

Education Action Zones:

New moves to privatise education in Britain

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The introduction of Education Action Zones (EAZs) into the British state education system is a qualitative step towards the privatisation of education. The Labour government is proposing to set up EAZs in the most socially and economically deprived areas, ostensibly "to raise standards in schools, especially those in challenging circumstances." The outcome, however, will be the increased competition of schools for dwindling state funds and the ever greater role of big business in deciding educational policy.

The zones will be run by joint bodies of business representatives and Local Education Authorities. Existing teachers pay and conditions--holidays, the length of the working day, and Monday to Friday working--will no longer apply in the zone. The national curriculum, the uniform syllabus imposed under the previous Tory government, will be suspended in order to concentrate on English and math. The government will also provide minimal grants to schools joining the EAZs, an incentive which financially starved schools cannot afford to turn down.

In the initial stages 25 zones are to be set up. Twelve will be operational from September 1998 and another thirteen in January 1999. The initial pilot schemes will last for three to five years. David Blunkett, Minister of State for Education, has said he hopes to set up 100 within the next four years. Each zone will include about 20 schools--two or three secondary (11-16 years olds) and a cluster of feeder primaries (5-11 years old).

Earlier this year, Professor Michael Barber who heads the Standards and Effectiveness unit at the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) argued that they were essential in order to increase the competitiveness of Britain. He argued that business deals were being lost as a result of a skill shortage. Britain has a more acute problem with low skills--among both young

people and adults--than any other industrial country except the United States.

The ability to attract investment is a key factor in the drive to set up EAZs. By dropping the National Curriculum, which had already been widely criticised for its narrow range of subject matter and emphasis on drilling, the government intends to restrict teaching even further, reducing it to the most rudimentary literacy and numerical skills required by employers.

So far 60 bids have been submitted to run the EAZs. The government is giving £750,000 per year to each zone and a further £250,000 will come from business. British Telecom is involved in many of the bids in the north of England. This is significant, as the fastest growth industry in the former mining and steel regions are call centres (telephone marketing). Call centres now employ over 200,000 people, more than the combined work force in heavy industry. These centres, which have a high employee turnover rate, require labour that is young, literate, numerate, cheap and flexible.

The emphasis placed on rote-learning and strong curriculum guidelines is reminiscent of the drilling methods used in Victorian schools. This will contribute to moulding the type of disciplined workhorse that these new industries require.

The New York-based Edison Project, a for-profit education company, has an interest in four of the bids. As their record in the US has shown, Edison's strategy for increasing profits is to employ younger, less experienced teachers who command lower salaries; to educate special-needs students without using specialists and to gain control of the "non-academic" aspects of schooling, i.e., administration, land and buildings, and make cuts in these areas. Of particular importance is the way the company's emphasis on achievement militates against genuine efforts to deal with children with

special needs. The long hours and detailed curriculum have led many teachers, who have not been paid for working extra hours, to resign.

This introduction of market methods into education has been prepared through a protracted ideological offensive against state education that began under the Tory government of Margaret Thatcher. State education was starved of funds. The introduction of the Local Management of Schools (LMS) in 1988 reduced the amounts Local Authorities gave to schools, forcing those in socially deprived areas to decide between spending resources on staff, buildings or pupils. Grant Maintained Schools, that were provided a higher level of funding by central government, were introduced as an option for those in wealthier areas.

The introduction of Standard Assessment Tests at ages 5, 7, 9 and 11 and the publication of league tables for exam results has been accompanied by a campaign to identify as "failed schools" those whose test results are low. These are usually in the most deprived urban areas. This has led to increased competition between schools, with the best creaming off the bulk of children with the best academic record. Those that fall behind are simply threatened with closure.

In the post-war period resources for education and welfare were state-funded, except for a small number of fee-paying schools for the rich. The 1988 Education Reform Act placed a much greater emphasis on schools raising their own funds. Because government funding is inadequate, schools have had to turn to businesses for financial grants or awards. The introduction of EAZ will now give corporate donors a direct say in how schools are run.

Without additional resources many more schools will be forced to close. The Labour government has only allocated £240 million of the education budget to cutting class sizes for 5-7 year olds to 30 and to repair dilapidated school buildings. As long ago as 1992, the Labour Party in opposition cited a figure of £3.5 billion needed for school repairs.

Far from helping poor areas under the guise of raising standards, EAZs offer the most impoverished and educationally disadvantaged children a lower standard of education than ever before. An all-rounded education involves the pursuit and assimilation of knowledge from a range of subjects over a long period. It requires an ongoing commitment to the allocation of resources

for the training of the next generation. Big business is not interested in such long-term aims. It will fund only those aspects that yield the most immediate financial results.

The Labour government fully embraces this perspective. By placing education at the mercy of the market, it is breaking from the principle of free education for all that has underpinned the British social welfare system since the introduction of the 1944 Education Act.



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