

News and views from the
Campaign for State Education

AGM – addressing the system’s failings

This year’s Annual Conference, held on Saturday 21 November, had as its theme “Advancing Education in an Unequal Society: A Way out of Recession?”

Andy Green, Professor of Comparative Social Science at the Institute of Education and Director of the Research Centre on Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, gave the keynote address: a masterly account of the present situation as it affected young people, who had been badly served by the divisive “Anglo-Saxon” model of capitalism. He also put forward a number of urgently needed reforms, chief among which were:

- the provision of universal, free pre-school care
- the introduction of comprehensive schools for children from 5 to 16
- the organisation of catchment areas so that these schools have a balanced intake
- the replacement of sixth forms by schools catering for 15- to 19-year-olds.

To achieve these reforms, he argued, we must abandon the divisive “choice and diversity” agenda and abolish subsidies to private schools.

Brett Wigdortz is CEO of Teach First, a charity that recruits high-flying graduates to work in inner-city schools and which is now one of the top five graduate recruitment organisations in the UK. Brett produced some recent research by the McKinsey Corporation which clearly shows that inequality, which the Anglo-Saxon capitalist model insists is necessary to promote economic growth, actually hinders it. In other words, there are sound economic, as well as social, reasons for attempting to reduce inequality.

He went on to explain the work of Teach First and its “can do” ethos, which attempts to inspire deprived young people to believe in themselves and overcome the handicaps imposed on them by an unfair society. He pointed out that, although people may join Teach First with the intention of pursuing a lucrative career in commerce, well over 50 per cent of them are inspired to remain in school teaching.

Tom May of QCDA and Graham Ruddock of NFER, both professional statisticians, gave some extremely interesting insights into the effects of current and recent educational policy. Using data from three different international surveys, Tom showed that the UK’s achievements in education and related fields are generally at or below the average for comparable countries, as measured against a variety of benchmarks. Graham added that these international comparisons are much more reliable than the UK’s own measurements and, in particular, that some of the most important differences between countries could be attributed to societal attitudes, rather than to the government’s favoured scapegoats, inadequate teachers.

Warwick Mansell, a well-known educational journalist and author of *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, concluded the presentations with a stinging attack on the culture of testing and targets which has come to dominate education in the UK during the last 20 years. These crude instruments of policy, allied to the agenda of “choice and diversity”, have both stultified education within schools and increased inequalities between them.

It was a tribute to both the interesting content and effective delivery of all five speakers that the Chair was obliged to curtail the very lively debate that followed each.

CASE for young people

Over the past few months I have developed, with the help of several other people, a Facebook-based, student branch of CASE. The idea behind it is that too many of the people most effected by Britain’s educational inequality – students – do not know what the problem is, or care very much.

On one hand are a proportion of students in state schools who are alienated from politics and so know little about the politics of education. On the other hand are students whose private schools have never mentioned the damage they are doing to society, and so they remain in ignorance. Many of them also have been given an incredibly snobbish view of state schools by their education: the first lesson a private school teaches its students – albeit unknowingly, as a side effect of its choosing children because of their parents’ wealth – is that they are better than the rest of society. This was accentuated by the words of an extremely intelligent Oxford candidate from a private school who, when asked about this issue, said that he thinks the problem is that parents who send their children to state schools don’t love them. Clearly, more awareness is needed.

So the group came into being. Now with just over 200 members

it has already made a big splash, and I find myself constantly questioned about it. We made it very clear that the group was as much for private, grammar, or faith school students who oppose the system as it is for those from comprehensive schools: we cannot expect them to leave their schools, and having private school students understand that selective education is wrong is the first, very important step for us to take. We have already had converts.

This January, there will be a debate in the Grand Committee Room, House of Commons, about whether private schools and selective faith schools are good for society, with CASE students hopefully facing teams from a private school and a faith school. The University College School of London has agreed to defend the role of private schools, but so far numerous faith schools have declined to be involved, or simply ignored emails after hearing that the debate would challenge their admissions policy. But we do hope soon to find a faith school team to defend the right of schools to pick students of their religion. It’s work in progress.

