

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT STATE EDUCATION?

A manifesto for common sense

Introduction: In stark contrast with the independent sector which, because it is accountable to its ‘consumers’, has retained its desirable reputation, the state education system has been systematically undermined over recent years by the politicians and bureaucrats who control it. Serious consequences are inevitable, unless the decline in standards in the state system is reversed. In general terms, education should be a joint enterprise between parents and teachers (and, of course, the young person concerned): parents should be responsible for their child’s attitudes and values, and teachers for the professional teaching of subjects. Confusion and conflict about values, and who is responsible for what, damages young people. Listed below are some recommendations for improvement.

1) Educational philosophies: There are two main educational philosophies, which are highly relevant and need to be understood. The traditional philosophy advocates that education is the transference of factual knowledge (the cognitive areas) and a value-system (the affective areas) from one generation to the next. Progressives downgrade factual knowledge (the cognitive) in favour of using education to change attitudes and values (the affective) in order to produce a new, politically correct society.¹

Recommendation: All schools, colleges and universities should clearly state their philosophical ethos in their prospectuses.

2) Purpose: Most teachers are now confused about their primary purpose. They are unsure whether they are expert, professional educators/teachers or social workers/pseudo-parents. It is often claimed by progressives that their opponents do not understand ‘modern’ education. That may be true: those of a more traditional disposition do not always realise how progressive the education system has become. But can any enterprise succeed if those involved are unsure of what they are supposed to be doing?

Recommendation: The primary purpose of all educational institutions should be clearly stated and published, as should their record of performance in tests or exams over a 3-year period.

3) Standards: Academic standards should be set from the top (ie university-level) down, but implemented from the bottom (ie primary-level) up. Each child’s academic achievement should be pushed to the highest possible levels from his or her first days in school – without firm foundations, such as the ability to read well from the age of 5 or 6, higher levels of achievement are practically impossible. Standards in vocational education should be set by employers, who should have a veto on inadequate taxpayer-funded courses and qualifications.

Recommendation: Two small committees, one dominated by respected academics and the other by successful employers, should be set up to consider standards and how to improve them. The chairmen of these committees could be appointed by the education secretary, but only individuals who are on record for defending standards should be eligible for membership.

4) Choice: The state system favours ‘informed’ choice for children, but the Human Right of parents to have their child educated in accordance with their own religious and philosophical convictions is ignored. Yet choice and competition between different types of school are essential for a free society and an effective education system. Many grammar schools have 10 or more applicants to take their voluntary 11-plus exam for each available place. Yet, none of the main political parties supports grammar schools and there are not even enough places available for all the children who pass the test.² In the real world, anyone seeking to undermine the best-performing sections of an enterprise (such as grammar and high-performing comprehensive schools) and to excuse the under-performers, as ministers now do, would probably be dismissed for professional incompetence on the grounds of his or her failure to discriminate between good and bad practice. Why not in education?

Recommendation: Wherever possible, parents and their children should have the choice of independent or state schools, selective or comprehensive schools, single-sex or co-educational

schools, faith or secular schools, traditional or progressive schools. Additional choice is welcome, but new schools such as academies should only be opened where parents clearly want them. They should not be allowed to undermine other effective schools in the neighbourhood. 'Free schools', if they come to fruition, should be genuinely free from restraints, not fundamentally restricted as currently proposed.

5) Accountability: State schools are only minimally accountable. The politicians and bureaucrats who control the system are also unaccountable. School performance tables offer some accountability, but the political requirement to claim success and the 'all must have prizes' ethos mean that wide variations in performance are often hidden.

Recommendation: All educational institutions, especially their heads/principals/governors should be directly accountable to their 'consumers' (ie parents/pupils/students). Making all state schools and colleges financially dependent on vouchers passed to them by their 'consumers' (see below) would greatly enhance accountability.

6) Admissions: There are too few primary and secondary places in good schools to satisfy parental demand. Bureaucratic admissions codes, which seek to manipulate admissions to promote social justice, have been disastrous. It does not make sense to compel good schools and universities to accept sub-standard applicants as part of the class war – or as a means of social engineering.

Recommendation: All educational institutions, from primary schools to universities, should have the freedom to set their own admissions criteria and the freedom to accept or reject applicants at their discretion.

