is also a contradiction between the Bill and the Every Child Matters, disadvantage and extended school agenda. These need good local schools to make them work.
- There is a need for local education forums to discuss parental views. This needs to go beyond the current focus on outcomes and provide a real opportunity for parents to articulate a wider discourse about what makes for a good school e.g. creativity, socialisation, the curriculum.
- Judy explained how she thought the parent council model could help provide an opportunity for a wider discussion with parents, especially where this is achieved through a bottom-up approach as opposed to a model and structure being imposed upon parents by the school.

Recommendation

- A universal parents' charter of rights and good practice as the minimum standard to involve parents in education.
- A structure is needed that ensures parental views are heard and parental involvement is achieved (possibly through a parent council). Dedicated staff are also needed to support parental involvement.
- A model of how to engage hard-to-reach parents which has been researched and shown to work is essential. (Could Pupil Parent Support Workers have a role in this model?)

Implications for local authorities

Facilitated by the Children's Services Network (CSN, formerly TEN)

Report not yet available.