Britain: government outlines plans to dismantle state education

Liz Smith
11 August 2004

The latest proposals outlined in the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) "Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners" is the clearest declaration ever made by a post-war government to end what remains of the comprehensive state education system in England.

The essential thrust of the 114-page document is a determined push for the privatisation of state-run schools.

In his introduction to the document, Education Minister Charles Clarke states he wants to see the end of the "monolithic"model of public services—a euphemism for the government's aim of ending universal provision in education, health and social services.

In the case of education, the "monolith" to which Clarke is referring is the system established by the 1944 Butler Education Act, which for the first time ever established universal secondary schooling for all up to the age of 15 years, comprising grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. This was later extended in London, West and South Yorkshire to a comprehensive school system in which the selective grammar schools were all but abolished. The remaining grammar schools in these areas became private fee-paying schools.

In the document, Clarke states that the government wants to establish an entirely different type of local education system to that currently run by the Local Education Authorities (LEAs). This would ensure schools have "the freedom to shape and reshape the offer to meet different and changing needs."

By effectively dismantling any centralised form of control over schools, the government is opening the way for significantly extending the role of private capital and private sponsors in education.

Clarke states that the new model of education envisaged by the government, "cannot just be a partnership of state providers—the voluntary and community sector, business, and private enterprises need to be part of this partnership to provide joined-up services."

This is spelt out most clearly in the section on "Independent Specialist Schools". These schools have been massively expanded by the Blair government, to a point where they now make up 50 percent of all secondary schools in the state sector. In order to achieve specialist status a school has to submit detailed development plans that show increased exam results, attendance and improved behaviour year on year; be able to raise £50,000 from business; and be subject to constant monitoring. In return, a specialist school can select 10 percent of its intake based on ability.

Under the five-year strategy, the government intends for all schools to achieve specialist status. The highest performing ones will then be able to opt out of LEA control.

Clarke claims that the government is, "not creating a new category of schools—rather, giving more independence to all schools within a specialist system." This is a lie. The ground is being laid for transforming state education in a way that will ensure greater selectivity of pupil intake, and business involvement.

The government's proposals mean that the "best" state schools will become business entities in their own right, with their facilities, working conditions, etc., determined by their sponsors. Already the highest performing state schools are almost exclusively in better-off neighbourhoods. House prices can be double and even triple those of other areas as parents try to ensure their child a guaranteed place in the school of their choice. The five-year strategy will significantly increase such social stratification between schools.

Launching his strategy, Clarke claimed that the

government's proposals were driven by a desire to "lure back" into the public sector middle class families who go private out of "despair". In reality, the private sector accounts for just seven percent of the overall school population in Britain (although this can rise to 20 percent in central London).

Clarke did not explain why such a tiny minority should apparently be able to determine the future course of education in Britain. And for good reason, as his arguments are specious. Clarke is simply using the spectre of private education (which his government has encouraged) as a cover for the marketisation of the existing state system.

The strategy states that all secondary schools will be allowed, "Freedom... to own their land and buildings, manage their assets, employ their staff, improve their governing bodies, and forge partnerships with outside sponsors and educational foundations".

In order to simplify the process of setting up a foundation school, a fast track process of 12 weeks is to be put in place and a simple vote of a school's governing body (whose powers are to be extended) will be able to hire and fire, change school policy, sell-off land and increase business links.

Combined with a three-year devolved budget paid directly to schools, this will effectively end the relationship between schools and the LEAs. More importantly, it will remove schools from the democratic mechanisms that currently exist to prevent schools closures and sell-offs. LEAs have to go through lengthy procedures if they want to make change to local provision, such as consultation with schools and communities, and this can result in the original decision being reversed.

Even starker is the fate of those schools that are unable to meet government criteria for specialist status. These "failing schools" are to be sold off to private companies, who will be able to determine curriculum, behaviour policy and working practices.

Examples of this policy are the two schools run by millionaire car dealer Sir Peter Vardy. Established under the Conservative government 15 years ago, Vardy's schools teach creationism and operate a rigorous discipline regime. The *Guardian* newspaper recently revealed that at Vardy's King's Academy in Middlesborough, 26 pupils out of a total of 1,034 were expelled in the first year alone, 2.51 percent.

The second most important feature of the five-year strategy concerns its reinforcement of the Blair government's law and order policy. This includes extending the "street crime initiative" that has been in operation for the last 18 months. Under this scheme, 50 children/young people aged 8 to 18 years old in a certain neighbourhood are identified as being likely to carry out minor criminal activity, and their names given to police, social workers and others supposedly to prevent this happening. In other words, young people living in the poorest areas are effectively criminalised simply on the say-so of a few individuals.

Parents are also to be held more accountable for their children's school attendance and behaviour through the extension of Parenting Contracts. Those who fail to abide by the agreement can be subject to fines and prosecution.

The five-year strategy further proposes extending the practice of removing "disruptive" pupils from classrooms, to in-school units or external pupil referral units. However, the reality is that those schools with the highest levels of social deprivation are full to the brim with disaffected young people and no matter how well meaning the staff, the increased workload and pressure to maintain targets means that many of these schools are little more than holding pens for the most disadvantaged. A similar situation exists in external pupil referral units, which are so full that schools are paid by the units to take a referred child in order to free up places for others who have been expelled.

Especially noteworthy are the document's suggestions regarding the provision of additional support to children with Special Educational Needs, ethnic minority groups and those deemed gifted and talented. Such assistance is to be provided by support workers, rather than teachers. Current workplace reforms being introduced into schools already have the requirement that support staff cover for absentee teachers.