7) Inspections: With inspection reports emasculated because they are all written in accordance with a set formula, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), which currently costs taxpayers around £222m a year, is wasteful and largely ineffective. It has, moreover, become a promoter of progressive ideology.

Recommendation: Ofsted should be abolished or radically slimmed down in favour of a small, totally independent, organisation which truly represents the interests of parents and consumers. The inspectorate should be limited to a small group of people with genuine educational expertise and access to a range of inspectors with sound knowledge and experience. An inspection should automatically be triggered if the test or exam performance of an institution is seriously below average. Otherwise, schools and other educational institutions should only be inspected if significant numbers of their clientele request an inspection. All inspections (which need not be expensive) should be paid for by the relevant institution. Inspectors should unambiguously recommend the closure of ineffective schools and colleges.

8) Discipline: Effective learning cannot take place without firm discipline. Responsible adults should not surrender their authority to children – power currently rests with the delinquents and they know it. Good discipline cannot exist without a clear understanding that actions usually have consequences.

Recommendation: All schools should guarantee firm discipline by ensuring that bad behaviour always results in meaningful punishment, including permanent exclusion. Both teachers and parents must be free to administer whatever sanctions against bad behaviour they judge necessary in order to restore discipline and order.

9) Teacher training: The state's control of teacher training has permitted the universal enforcement of progressive ideology at the expense of in-depth subject knowledge. The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), which costs taxpayers around £777m annually (£590m of which goes on initial teacher training), is not providing a satisfactory service.

Recommendation: The TDA should be closed down. So-called Qualified Teacher Status and other restrictions on teacher employment should be removed and institutions should be allowed to employ anyone as a teacher, providing the applicant has the qualifications and experience (and passes

criminal record checks) required by the head/principal and governors. Practical teaching skills such as efficient class management should be acquired in school.

10) Teacher professionalism: Effective teachers are the most important resource in the system. Yet the destruction of the professional standing of teachers by ideologically driven politicians and teacher training colleges has caused a crisis in recruitment and retention. There is now a serious shortage of competent heads and subject teachers. Between 30% and 50% of new teachers now leave the profession within five years of starting.³

Recommendation: Teaching should be an evidence-based profession. Teachers should be expert, professional teachers of subject knowledge. They should not be expected to be social workers, pseudo-parents or political commissars. The number of competent heads should be increased by giving them greater autonomy and removing unnecessary bureaucratic burdens.

11) National testing: Although it provides invaluable information, national testing has become too bureaucratic, complicated and expensive.

Recommendation: National testing of 7-year-olds should be limited to short tests of reading, writing and arithmetic. Compulsory reading tests should provide a comparison between each child's chronological age and his or her 'reading age'. The average results for all state primary schools should be published. National testing of 11-year-olds should include simple testing of basic English and maths plus, perhaps a short general knowledge paper requiring basic knowledge of science, geography, history etc. The average results achieved by each school should continue to be published. To ensure accountability in the primary sector, these tests should be carried out at the end of the final year in primary school. They should be administered and marked by secondary school teachers, who should receive additional payment for their services.

12) Exams: The exam boards have failed to maintain standards and lost the confidence of their 'consumers'. As they are market driven, but in a closed market, they have a propensity to 'dumb-down' in order to attract more clients. But having a single (nationalised) exam board seems dangerous. It does not make sense that a vocational qualification in cake decoration should carry more points than GCSE physics; or that a 16-plus qualification in Information & Communication Technology (ICT) should be worth 4 times as much as an academic GCSE.

Recommendation: Honest competition between exam boards should be encouraged, but their standards for (academic) 16-plus and A-level exams should be set by respected universities. Academic staff with a proven record of defending standards should regularly monitor academic exam standards and publicly report their findings. Overall control of standards in vocational education should be the responsibility of respected employers. The exam system should not be distorted to allow vocational qualifications to carry more weight than academic qualifications. All schools should have the choice of using O-levels (which are still produced in this country but only for overseas candidates), International GCSEs, ordinary GCSEs, or diplomas if they remain as an option. There should also be a general requirement that pupils/students must achieve the lower educational qualification in a subject before they are allowed to move up to the higher levels in that subject. Proposals to subsume GCSEs and A-levels into a diploma should be rejected as another attack on academic standards. The way to solve the problem of falling confidence in the exam system is to raise the standard of existing exams, not to replace them with a complicated, unproven system.