To find out more about the group, view the debate, and join in, search “CASE students branch” on Facebook.

Arthur Baker

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system

Directing the Compass point

CASE Executive members were well represented recently at a seminar with *Compass*, the think tank working on democratic Left policy issues. Others attending included academics from the Institute of Education and representatives of the Socialist Education Association, trade unions and the National Union of Students.

By way of introduction, Neal Lawson of *Compass* emphasised the importance of not being afraid to push for the utopian vision of education, in the context of good public services more generally. Ken Spours from the Institute of Education highlighted the need for the democratic Left to work together on education issues to counter the increasing confidence and clarity from the Right. He also emphasised that campaigners should find new ways of working and communicating on education issues so as to engage with the public.

There was consensus that education is a lifelong right rather than a positional good, and that increased democracy and sustainability as well as equality should be pivotal to any reforms to the educational system. CASE representatives put forward strongly several of our concerns and priorities, especially that universal education is a vital concept that needs to be widely explained, that local government and local services are critical, and that the core values of the project must be agreed and disseminated.

It is now proposed to hold further meetings before the end of 2009 to develop ideas and plan projects. *Compass* has committed itself to playing a supportive role in the project, and to constructing a special section of its website to host further debate.

It is hoped that one outcome of the seminar will be a substantial project on the role of education in a good society.

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Membership

To join CASE send £15 (£5 unwaged) with your name, address and phone number to CASE (address above)

Disappointment, disappointment, disappointment: part 3

Michael Pyke

The last of Labour's education White Papers appeared in June 2009: *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: building a 21st century schools system*. By this time Tony Blair had been replaced as prime minister by Gordon Brown and there had been yet another departmental re-structuring in Whitehall, with education now being part of a large empire under the control of Ed Balls: the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Compared with its predecessors, this white paper – yet to be implemented – is somewhat lacking in substance and its thrust is tactical in nature, rather than strategic.

Some of its detailed proposals amount to a tacit admission of failure. For example, the National Strategies, by which the government has maintained central control of the teaching of literacy and numeracy in primary schools, are to be abandoned. There are a number of rhetorical gestures towards "parental choice" and giving children "more say" and there are some curricular proposals which amount to little more than tinkering. The document reflects the general weariness of a government whose big ideas have not worked but who cannot rid themselves of the mistaken ideology from which these ideas originated.

Meanwhile, the policies of the previous Blair government have continued to be implemented. The government is still driving forward the academies programme, often using its control of funding to force the hands of unwilling local authorities, and it has maintained its Thatcherite central narrative that schools, rather than inequitable social and economic structures, are to blame for the continued inability of the poor to improve their lot. That parents have swallowed this idea wholesale can be seen in the current moral panic about parents who "lie and cheat" in order to obtain places for their children in the "best" schools.

The failure of "parental choice"

As it has become increasingly clear that the exercise of a somewhat chimerical "parental choice" has not sufficiently raised standards in "failing" schools, the government has now taken to threatening such schools with closure if they fail to reach an arbitrary benchmark in their GCSE results. Closed schools will, in most cases, be turned into academies. The government, however, is not clear about what will happen to academies themselves that fail to reach the benchmark. The need to reform the examination system has been shirked, with the predictable result that the post-16 diplomas are about to go the way of GNVQs and all previous qualifications designed for the non-academic.

It is true that there have been some changes of emphasis in government policy.

Compared with its predecessor, the present regime is lukewarm on the subject of faith schools, and it has begun to question the fitness of some academy sponsors, such as United Learning Trust. Some changes have been forced upon government, such as the abandonment of Key Stage 3 SATS after administrative incompetence robbed these exams of all credibility. Other policies, such as the specialist schools initiative, seem to have quietly merged into the background. Private schools have come under welcome, if limited, pressure to justify their charitable status. In the main, however, the government has adopted a bunker mentality in the face of growing evidence that its strategies have been mistaken.

