

Britain: Labour pushes ahead with privatisation of education

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The Labour government has outlined further measures to extend its plans for the privatisation of education in Britain. Private companies and consortiums have been invited to bid for contracts to run services currently operated by Local Education Authorities (LEA), including schools. David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, told the North of England Education Conference he would not rule out a private company taking over the whole of an LEA's education services.

Initially, these and other measures are directed against LEAs that have a high level of "failure" within their schools and other services ranging from educational welfare through to personnel.

The day after Blunkett's announcement, advertisements were placed in the national newspapers inviting companies to apply to run local education provisions. "The Government will act where it is clear that a particular LEA cannot or will not perform adequately.... This advertisement invites contractors to express an interest in playing their part, as and when necessary, in improving local education services."

Among the companies who have expressed such an interest is *The Education Partnership*, which has links to the New York-based Edison Project. This is a for-profit education company that cuts costs by employing newly qualified teachers and teaching several classes at once. The Education Partnership is led by millionaire businessman Wynford Dore, who recently told the *Observer* newspaper that he first spotted a gap in the market when last year's Education Act paved the way for private companies to take over the functions of education authorities.

Other directors include Professor James Tooley of Newcastle University, a right-wing academic who believes all schools should become self-governing

private institutions, and Gareth Newman, principal of Brooke Weston City Technology College in Corby.

There are 182 LEAs and currently none are deemed to be failing. However, the London Borough of Hackney may be among the first to be considered as having failed, as the education inspectorate OFSTED is to re-visit there at the end of the month. The authority in Hackney, one of the poorest boroughs in Britain, is planning to vote itself out of existence and hand over control of all its schools to a forum of parents and teachers. The council has drawn up plans to set up a giant Education Action Zone containing every school in the borough.

The power to remove a failing LEA's services is contained within the School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA) passed last year. This set down rigid criteria governing all aspects of education and introduced Education Action Zones (EAZs) as test beds for future school education. The terms laid down for the EAZs enable big business to join into partnership with LEAs in the running of schools and lifted controls on existing conditions--pay, hours, holidays and the already narrow national curriculum--in order to concentrate on literacy and numeracy. EAZs were set up in the most socially deprived areas.

The government has not been as successful as it had hoped in bringing big business into the first round of EAZs. The financial inducements on offer and the terms and conditions were not attractive enough, and those currently in operation are all being run by LEAs. At the launch of the second round of EAZs the government changed the bidding criteria for business to invest more funds and have a more direct say, rather than at present where companies offer services "in kind", such as consultancy.

Alongside these changes, a concerted effort has been

made by the government to convince those critical of government policy of the need for such changes. Prime Minister Tony Blair, Blunkett and Standards Minister Estelle Morris have launched a series of ministerial road shows to promote the Green Paper on the introduction of performance-related pay for teachers. Blair underlined the government's perspective in an interview with the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme, in which he attributed all the problems of education in inner-city schools to bad teaching. "We can't tolerate people in the teaching profession who are not up to the job," said Blair. "We have got to make it easier to get rid of heads or teachers who simply can't teach or run a school properly."

Later that day, at a meeting of selected heads and teachers designed to win support for the plan to spend £1 billion over the next three years on incentives to reward excellence in the classroom, Blair acknowledged the reality that confronts thousands of children. "We have an education system that educates the top 20 percent very well and the top 5 percent probably extremely well. But if you go all the way down there are large numbers of children that don't get the education they need and deserve. They can spend the rest of their lives trying to recapture what they have lost at the beginning."

Far from reversing this situation, however, the Blair government will exacerbate it. Its education strategy extends a process that was begun under previous Conservative administrations. In 1988, the Thatcher government passed the Education Reform Act introducing market methods into education. Local Management of Schools (LMS), which nominally gave schools greater independence, reduced the funding LEAs provide, forcing schools in socially deprived areas to decide between spending resources on staff, buildings or pupils. Grant Maintained Schools, which opted out of LEA control, were then introduced and provided with a higher level of funding by central government, as an option for those in wealthier areas.

The government's strategy of targeting "failed" schools and authorities is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Social deprivation in the inner-city areas means that schools must cope with children who often suffer educational difficulties. When Blair and Blunkett rail against "failing schools" they never address the impact of education cuts and poverty on children whose future

has been sacrificed so that the lion's share of resources can be diverted to the top 5 to 20 percent.



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