

HELP CASE CAMPAIGN

In the mailing that brings you this issue of CASEnotes you will also receive a survey form (and pre-paid return envelope). **Please return this no later than Friday 15th April** so that we have an up-to-date picture of the issues we need to campaign on and how we can involve you.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Shadow SoS impresses

On February 3rd, a delegation from CASE met for an hour with Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Lucy Powell MP. Although there are some areas of policy over which CASE and Ms Powell may well disagree, the purpose of the meeting was not to have a debate but to establish a channel of communication. *From this point of view, the CASE delegation felt that the meeting was overwhelmingly positive.* Ms Powell impressed with her forthrightness and obvious command of her brief and was very generous with her time. CASE looks forward to a productive relationship.

Mums hardly the word

Having repeatedly denied, in the face of overwhelming evidence, that there is a crisis in the supply of teachers, Nicky Morgan has finally decided that the problem lies in women's annoying habit of having children and has announced a new website designed to encourage young mothers to return to the classroom. Strangely, motherhood does not appear in the list of reasons actually given by teachers for deserting the profession in ever increasing numbers but Ms Morgan obviously knows better.

No accounting for academy trusts

Janet Downs, of the Local Schools Network, reports that, only two months into 2016, 7 academy trusts have already been given a Financial Notice to Improve.

Also, the DFE has missed the January 31st deadline for submitting its accounts to the National Audit Office and has received an extension to April 30th. The NAO gave an "adverse" opinion of DFE accounting in both 2014 and 2015 and Neil Carmichael, Chair of the Education Select Committee, has now said that DFE finances should be investigated.

STOP PRESS - the Chief Inspector has just (March 10th) written to the Secretary of State expressing serious concern about the performance of another 7 multi-academy trusts (MATs).

DfE oblivious to health concerns

ASCL has drawn attention to the growing problem of mental ill-health among schoolchildren (see also CASENotes 58) but it appears from its complete lack of response that the DFE has no policies to deal with this disturbing phenomenon.

Gift membership

Do you know someone who would enjoy reading CASEnotes regularly?

For just £6 you can buy CASE "starter" membership for a friend. See the special membership form enclosed with this mailing.

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

Wealth and Privilege Masquerading as Education

On February 24th The Sutton Trust published its tenth survey of the educational backgrounds of "leading people" - those whose birthdays were listed in national and Sunday newspapers during 2015. The results of this sociological gem were immediately seized upon by such as The Guardian: "Private school is still surest route to front rank of professions". The subsequent article went on to identify "leading people" as "top" military officers, "top" judges, "leading" print journalists, "top" doctors, MPs and "award winning" actors. Astonishingly, it turns out that quite a lot of these people attended expensive private schools.

The Sutton Trust's own website carries a considerably more nuanced response to its findings than anything which has appeared in the media but The Guardian chose to quote only the somewhat unreconstructed Sir Peter Lampl: "...your chances of reaching the top...are very much greater if you went to an independent school...essential skills, such as confidence (sic), articulacy and teamwork...open up independent schools to all pupils based on merit, not money...support for highly able students in state schools." Perhaps the ranks of privately educated Guardian staff actually believe this stuff.

However, "research" of this kind does not stand much analysis. For a start, it is quite a long time since "top" people were at school - 50 years in the case of High Court judges - so the research tells us little about what is happening now. Also one might ask why, if it is their education that has led the children of the rich to having their birthdays listed in the newspapers, they are regularly outperformed at university by their humbler contemporaries, something which The Sutton Trust itself has helped to establish. Could it be that wealth, opportunities and connections, the last two reinforced by attending a prestigious and expensive school, are at least as important as education in "career development"?

The Sutton Trust also laments the "dominance" of Oxbridge but neglects to point out that half the students at Oxbridge attended comprehensive schools. Presumably, it is the other half who are going to "dominate"?

If we look at those professions with which The Guardian busies itself, it is obvious that the support of a wealthy family is rather helpful. High Court judges, for example, are nearly all appointed from the ranks of barristers and, according to the Chair of the Bar Council, to qualify as a barrister can cost as much as £127,000.