The most recent example of this has been the ludicrous response of ministers to the Cambridge Primary Review, the most significant review of primary schooling since Plowden. Recommendations based upon years of careful research and supported by overwhelming evidence drawn from international comparisons have been cursorily dismissed by junior ministers on behalf of a government whose head is well and truly in the sand. Back in 1997, one of Tony Blair's earliest pronouncements was that, henceforth, government policy would be evidence-based. Sadly, throughout Labour's time in office, evidence that has conflicted with government's preferred narrative has routinely been ignored.

Labour has, however, done some good things. It has presided over a considerable improvement in examination results and enabled more young people to obtain higher education. Even allowing for contentious arguments about possible grade inflation and the danger of education being replaced by narrow examination coaching, this has been a generally welcome trend. Labour also deserves credit for a huge investment in buildings and equipment. Even though a lot of money may have been wasted on inappropriate PFI schemes and the like, the appalling neglect of the Conservative years has been remedied.

In the end, however, it is impossible to avoid feeling a sense of lost opportunity on a truly vast scale.

Ending rejection at 11+

Selection at 11 could be phased out within the next ten years. Comprehensive Future, the campaign for fair admissions, has launched a pamphlet, *Ending Rejection at 11 Plus*, that spells out how this could be done without disruption to any children's education or to parents and teachers, and without any significant expenditure. Copies can be sent on request by emailing info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk or from www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk.

Diplomas: a half-hearted nod towards vocational education

It is a truism in educational discourse that vocational studies do not enjoy sufficient status in British schools and that this is not a good thing. Indeed, “bridging the academic/vocational divide” is something to which all politicians have cheerfully subscribed for years, without being willing to make the radical changes necessary to achieve the aim. The current problems encountered by the new diploma courses are yet another illustration of the way in which lack of political courage continues to prevent the development of high quality, high status vocational education.

In 2004 the long-awaited, government-commissioned, Tomlinson report into 14–19 education was published. Its key points were as follows:

- Replace the current system of GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications with a single diploma, carefully developed over ten years, and made up of a range of optional modules, both academic and vocational, together with a core of compulsory studies and activities.
- Drastically reduce the number of exams that pupils have to take.
- Grade the diploma at four levels: entry (equivalent to pre-GCSE), foundation (GCSE grades D-G), intermediate (GCSE grades A*-C), advanced (equivalent to 3+ A-levels).
- Replace all current coursework with a single extended project, which would include an oral examination, in order to detect plagiarism and other cheating.

- Allow students to progress at their own pace, if necessary in mixed-age classes.
- Make more difficult questions available to advanced students.
- Allow students a choice between specialised, pre-designed combinations of modules and their own “pick and mix” combination.
- Supply all those receiving the diploma with a transcript of their achievements, including the marks for each module and make these available online to legitimately interested parties.

Needless to say, the government, while broadly welcoming Tomlinson’s ideas, ignored the most important elements in his proposals. The new diplomas do not offer a mix of academic and vocational studies but are overwhelmingly vocational in character, they are not being developed carefully over 10 years but are already being made available to all schools, and, crucially, they are not going to replace the current examination system but are going to run in parallel with GCSE and A-level.

The inevitable result of this latter decision will be that diplomas will lack status and credibility, especially as an alternative to A-level. However much the government asserts that the Advanced Diploma will be equivalent to 3+ A-levels, it will be ignored by the middle classes, and diplomas as a whole will be seen as “secondary modern” types of qualification. Already Ofsted has reported that take-up has been “below what might have been expected”.

From this year’s Party conferences

1. Labour

Education issues did not feature particularly strongly at the Labour Party Conference this year. However, there were welcome commitments by the Prime Minister not to “cut support to our schools” and to extend free childcare if Labour are returned to power at the forthcoming general election. On the other hand, his controversial proposal that pregnant 16- and 17-year-olds receiving state support should be placed in supervised homes went down extremely badly with delegates. In addition to the implications for civil liberties, it is doubtful that the educational aspects of the idea have been considered appropriately.

Very welcome was Ed Balls’ announcement of a review examining whether teachers should be banned from becoming members of the BNP. The Secretary of State’s speech was significant too for its focus on tackling anti-social behaviour in schools, although commentators pointed out that most of the policy ideas had already featured in other announcements or proposed legislation. Moreover, it is worrying that this may increase the tendency for Ofsted to penalise schools unjustifiably for anti-social behaviour.

