
A Better Future for our Schools

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ABSTRACT The purpose of 'A Better Future for our Schools' is to contribute to the debate about what a new government after 2015 should seek to achieve. It identifies 10 areas where current policies are clearly inadequate and damaging and identifies a range of actions to address each area. The manifesto is the outcome of debates organised by the Campaign for State Education and the Socialist Educational Association over the last 18 months. The authors are grateful for the contributions that have been made by many people during this process. The proposals are rooted in core values such as democracy, equality and inclusion as well as in the need to maximise the achievement of all our young people. Above all, they are designed to ensure that our schools prepare young people better for life in an increasingly complex and diverse society.

There are now less than two years before the United Kingdom's next general election. With a significant chance of a change of government in 2015, there is an urgent need to develop a new policy framework for such a government. In 2010, the current government came into office with a very clear agenda and with much of the groundwork done in opposition. We believe that if there is to be the radical change of direction that we need, then something of the same needs to happen in preparation for 2015.

It would be a profound mistake to launch into a radical reform process without first engaging in the battle of ideas. Many professionals may beg to differ but in the broader world of the media and public opinion, the neo-liberal analysis holds sway. That consensus needs to be challenged; we believe that to do so requires a coherent analysis of the issues facing the school system not just a further layer of tinkering.

The manifesto that follows is one attempt to do that. Its inspiration was the 'Picking up the Pieces' conference held in November 2012. At that event Tim Brighouse, Peter Mortimore, David Wolfe and Peter Downes presented their analyses of what's wrong and how it needs fixing.

We start from the premise that our school system needs to be underpinned by core values and principles, but also that its performance needs to be judged by evidence. As Ben Goldacre (2009, p. 9) wrote recently in a report published by the Department for Education, 'certainty can be a barrier to progress, especially when there are charismatic people, who claim they know what's best, even without good evidence'. [1] It would be hard to imagine a more accurate summary of current education policy.

We recognise that at one level, education is a profoundly political process. In a democratic society, it is right that the whole community has a stake in identifying what it wants to achieve through its schools. This is about our shared values as well as about the skills and knowledge that we think young people need to make sense of a rapidly changing world. But education is also a professional process. There is an urgent need to redefine the boundary between political and professional decision making.

The manifesto identifies ten key areas for action. Some are about the values we believe are central – values such as democracy and equality. Some are about outcomes – asking whether all our young people are fulfilling their potential and whether schools are adequately meeting the needs of society as a whole. Others are about practical processes such as the curriculum, assessment, admissions and what contribution they should make in terms of both core values and outcomes for young people. But taken together they propose a consistent and specific agenda for a future government.

This manifesto has been developed and is endorsed by the Campaign for State Education, the Socialist Educational Association and Information for School and College Governors. It is offered as one framework within which detailed policy debate can take place.

A website (<http://www.pickingupthepieces.org.uk>) has been set up where we hope to draw together some of that work. Contributions to the debate are welcome and can be sent to: views@pickingupthepieces.org.uk

A Better Future for Our Schools

1. How Should We Determine the Aims of Education?

There is no agreed set of aims for the education system against which achievement and policies can be judged. Consequently narrow measurable targets have dominated the debate over how well the system is performing. These have had the effect of distorting and narrowing what goes on in schools.

Actions

- 1.1. Develop a statement setting out the aims of education;
- 1.2. Ensure that this statement has broad support amongst all stakeholders and that it contains a commitment to inclusive education and full regard for the diversity of our population;

- 1.3. Identify how the achievement of these aims can be assessed at national and at school level;
- 1.4. Ensure that all aspects of education policy and practice contribute to the achievement of these aims;
- 1.5. Require schools to work with other providers of children's services so as to meet the needs of the whole child.

2. How Can We Make Education Accountable to Local Communities?

Opportunities for local communities to have any influence over their local school systems are being diminished and decision-making is being concentrated in the Department for Education (DfE). Academies and free schools are not locally accountable and key information is often unavailable because they are regarded as private institutions. The values of collaboration and partnership are being undermined.

Actions

- 2.1. Establish clear responsibilities for local authorities in planning, commissioning and monitoring all schools in their area;
- 2.2. Ensure that local communities are empowered to play an active role in the planning, commissioning and monitoring of education provision in their area;
- 2.3. Require all state funded schools and any linked trusts and sponsors, the DfE and all government agencies to be accountable for their decisions and for the use of public money by complying with freedom of information and publishing data of all kinds.