Acting has now become far too precarious a career for any but the well-off to embark upon. Grants for attending drama school have disappeared and young actors

spend long periods of time waiting for work. Without financial support from families able to provide it or good "connections" within the established profession, young actors may never be able to get started. Added to this is the way in which successive governments have downgraded the role of the arts in education. Speaking a year ago, Julie Walters was quite clear that she and other working class contemporaries would not have enjoyed successful careers had current conditions prevailed when they were young.

In print journalism, the traditional route to work on a national title has all but vanished, as local and regional newspapers have either shrunk or ceased publication altogether. Now the industry recruits from a narrow pool of well-off new graduates who can afford to gain experience by doing spells of unpaid work and these "internships" are frequently gained through personal connections. The daughter of Alan Rushbridger, for instance, obtained a post at The Guardian following a successful period of "work experience" undertaken while her father was Editor.

Amid all the pious talk of "social mobility" it never seems to occur to people that wealthy parents do not plan for their children to enter poorly paid, low status occupations to make room for more able children of humbler origin.

Sending a handful of the latter to prestigious institutions will do nothing to alter this: the only way to have greater social mobility is to have greater equality but in the UK we are headed doggedly in the opposite direction.

Student Mental Health Deteriorating

School children are not the only group whose mental well-being is in decline. The last three years have seen a 28% rise in the number of students at Russell Group universities using mental health services.

The mental health charity, Mind, points out that this rise has coincided with the rise in tuition fees to £9,000 and argues that financial anxiety is a major cause of the problem.

However, the 28% figure conceals a number of quite startling variations between institutions, with Oxford, Leeds, Cardiff and Edinburgh showing increases ranging from 43% to 75%. This throws Mind's diagnosis into doubt, especially as the figures at Edinburgh have not been broken down between Scottish students, who pay no tuition fees, and those from the rest of the UK.

Nevertheless, the situation is worrying and research is urgently needed.

A Dark Day for Education in England

A response to the passing of the Education and Adoption Bill:

By Dr Ruth McGinity and Dr Steven Courtney of the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester

On February 24th, the DfE released a statement announcing the passing of the Education and Adoption Bill which represented this Government's thinly veiled disregard for research that challenges the dominant ideological position that Academies are *Good* and Council-Run schools are *Bad*:

The bill will see more schools becoming academies - transforming the education system by giving power and responsibility to teachers on the front line, empowering schools themselves to spread excellence everywhere.

Academies operate under the strictest possible system of oversight and accountability - more robust than in council-run schools - and are challenged to bring about rapid and sustained improvements when they do not reach the high standards we expect.

Why does this matter? We think there are two major, related problems with this.

First, this Bill, with its ratcheting up of the academies programme, is an ideological rather than an educational matter. There is still *no conclusive evidence* that reducing local authorities' role in supporting schools in favour of academy sponsors has significant and consistent effects on improving education. This isn't a new or a surprising development, as the Conservatives have long been proponents of transferring the running of schools from councils to academy sponsors — the 2010 Academies Act demonstrates this quite clearly.

Second, and connected to this, the Bill is a key milestone in the march towards the privatisation of public services. We know the story in relation to the NHS, but for some reason, in education, there is a lot less urgency in acknowledging that this is happening and subsequently challenging and resisting such shifts in how provisions are organised and who has 'control' over them.

As one of the authors of this piece has explained in more detail, academies and their sub-types are state funded, but not state controlled — private interests are central to how the academies programme has been developed.

The accountability that the DfE is keen to tout in the above press release is built on sand. Yes, all schools are accountable to parents and the government through Ofsted inspection.

Yet when the running and support for local schools is forcibly taken out the hands of local councils and given to academy sponsors, that accountability trail peters out in many ways.

Private academy trusts receive millions of pounds of tax-payers' money, but are not directly inspected by Ofsted as unitary organisations. Parents, teachers or school staff may not choose Trusts' board members or vote them out, and there is a strong tendency for private interests to have a majority say on academy governing bodies and through that, school leadership.

