

Out the window

Never properly implemented and too timid in the first place: Labour's policies for improving schools have failed.



Illustration by S. Kambayashi

No one knows children better, or has their interests more at heart. So education reforms that put power in the hands of parents have an obvious appeal. Arm them with hard facts about how schools are doing; allow schools to diversify and compete to attract parents; allow parents to choose the ones they like best—and watch the power of competition drive up standards for all. This, in a nutshell, has been Labour's prescription for education since it came to power in 1997, and, with minor variations, that of the Conservative government before them.

That it hasn't worked is now clear. Literacy and numeracy standards in primary schools, which improved during Labour's first term, are flattening out—and independent observers agree that much of the initial rise was illusory, a consequence of teaching to the test. The results of the GCSEs and A-levels taken by 16- and 18-year-olds are still rising. Grade inflation and savvy schools pushing children towards easier subjects is the consensus, again denied by the government. The gap between the exam results of rich and poor children shows no sign of narrowing. And now all three tactics—information, diversity and choice—are looking shaky.

Most of the information for parents on schools' performance comes from the standard-assessment tests (SATs) in English, maths and science that children used to take at seven, 11 and 14. These are imperfect: raw results reflect a school's social mix, adjusted versions are hard to understand, and the tests' troubled recent history means they may not be long for this world.

Last summer the company hired to mark the SATs made a mess of the job and was sacked. The government dropped the tests for 14-year-olds and found someone else to mark the others. Seizing its moment, the National Union of Teachers, the most militant of the teaching unions and one that had been against the tests from the start, decided at its annual conference in March to ballot its members on boycotting those that remain. The head-teachers' union will decide whether to follow suit at its own conference next month.

Both unions will be emboldened by a growing political row. On April 22nd the head of the exams regulator, who had resigned after the fiasco, told MPs that ministers had made him the fall guy. They had made statements, he said, that were "flawed", "sexed-up", "fiction" and "totally false". (He declined, when asked directly, to say they lied.)

As for the diversity of Britain's state schools, parents have long known it to be largely illusory. Most secondaries are labelled "specialist" in one of a dozen fields, from mathematics to music to media studies, but this is mere flim-flam. Parents hardly care; schools can "specialise" in whatever they like, as long as they teach the standard subjects well and crack down on misbehaviour and bullying.

But the fact that choice is turning out not to mean much bothers parents a lot. As teachers—never keen on parental choice—and Labour’s old guard like to point out, parents do not have the right to choose a school, but merely to “express a preference”. If too many express the same preference, some will be disappointed—and each year, around a fifth of parents are. All that changes is the number who go on to appeal (up each year), and the number of appeals that succeed (down).

Parent power

Real choice for parents would mean real consequences for schools, of the sort that businesses experience in a marketplace. Good ones would grow. Bad ones would close. But the government has refused to take its reforms to their logical conclusion. Instead, it has tried to use the tools supposedly intended for parents to mimic the effects of the market, compiling hit lists of schools with poor exam results. Some of these are to be given school-improvement partners to chivvy them into raising their game, some taken over by better-performing neighbours, and some closed forthwith and replaced by “academies”—state-funded independent schools that are overseen directly from Whitehall.

But these half-measures do not seem to have done even half the job. Research by the Institute of Education published on April 21st looks at those corners of the state-education system where some parental choice does exist. Even there, it turns out to be neither unleashing competition nor raising standards.

Unlike most other state-funded schools, religious ones select pupils according to their parents’ devoutness, rather than their proximity to the school. This means that religious families have a wider choice of school than most: they are given preference by distant religious schools and can still apply to secular ones nearby.

The study looked at GCSE results in both sorts of schools. “We could have found that faith schools benefited all parents, including those who didn’t, or couldn’t, choose them, if other schools improved in an attempt to hang on to pupils,” says Anna Vignoles, one of the researchers. But they came across no such benign competitive effects—indeed, they found no effects at all. Children at religious schools made no more progress than those at secular ones, and areas where there were many religious schools did no better than those where there were few. “What is described as a quasi-market clearly is not working,” concludes Ms Vignoles.

That might be because religious schools in fact pose little threat to secular ones. The latter may know that a limited supply of faith-school places means many parents will have to settle for a secular alternative whether they want to or not.

Or it could be that, by giving religious people more choice than other parents, the government has weakened competitive pressures in another way. The researchers checked which schools had the most students with the best prospects for academic success in their neighbourhoods. Most religious schools turned out to have more than their fair share of bright, well-off kids, and correspondingly fewer stragglers and poor ones. If secular schools with religious neighbours know that whatever they do they will get lumbered with the hardest pupils to teach, they may resign themselves to being at the bottom of discerning parents’ wish lists and give up trying.

Choice, then, is unlikely to have any impact on standards unless it affects the supply of places. Both of the main opposition parties recognise that. The Tories would allow charities, churches and groups of parents to open schools, even where existing ones have plenty of capacity. They cite free-market reforms in Sweden, where new schools have, in a little over a decade, captured a tenth of the market. The Liberal Democrats, Britain’s third party, have similar plans, with the addition of a “pupil premium”—extra cash for each poor child a school admits.

Either scheme would give more power to parents than the government has managed to do in 12 years.

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