13) Statistics: All sectors of state education withhold and manipulate statistics for political purposes.

Recommendation: School and college performance tables should be simplified. For example, performance tables for 16-year-olds should show 'up front' the percentage in each school achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs including English and maths. The type of school (whether independent or state-funded, grammar, secondary modern or comprehensive) should also be shown 'up front' to enable clear comparisons. The average performance of all state schools and colleges in each local authority area should also be published, so local councillors and officials can be held to account. Statistical dishonesty should be seen and exposed for what it is – as should the use of unnecessary educational

jargon. Whenever ‘weighted’ or manipulated statistics are used or published, the ‘raw’ figures should always be published alongside.

14) Value-Added: The current ‘value-added’ system of monitoring school performance is designed to disguise both success and failure. Pupils who perform extremely well in the early stages of their education are unable to ‘add value’ at the age of 16-plus and bureaucratic estimates of free school meal take-up and other social disadvantage are used to ‘level-out’ and justify poor performance.

Recommendation: If value-added performance tables are to continue, the methodology must be revised to allow both high and low levels of performance to be identified properly and honestly.

14) Early years: The state has already demonstrated that it cannot provide effective education for 5 to 16 year-olds, so it is nonsense to extend the age range downwards (or upwards). The Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (which requires 69 boxes to be ticked for each child) should be optional not compulsory. Attempts to enforce it in independent schools are a direct attack on freedom.

Recommendation: Parents (especially mothers) who are prepared to stay at home to look after their young children should be given tax breaks or other inducements to do so. Politicians should encourage responsible parenthood, not bribe responsible parents to surrender the rearing of their children to the state.

15) Primary education: Despite the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, too many primary schools are failing to equip their pupils with firm foundations on which to build the rest of their education. The teaching of reading may have improved slightly over recent years, but it is still ineffective in too many schools.

Recommendation: Primary children should receive a solid grounding in reading, writing and arithmetic, plus all the major subjects before they move up into secondary schools. All children should be taught to read by concentrating on systematic, synthetic phonics-first. Research shows that this method works. Furthermore, it eliminates unequal performance between boys and girls.⁴

16) Secondary education: Academies and many so-called specialist (secondary) schools have been created to give parents the illusion of choice without the reality. Any form of additional choice is welcome, but what is needed is genuine choice between different systems (such as independent and state-funded, selective and non-selective) and between honestly different institutions.

Recommendation: Schools should be given full autonomy and be allowed to specialise or diversify to meet the requirements of their ‘consumers’. They should not need bribing with taxpayers’ money to do so. For instance, whether to offer education for 11-16 year-olds or 11-18 year olds (ie have sixth forms) should be decided by schools, not bureaucrats.

17) Special Needs: When the proportion of pupils with genuine special needs is probably only around 5%, the educational establishment’s acceptance of 20% or more is intolerable.⁵

Recommendation: Immediate steps should be taken to reduce the artificially high percentage of ‘special needs’ by ensuring that only those that are genuine are specified – and properly catered for. The widespread practice of exaggerating special needs to gain additional funding should be halted.

18) Further and Higher Education: Between 1998-99 and 2007-08, annual expenditure centred around Further Education grew from £4.3bn to £10.1bn. Over the same period, expenditure on Higher Education increased from under £6bn to £9.4bn.⁶ Yet FE and HE lecturers complain that their incoming students lack basic knowledge and need remedial lessons. Employers make similar complaints about those who apply for jobs.

Recommendation: Further and Higher Education should be financed partly by taxpayer-funded vouchers and partly by tuition fees. Access should only be available to those who are properly qualified at the lower levels and ‘open access’/‘inclusion’ policies at taxpayers’ expense should cease.

19) DCSF: The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) does not provide a satisfactory service or value for money. Considering the size of its overall budget (approaching £80bn a year), it is a grossly inefficient Department with its own ideological agenda. For example, in January 2003, in answer to a Parliamentary Question about Departmental grants to outside bodies, Charles Clarke produced a 75-page list of organisations, each page listing around 45 bodies receiving grants above £20,000 in 2001-02. No individual amounts were listed and the education secretary admitted that the Department's accounting system was unable to distinguish between voluntary grants to outside bodies and contractual payments for goods or services supplied.⁷ The *Departmental Report* for the financial year 2005-06 showed the Department had set aside £1.5bn for unidentified 'Miscellaneous Programmes'. Since then, 'Miscellaneous Programmes' have not even been recorded in the accounts.