3. How Can We Ensure Fair Access for All Pupils?

In areas where there is selection by test, too many pupils are denied opportunities with the result that overall attainment is lower than it should be. Moreover admission arrangements are becoming ever more complex as more schools set their individual criteria. This makes it harder for parents to make informed choices and in some cases prevents them getting access to their local school. There is evidence that fair access procedures are breaking down with damaging effects on the education of vulnerable pupils. There is a serious shortage of school places, currently in primary, but soon in secondary as well.

Actions

- 3.1. End immediately the system of partial selection by 'aptitude' and require local authorities to end all selection by testing;
- 3.2. Revise the admissions code with the aims of ensuring more consistent and transparent admissions criteria and reducing socio-economic segregation;

- 3.3. Require all schools to publish background information on both applicants and pupils admitted as proposed by the Royal Society of Arts Academies Commission;
- 3.4. Ensure that all schools co-operate in fair access arrangements to ensure that the needs of excluded and vulnerable pupils are met in an equitable way;
- 3.5. Place a duty on all schools to collaborate in meeting the needs of all pupils (for example by ensuring access to the full range of 14 to 19 courses) and in enabling teachers to share best practice;
- 3.6. Make local authorities responsible for planning to meet the shortage of places (including for the full range of special educational needs) and give them the powers and resources needed to do this effectively;
- 3.7. Allocate capital resources according to the need for school places and for the refurbishment of existing schools.

4. How Should We Tackle Underachievement?

Many young people achieve excellent results in schools in all parts of the country. But compared to other school systems where there is less social and economic segregation, more young people fail to achieve the standards needed to succeed in adult life. This underachievement is particularly to be found amongst some ethnic groups (including some white pupils), boys and children from poorer families. These gaps were narrowing but are now likely to be reinforced by increasing poverty, worsening socio-economic segregation and the narrowing of the curriculum and of approaches to assessment.

Actions

- 4.1. Ensure that all children have access to high quality, free early years provision and re-establish the network of Sure Start centres;
- 4.2. Reduce the current concentration of children from poorer homes in particular schools;
- 4.3. Ensure that pupils falling behind have the personal support needed to catch up;
- 4.4. Build on the example of the London and City Challenges to help raise attainment and narrow achievement gaps in other areas;
- 4.5. Redesign published performance data so that it recognises the achievements of all pupils, promotes high standards in all areas of the curriculum, is not based on narrow testing and takes account of pupils' starting points;
- 4.6. Ensure that all effective schools make an appropriate contribution to system wide improvement, for example through partnerships with other schools or by leading professional development in their area;
- 4.7. Require local authorities to take the lead in supporting and intervening in schools where standards are unacceptable;

- 4.8. Reverse the policy of narrowing the curriculum and ensure that the curriculum and the examination system are designed to motivate and support children and young people at risk of underachievement;
- 4.9. Improve the quality of teaching (see section 5).

5. How Can We Ensure that All Teaching is Good?

In high-achieving countries, teaching is a high status profession. Initial Teacher Education is rigorous and challenging, sometimes to Masters level. There is clear evidence that current policies are alienating a very high proportion of teachers. Schools are subjected to a punitive accountability regime. Structures supporting professional development have collapsed in many areas. Scope for professional innovation has been reduced and a culture of conformity is being imposed.

Actions

- 5.1. Restore the independence of Her Majesty's Inspectorate;
- 5.2. Recognise that pedagogy is a professional issue and establish structures for the professional dissemination of research findings and best practice;
- 5.3. Ensure that teaching is seen as a high status profession with high academic and professional expectations of all new entrants, including qualified teacher status;
- 5.4. Enable all teachers to have access to high quality professional development including opportunities for school to school collaboration;
- 5.5. Restore a working partnership with trade unions and re-establish a national framework for pay and working conditions.

6. How Can We Provide a Broad, Balanced and Challenging Curriculum?

Current plans for the curriculum are incoherent. The National Curriculum no longer applies to many schools. The government's emerging curriculum is not based on any significant statement of aims and is largely confined to factual content. It is not being planned as a connected whole, varies wildly in respect of the level of prescription and is based largely on ministers' views rather than on a professional and stakeholder consensus.