There was a general feeling of anxiety at the consequences for schools if the Conservatives win the general election.

2. Lib Dems

The major education policy debates for the Lib Dems had taken place at their Spring Conference this year, so there were no new education policy resolutions to come out of their Autumn conference.

Education was, however, possibly the biggest headline grabber from the conference, as Vince Cable and Nick Clegg revealed that the Lib Dems’ firm pledge to axe university tuition fees could not be guaranteed, should the Party form the government in six months’ time. They did, however, state that it remained a firm commitment in principle.

There was an extremely lively range of fringe meetings that covered a variety of hot education topics. Bruce Liddington had the unenviable job of being the only pro-academy speaker at one of these entitled “The Future of Academy Schools”.

Up against strong opposition Sir Bruce was always going to be struggling. Indeed he spent most of his eight minutes reassuring the assembled throng that his chain of seven academies were heavily committed to being good employers, stuck to the admissions code, and adopted the same pay and service contracts as comprehensive schools, prompting the question “Why have them then?”. And although much was made of the advantages of “injecting the DNA of private businesses into education”, few concrete examples were proffered.

Conservative education policies were covered in CASEnotes 33.

Comment

Two major reports have been dismissed by the government without any apparent consideration of their findings. Its response to the Cambridge Primary Review’s Children, Their world, Their Education suggested that neither they nor the civil servants had read it nor had any intention of doing so. Yet this is the most extensive and well researched review of primary education this country has seen.

The government’s remit to Sir Jim Rose was limited, and quite possibly only occurred because the Cambridge review was happening.

Similarly, the report Education for All: The future of education and training for 14-19 year olds, published earlier in the year, has also been ignored, despite being the largest and most wide-ranging review of this phase of education since the Crowther Report in 1959.

It is time that the government showed a commitment to basing its policies on evidence and faced up to the view expressed in the Cambridge review that “policy has been introduced without proper evaluation of previous initiatives”. The review’s consultations revealed that

primary schools are currently “in good heart” and “highly valued by children and parents” but there is general opposition to national targets, testing, performance tables, naming and shaming schools and Ofsted inspection procedures.

Interestingly, two of its recommendations are possibly being considered by the government, perhaps coincidentally. A consultation question was issued in October by the DCSF asking at what age children should start school – the review recommends that they have an early years education until the age of 6 and a primary phase from 6 to 11. There is some suggestion that SATs may not continue, which could be because of the NUT and NAHT threats to boycott the tests next summer.

The Early Years Foundation Stage is to be reviewed in 2010. What is needed, however, is a proper look at education from birth to 19, taking full account of these two reports, and clarifying the aims, principles and purpose of education so as to provide a cohesive system for the 21st century.

Melian Mansfield

If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck ...

At the time of writing, the Jewish Free School (JFS) in outer London is engaged in an appeal to the Supreme Court against an Appeal Court Ruling that its selection criteria for entry were in breach of the Race Relations Act.

The school is oversubscribed and had a policy of only admitting children recognised as Jewish by the Office of the Chief Rabbi (OCR), irrespective of the extent of religious observance and practice within the child's household. The school had refused admission to a boy from a practising Jewish household because the boy's mother had been converted to Judaism in a "progressive" synagogue not recognised by the OCR so that it did not hold her to be Jewish.

The Appeal Court ruling stated that the law forbade both racial and religious discrimination, but faith schools were exempted from the prohibition on religious discrimination because their purpose was to educate children in what were generally the religious beliefs of the parents. JFS, in contrast to other faith schools, admitted children whose families did not share the Jewish faith but were recognised as technically Jewish by the OCR. That clearly discriminated between Jewish and non-Jewish children, which was permissible if made on religious grounds but unlawful if

made on racial grounds. The Appeal Court ruling deemed the refusal to admit the child in question to be based on his birth rather than his family's religious practice and therefore to be racial discrimination.