What connects these two points and is particularly unnerving in this newest legislation is not just the complete removal of consultation with parents and local communities in the conversion process, but the requirement for Councils' and governors' compliance. So, academisation is to be literally 'forced' upon the teachers, students and parents in schools that are identified (by the government, obviously) as either 'failing' or 'coasting' and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Indeed, stakeholders who might previously have dissented are now required to make it happen.

This is a further manifestation of the increasing totalitarianism pervading the education system and its leadership.

So we should not be surprised, only dismayed, that parent consultation has disappeared from this newly intense vision for an academised system. Indeed, the Bill instead assumes logically that the public should have no say in a private, or *privatised* matter. This is a dark day for public education in England.

Note: *this is a slightly edited version of the original article, which can be read in full on the website of the Local Schools Network - www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk*

Birmingham School Strike

A series of strikes at Small Heath School, Birmingham, has brought about the abandonment – for now – of a proposal to convert the school to academy status. However, the school leadership, which supported the conversion, has suspended the NUT representative over a "disciplinary" matter which appears to be trivial.

This is being widely interpreted as a piece of vindictive retaliation and it has led to the continuation of the strike action. However, the latest planned action has been called off, following the leadership's belated willingness to talk part in ACAS supported talks.

For more details see the website of CASE's Birmingham branch: www.birminghamcase.wordpress

Media Watch

- As well as The Guardian's uncritical response to the Sutton Trust review of "social mobility" (see page 2) all of the "serious" press recently reported a research project at Durham University which purported to find that private schooling gives children the equivalent of an additional two thirds of a GCSE grade across the range of subjects, **an advantage that amounts to two years' extra schooling**. Leaving aside the somewhat bizarre implication that it takes two years to improve a GCSE grade by two-thirds, **not one newspaper actually reported the research project itself**, relying instead on a less than objective press release produced by the Independent Schools Council.
- Meanwhile, **CASE spokespeople have been in much demand by local radio stations**, all of whom have the knack of fixing upon questions which are at best peripheral to any serious educational debate. We have been asked to discuss David and Samantha Cameron's choice of school for Ewan; the case of a journalist who has incurred enormous debts in order for her child to avoid being educated alongside "riff-raff" (her term); whether or not a school should reveal to the victim's parents the identity of online bullies...and so forth.
- However **the prize for inanity** must go to the BBC local radio station who wanted to discuss the educational views of pop singer Lily Allen. While it is true that Ms Allen has seen the inside of more schools than the average person, having attended at least fifteen different ones, some of them extremely posh, it is not clear that she has a coherent view of current educational issues, having tweeted that, instead of "Pythagoras," children should be taught about "mortgages and tax returns". She herself, of course, earns enough money not to need a mortgage and employs accountants to do her tax returns, while most of her fans don't earn enough to need to complete a tax return and wouldn't be able to afford the mortgages she would have them learn about.
But when a pop star tweets...
- On the positive side, **an excellent article in The Observer of March 13th** confirmed the futility of relying upon "school improvement" as a means of promoting "social mobility." Written by John Goldthorpe, a sociologist at the University of Oxford, the article pointed out that "social mobility" is a function, not of the education system but of the number and type of economic opportunities that society makes available. **Without an expansion of high status employment, as happened in the early post-war years, the only way for people to move "up" is for others to move "down" but already advantaged parents will do everything possible to prevent this happening to their children.** Politicians, for obvious reasons, do not want to acknowledge this.

Education Funding

The Government has launched a consultation ending on 17th April regarding the centralised funding of schools. They are proposing "a school-level national formula, in which the funding that each pupil attracts to their school is determined nationally, with a much reduced role for local authorities... that removes local variation and... would be easily explainable to head teachers, teachers and parents."

The full effect is unlikely to be felt before 2019-20 and the consultation paper implies the Department for Education is nervous of moving too quickly in a situation where there are likely to be significant losers.

Initially, local authorities will be expected to administer the new arrangements, making them little more than cashiers for the Government. Ultimately, we may see a privatised service run by, say, Capita, rather like the TV licence.

There are undoubtedly unfair elements in the current system, but the effect of the government's proposed measures will only become clear when we see which pupils, schools and local authority areas are winners and losers when the changes have been made.

<https://consult.education.gov.uk/funding-policy->

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Membership

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Contributions to CASEnotes are welcome.

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