Actions

Revise the National Curriculum so that it:

- 6.1. Addresses all the aims of education (as required by section 1 above);
- 6.2. Provides an outline entitlement for all children and young people;
- 6.3. Provides a coherent curriculum from the early years to post 16;

- 6.4. Allows substantial scope for local area and school level curriculum planning and development;
- 6.5. Applies to all state funded schools;
- 6.6. Removes the distortion caused by the English Baccalaureate and restores the place of artistic, technical, practical and physical education in the overall curriculum at least up to age 16;
- 6.7. Adequately meets the needs of pupils of all abilities and backgrounds and takes full account of the range of learning difficulties and disabilities.

Ensure that this curriculum:

- 6.8. Is supported by a comprehensive and independent information, advice and guidance service;
- 6.9. Leads on to a comprehensive programme of post school opportunities.

7. How Should We Assess Progress by Pupils and Schools?

The volume of high stakes testing has already led to a narrowing of both the content of the curriculum and approaches to teaching. Current planned changes to the examination system will worsen this. This is because of the over-riding focus on the English Baccalaureate subjects and the narrow range of assessment techniques to be used. Moreover the proposed implementation process and timetable is widely considered to represent a substantial risk.

Actions

- 7.1. Ensure that, as the participation age is raised to 18, a coherent 14 to 19 phase is planned that offers all young people appropriate recognition of their educational achievement;
- 7.2. Require all qualifications to use assessment techniques which enable young people to demonstrate a wide range of skills and qualities as well as knowledge and are accessible to those with specific learning difficulties;
- 7.3. Ensure that there are a broad range of qualifications, academic, practical and vocational, which enable young people to access the full range of post school opportunities;
- 7.4. Reduce the volume and cost of examinations especially at age 16;
- 7.5. End national external testing in primary schools and separate diagnostic assessment of pupils from the assessment of school effectiveness.

8. How Can We Make Best Use of Limited Resources?

The Public Accounts Committee has identified a huge and unjustified overspend on the academies programme. Current policies are also leading to the creation of school places where there is no shortage with a consequent waste of both capital and revenue. As there is now no effective oversight of many schools, there is a significant and growing risk of financial mismanagement and even

fraud. As the number of academies increases, centralised monitoring through the Education Funding Agency will become increasingly crude and ineffective.

Actions

- 8.1. Require local authorities to monitor financial management in all state funded schools;
- 8.2. Prevent any organisation from taking a profit from the management of state funded schools;
- 8.3. Require all trusts and sponsors to publish full details of their activities and their financial affairs as is normally required of public bodies;
- 8.4. Ensure that new school places are only created where there is a clear demand for them;
- 8.5. Ensure that all private training providers maintain high standards of both teaching and learning and financial management.

9. How Can We Ensure Schools are Treated Equally?

There is both a practical and a perceived inequality between schools. Too many schools openly practice complete or partial academic selection and others find ways of covertly manipulating their intakes. Academies and free schools have been funded more generously than other schools. There is a widespread perception of a hierarchy of schools which distorts intakes and leads to an unacceptable level of socio-economic segregation. International research from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has identified this as one factor that contributes to higher levels of underachievement.

Actions

- 9.1. Place all publicly funded schools within a common administrative and legal framework;
- 9.2. Give all schools the same freedoms and responsibilities;
- 9.3. Reform admissions procedures and end selection;
- 9.4. Revise the school funding rules so as to ensure that all schools are funded on the same basis;
- 9.5. Restore the right of local areas to determine their local funding formulae.

10. How Can We Stop Education being a Political Football?

A democratic and decentralised structure of education was established in 1944 so as to ensure that power to control ideas, culture and thinking were not concentrated in one person's hands. However, education has become increasingly politicised. Too much control over curriculum and pedagogy is

now concentrated in the hands of the Secretary of State, resulting in unacceptable centralisation.

Actions

10.1. Establish an independent Office for Educational Improvement with the responsibility for identifying and sharing best practice and promoting evidence-based policy making;

10.2. Establish structures at arm's length from ministers for the detailed development and management of the curriculum and examinations.

Note

[1] <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/b/ben%20goldacre%20paper.pdf>)

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