Recommendation: The DCSF should be replaced by a small Department for Education employing no more than 100 staff to support education ministers and the system generally.

20) Local authorities: England's 150 Local (Education) Authorities (LAs) spend billions of pounds each year on central services, many of which are damaging, unnecessary and duplicated elsewhere.

Recommendation: Most of this money should be re-directed to front-line services. LAs should have a statutory responsibility to ensure places are available for any child who cannot find a place directly with a school, for all children who have been excluded from school, and for those who have genuine, quantified special needs. Such places should only be provided directly by LAs when it is impossible to find a charitable or private-sector provider. Any other services LAs seek to provide, which are educational rather than social, should be permitted only if individual institutions pay for them directly.

21) Quangos: Educational quangos consume billions of pounds of taxpayers' money which should be directed towards the 'front-line'. As with all bureaucracies, quangos keep growing and offer poor value for money.⁸

Recommendation: There should be a review of all existing educational quangos. Most should be abolished and any essential duties or responsibilities should be moved to the education department or elsewhere.

22) Funding: In 2003, ICM surveyed a cross section of 'swing' voters for the Reform think tank. People were asked if they would like to be free to use the money the government spends on education (then about £5,000 per year per child) to send their child to any school of their choice, including private schools for which they would be allowed to top-up the vouchers. Of those polled, 55 per cent described the proposal as a 'good idea' and only 29 per cent rejected it. Among members of political parties, 67 per cent of Conservatives and 54 per cent of Labour supporters favoured the proposal. In 2004, the Centre for Policy Studies calculated that, in 2007-08, total average annual spending per pupil in the state system would be £7,366.⁹ That figure was probably an under-estimate, but accounting procedures are now so sloppy, the true figure cannot be calculated. Nevertheless, if the £7,366 average is divided between younger and older pupils, with primary pupils costed at 0.9 times the average and secondary pupils costed at 1.1 times the average, the amounts are significant: around £6,630 per primary pupil and £8,100 per secondary pupil. These amounts, of course, are similar to the fees charged by many independent day-schools.

Recommendation: All the taxpayers' money currently spent on school-level education should be given directly to parents in the form of an annual passport/voucher to spend at the state or independent school of their choice. Parents willing and able voluntarily to top up their vouchers should be free to do so. Similar facilities should be extended to FE and HE as soon as possible.

23) Subjects: The National Curriculum has now become so distorted, it no longer fulfils the purpose for which it was intended.¹⁰ The bodies responsible have failed properly to prescribe the content required in each subject for each year-group. And they have meekly acceded to political requirements to promote progressivism. One way forward would be to publish the best available curricula used by

high-performing schools, and to use these as models for the rest. In addition, the quality and provision of vocational subject options should be upgraded. The following minimal improvements are also required:

English: English language and literature should be more clearly separated, with different exams for each. Language should concentrate on grammar, spelling, punctuation etc. Literature should give due importance to the classics, which are part of our cultural heritage.

Maths: Emphasis should be on providing a solid grounding in basic arithmetic (especially mental arithmetic), algebra and geometry. The use of calculators in primary schools should be halted.

Science: Moves to promote Combined Science at the expense of separate Biology, Chemistry and Physics should be halted and reversed.

Geography: Should place more emphasis on physical geography, and less on environmentalism and sociological studies.

History: Should emphasise knowledge, not skills. Up to age 16-plus, it should cover the broad sweep of British history, examining Britain's place in the world and the main cultural influences at work as Britain has evolved. Chronological understanding should be emphasised. After 16-plus exams, particular periods could be studied in greater depth.

Modern Foreign Languages: Up to the age of 16, almost all pupils should study at least one modern foreign language. (Latin should be welcomed as an additional option.) The importance of learning vocabulary, grammar and doing accurate written translation from one language to another should be emphasised.

Art: Along with practical drawing and painting etc, all children should be introduced to classical art and architecture as part of their cultural education.