For the 2010 intake, the JFS has been compelled to change its admission criteria to require a certificate of religious practice to be completed by all applicants. This is similar to the selection criteria employed by state-funded Christian schools and is often associated with formerly unobservant households having their spirits moved just as their children near the age of secondary transfer. The JFS certificate of religious practice displays the disclaimer that "this form does not confirm that the child for whom this application is made is Jewish in accordance with orthodox Jewish law".

Whatever the outcome of the appeal, it will only serve to underline how inappropriate it is for these forms of discrimination against children to be funded by the state. It is not appropriate for the state to arbitrate in theological disputes between religious factions. Nor is it appropriate for the state to deem one religious faction to be authorised to speak for the wider religious community. But it is appropriate for the state to protect individuals from arbitrary and hurtful discrimination.

Faith Schools: Freedom of Choice or Recipe for Division?

This was the title of an extended debate held at St George's House, Windsor on Friday and Saturday, 13 and 14 November. St George's House is located within the walls of Windsor Castle and is the headquarters of the College of St George, the Anglican institution that provides for the religious life of the castle. The College holds regular debates on a wide range of subjects, a practice that was instituted by Prince Philip.

Michael Pyke was invited to participate on behalf of CASE, and CASE's briefing on faith schools was included among the various presentation papers. The majority of the participants were academics working in education, including such distinguished figures as Professor Richard Pring, Lead Director of the Nuffield Review of Education and Training for England and Wales. Among the rest were Janina Ainsworth, CEO and General Secretary of the National Society, which oversees the Church of England's schools; Rob Berkeley, the Director of the Runnymede Trust; Harry Brighouse (son of Tim), Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin; Andrew Copson of the British Humanist Association; Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society; Rabbi Jonathan Romain,

one of the founders of the Accord Coalition, and Sir Cyril Taylor, former Chair of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

As the debate was conducted under Chatham House rules, we are not allowed to identify or attribute individual contributions, but it is possible to make some general points. Various models of faith school were put forward. At one end of the spectrum, some participants supported the faith school as a means of transmitting religious belief and culture. Such a model implies that most, if not all, of the pupils must necessarily be admitted from the existing faith community.

At the other end of the spectrum was the view held by the Accord Coalition (to which CASE is affiliated), that faith schools supported by public money must be open to all. There was a particularly lively debate about whether or not faith schools can genuinely lay claim to a superior ethos and there was some conflict as to whether or not the intakes of faith schools are advantaged by comparison with state schools at large.

The quality of the debate was generally very high – perhaps not surprisingly, given the vast amount of expertise that had been gathered together.

News in brief

Consultation on accrediting school providers

A consultation on accreditation of school providers and schools groups and on academy sponsor selection was launched on 21 October with a closing date of 22 January. It sets out proposals for a new accreditation process that is intended to identify the most suitable organisations to be Accredited School Providers and Accredited Schools Groups for academies, trusts and federations. The intention is that Accredited Providers will ensure improved standards in schools that are currently low attaining or otherwise underperforming. The consultation also sets out a proposed process for selecting sponsors for future academy projects.

The system of accreditation will ask providers to demonstrate:

- sound governance
- effective leadership and management
- a strong vision for managing and improving schools
- a track record of improving outcomes for children and young people
- the capacity to achieve transformational change in the schools that they are supporting.

See www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations

Children, Schools and Families Bill

This Bill had its first Reading in Parliament on 19 November. It will implement the proposals in the White Paper summarised in the July CASEnotes. These include guarantees for pupils and parents – what they can expect from 21st century schools – reforms to the primary curriculum as outlined in the Rose review, the licensing of teachers, the introduction of the School Report Card and ways of safeguarding vulnerable young people.

Securing better rights for disabled children

The Disabled Children's Manifesto for Change sets out what disabled children and young people want politicians to do for them. Copies were taken to all party conferences and have been sent to members of all major parties. Questions include asking them how they and their party will ensure that services promote equality for disabled children and young people, that bullying is stopped, that schools have a disability equality scheme that disabled children helped to write, that schools provide ways for them to have a say about matters which affect them, and that people who work with them understand them properly and help them. See www.edcm.org.uk/demanifesto.

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