

Privatisation of education in Britain stepped up

Surrey Council puts state school out to private tender

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Conservative controlled Surrey County Council took the unprecedented step last week of putting a state school out to private tender. Kings Manor Comprehensive in Guildford will be the first privately run state Secondary (11-16) school in Britain. It presently has just 400 pupils on a site designed for 900. The falling school roll is directly related to competition between neighbouring schools, which have better academic results.

Kings Manor is situated in a socially deprived area of Guildford and is bottom of the league tables in Surrey. It recently failed to meet levels set by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) when it was criticised for truancy, bad behaviour and low achievement. As a result the school has had difficulty recruiting new pupils. Whilst other schools have closed as a result of poor Ofsted reports, the council are keen to keep Kings Manor open as there is a shortage of places in the area.

Bids have been invited for the contract to run the school. Three companies have already expressed an interest and have held informal talks with education chiefs in Surrey. These include the New York-based Edison Project and British the companies Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) and Nord Anglia.

Edison held discussions earlier this year, with a view to bidding for control of an Education Action Zone in Surrey, but then concerning the running of Kings Manor. Benno Schmidt, chief executive of Edison, has said that he would invest £500,000 to £1 million and expects to make a profit through efficiency savings and a performance-related management fee.

Nord Anglia runs private nursery, primary and secondary schools in Britain and other countries. It is the first education enterprise to be listed on the London

Stock Exchange. The head of Anglia is a former lecturer in further education who is now a millionaire. The company proposes to turn Kings Manor into a 'millennium school' based on a centre for excellence for information technology, languages and business education. It would seek to make a profit through levying a management fee.

The CfBT is a non-profit-making organisation, which provides education services, including teacher recruitment and training. It is currently involved in the managing of Ram's Episcopal, a failing primary school in Hackney, East London.

Teachers and parents at Kings Manor welcomed the decision because the authority ruled out closure and also agreed to leave open the possibility that the school could be relaunched by a consortium led by governors under a 'fresh start' scheme. The head teacher, Greg Gardner, has backed the governors' plan to relaunch the school in the year 2000 as a means of keeping the school out of private hands. He said that privatisation was 'untested and uncostered'.

The teachers unions have condemned Surrey County Council's move as a 'leap in the dark' which undermines local education authorities (LEAs). Doug McAvoy, general secretary of the largest teaching union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), said, 'Kings Manor deserves full support from the council. Experiments with private companies cannot substitute for that support.' Nigel de Gruchy, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), said, 'If Surrey decides to put out the management of this school to private enterprise ... it would be an admission that local education authorities cannot turn around schools in

difficulty. It will be a vote for the eventual abolition of LEAs.' Peter Smith, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), said, 'It would be an irony if a Labour government was to start dismantling the public education service.'

Irony or not, this is precisely what the Blair Labour government has prepared the ground for. The move to privatise education began under the Thatcher-led Conservative government in the early 1980s. In 1988 the Local Management of Schools (LMS) was introduced. This reduced the amount of funding Local Authorities gave to schools, forcing those in socially deprived areas to decide between spending resources on staff, buildings or pupils. The 1988 legislation also introduced Grant Maintained Schools. These were given a higher level of funding by central government and were introduced as an option for those in wealthier areas. The introduction of Standard Assessment Tests at ages 7, 11 and 14, 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.

Tony Blair and David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, have embraced the measures introduced by the previous Tory government and extended them. Within weeks of the Labour Party taking office, Blunkett 'named and shamed' those schools that were deemed to be failing, threatening them with closure if immediate improvements were not forthcoming. Accompanying this was an attack on teachers, blaming them for a fall in standards. 'Fast track' procedures were introduced to sack 'incompetent' teachers. Alongside this has been an unrelenting ideological assault on educators, parents and children in the areas where schools have 'failed'. Legislation is now in force where parents can be fined for both the truancy and ultimately the behaviour of their children.

Earlier this year Education Action Zones were introduced in 25 areas. The setting up of the zones was a qualitative step towards privatisation. LEAs combined with business to run schools. National pay and employment conditions, together with the national curriculum, were suspended. In light of this and other attacks on state education by Labour, the decision by a Tory council to utilise provisions laid down by Blunkett to privatise a former state-run school must be assessed.

See Also:

BBC Panorama's 'Failing at Four': a valuable contribution to the discussion over the future of education

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