Music: All pupils should be given the opportunity to sing and play a musical instrument. Pupils should also be introduced to some light classical music.

PE/games: Serious PE lessons and competitive games and sports should be encouraged and schools should not be allowed to sell off land or playing fields.

RE: As required by law, all pupils should have the opportunity to study honest Religious Education (not just a value-free sociological study of comparative religions). They should also have the opportunity to participate in a daily Act of Worship according to the tenets of their own faith.¹¹ Parental rights of withdrawal should be upheld.

PSHEC: Personal, Social, Health Education and Citizenship lessons are concerned with values, so they infringe on the rights of parents. PSHEC includes sex education, drug education, socialisation and political education. Yet along with more sex education in schools, there has been a massive increase in sexually transmitted diseases among young people. Since 1998, an increase in drug education has been accompanied by a massive increase in the number of young people experimenting with drugs. This is because current lessons are based on 'harm reduction' rather than prevention; plus a widespread failure to provide young people with unbiased factual evidence on which to make their 'informed choices'. Citizenship lessons, too, promote politically correct values, which many parents and young people find objectionable. These areas of the curriculum are contentious and distract from efforts to raise standards. They should, therefore, be discouraged. If they are offered, they should carry full parental rights of withdrawal, as with RE.

24) Whistleblowers: Teachers know that if they speak out publicly against the 'progressive' ethos of the system, they may be persecuted or lose their jobs. This cannot be good for them or their pupils.

Recommendation: A confidential telephone helpline or website should be set up to allow teachers and others to express their concerns, knowing that, if their concerns are genuine, they will be protected and their worries will be properly and impartially investigated, and dealt with.

Conclusion: It is often remarked that the requirements, quality and standard of national tests and exams steer the curriculum and many other aspects of education. If standards are indeed rising, as most politicians and the educational establishment claim, why are the marks required to achieve particular levels and grades reduced year after year? Raising the standard and quality of tests and exams should be one of the first priorities. Others should include encouraging fully autonomous educational institutions, higher standards generally, and more parental choice. Above all, the aim should be to remove political ideology and the influence of politics from the state education system.

/September 2009.

¹ See, for example, *All Must Have Prizes* by Melanie Phillips, Little Brown, 1996 and *A Desolation of Learning: Is This the Education Our Children Deserve?* by Chris Woodhead, Pencil Sharp, 2009. Also, www.melaniephillips.com/articles.

² In 2007, Kent had 1,232 out-of-county applicants to take the voluntary 11-plus test for a place in one of its grammar schools. In 2009, there were 1,810 out-of-county applicants – an increase of almost 50% in two years. Of the 924 out-of-county applicants who 'passed' the test, only 268 could be offered a place in a grammar school. So in this one area of the country, the system denied 656 bright children the opportunity to attend the school of their choice.

³ *Comparing Standards: Teaching the Teachers* edited by Sheila Lawlor, Politeia, 2004 and *Teachers Matter* edited by Sheila Lawlor, Politeia, 2009 (www.politeia.co.uk).

⁴ *The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: a seven year longitudinal study* by Professor Rhona Johnston and Dr Joyce Watson, Scottish Office, 2005 (www.scotland.gov.uk). This showed that at the age of 11, children taught synthetic phonics-first had reading ages more than 3 years ahead of their peers taught in accordance with the National Literacy Strategy.

⁵ 'The teachers' plot to make our children into failures' by Minette Marrin, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1998 and *What Are Special Educational Needs?* by John Marks, Centre for Policy Studies, 2000 (www.cps.org.uk).

⁶ *Departmental Report 2007*, DCSF, The Stationery Office, 2007.

⁷ *Hansard*, 23 January 2003.

⁸ See, for example, *School quangos: An agenda for abolition and reform* by Tom Burkard and Sam Talbot Rice, Centre for Policy Studies, 2009 (www.cps.org.uk).

⁹ *Better Schools and Hospitals* by Norman Blackwell, Centre for Policy Studies, 2004 (www.cps.org.uk).

¹⁰ *The Corruption of the Curriculum* edited by Robert Whelan, Civitas, 2007 (www.civitas.org.uk).

¹¹ *Whatever Happened to Religious Education* by Penny Thompson, Lutterworth Press, 2004.