

Britain's education white paper: A recipe for privatisation and social selection

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Labour's white paper on education, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, is the latest in the government's efforts to dismantle the comprehensive state education system in England and Wales.

Prime Minister Tony Blair touts the proposals as a means of ensuring greater equality of opportunity by driving up standards and tailoring education to "individual" capabilities and parental choice. Addressing the Northeast Economic forum in his Sedgefield constituency, he said that the "purpose of the schools white paper is to ensure that the choices now exercised only by the fortunate and the well-off can be given to all parents."

Currently a "postcode lottery" operates whereby better-off parents guarantee a place for their child at the more popular schools by buying homes in the area, the prime minister complained, which forces up property values in the neighbourhood of choice, further excluding poorer pupils.

Blair's criticisms are entirely cynical. Labour's policies have encouraged this process and, as with previous government reforms, the supposed concern for "equality of opportunity" is designed to sugarcoat right-wing policies that will only deepen the already growing social divide in education through greater selection.

The main "opportunities" contained in the white paper are made available to private capital in escalating its penetration of the education sector at taxpayers' expense. Blair has said the changes must be put "in the wider context of public service reform." There will be a market, "but it will only be a market in the sense of consumer choice, not a market based on private purchasing power."

Blair's statement is based on the fact that parents will not have to pay directly for their child's education. This will still be funded through taxation. But increasingly those taxes will be allotted to companies contracted to provide various education-related services, up to running whole schools.

Blair described this new role for the state, explaining that "as the system evolves, its hand will be lifted, except to help where help is needed. Our aim, explicitly, is to combine the drive for excellence, often associated with the right in politics, with the insistence that opportunity be open to all, the basic principles of the political left, in a public service system where the relationship between government and people is one of partnership; not central control or laissez-faire."

The "people" whom Blair wants as partners are corporate bosses. The white paper is a significant development on from Labour's previous policy of encouraging "academy schools," whereby private operators, from business or religious institutions, were encouraged to take over "failing" schools. The evangelical Vardy Foundation, for example, currently runs three state-funded schools, which teach creationism.

Under the latest plans, a new type of "self-governing" school trust is to be created run by other schools or "outside providers" which can take over individual schools or chains of schools. Blair has spoken of developing "national and regional education 'brands' whether led by good schools like Thomas Telford, established educational charities like the Mercers ... or linked to leading universities and business foundations."

Through these means, huge tranches of public finance are given over to private capital. This is key as far as private capital is concerned. Fee-paying education has always existed in Britain, but as it is only affordable by the top earners it comprises a small minority in the education sector. Offering companies access to government funds opens far broader vistas.

Many commentators have noted that there is a direct line of continuity between Blair's plans and those of the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, the term "self governing, independent state schools" employed by the government to describe its proposals borrows directly from Thatcher's Grant Maintained Schools, which similarly aimed at developing areas of "specialisation and competition", i.e., selection based on ability.

Then as now, a key component of this drive was to "free" schools from the control of Local Education Authorities. Labour's white paper envisages a situation in which LEAs act as "facilitators and mediators rather than providers" of education.

It is for this reason that the Tories have welcomed the new measures as a vindication of their GMS policy that had been reversed by Labour when it came to power in 1997.

The government's white paper stipulates that trust schools will be self-governing, independent of LEAs and have greater control over admissions and the curriculum. Although not for profit organisations, the aim is to encourage charities, universities and companies such as Microsoft to help form trusts. They will not be required to finance the schools, but to "offer expertise, advice and direction."

The encouragement of selection is the cornerstone of Labour's plan for education, even though they try to conceal this as best they can. As has always been the case in Britain, selection is portrayed by its advocates as a meritocratic system that rewards the academically gifted irrespective of social background.

But everyone involved knows that thanks to their greater opportunities—a more stable home environment, access to the arts, a culture of academic attainment, tuition by parents who are university graduates or by paid professionals—selection favours the better off. Though they may not be able to directly buy their child's way into a good school—either through paying fees or the postcode lottery cited by Blair—the can do so indirectly, and dominate even within a system

that is formally open to all.

The *Economist* October 29 commented, “If selection were not such a taboo for the Labour Party, the differences between Mr. Blair and Mr. Cameron [prospective Conservative leader] would be a good deal slighter.... In some ways the education white paper is more radical than has been generally realised. Although it pays lip service to a new role of LEAs as commissioners rather than providers of education services, the reality is that they are being stripped of most of their powers. The provisions to accelerate the closure and replacement of failing schools are draconian. A powerful new schools commissioner will work with schools to help turn them into trusts, while the vital capital allocations for extending existing schools or setting up new ones will be at the behest of the recently appointed Richard Bowker, the former chief executive of the Strategic Rail Authority and a diversity enthusiast.”

The proposals are “radical” not simply because they presage a return to the Thatcherite era but, as the Tories themselves had intended, to a version of the selective system that was established in the immediate postwar period under the 1944 Education Act. Then children sat exams at 11 years of age that creamed off the top achievers for grammar schools, whilst the majority of pupils attended secondary moderns. This formal distinction may not be replicated, but is implicit in the white paper.

Though the government says that children cannot be selected by ability, its code of practice on admissions is not binding. Schools that become trusts will be free to set selection criteria so that the admission system can be altered—or alternatively there can be banding according to ability.

Schooling is to be individually tailored, or personalized, with the government allocating £50 million towards so-called “gifted and talented education.” From 2006, all secondary schools will be required to identify g&t learners and from 2007 all primary schools will have to do so. A national register of all g&t learners is to be established.

The inclusion of primary schools into the proposals points to a huge expansion of a system already partially in place in secondary schools. Up to now government interference in primary schools has been to set a proscriptive curriculum and to mandate testing, with the dreaded literacy and numeracy hours. Although the league tables of results has always included test results at Key Stage 2 (age 11), it is inevitable that the process of selection will now extend into primary schools.

This is coupled with plans to make it easier for parents to select schools of their choice with the aid of a “schools commissioner” and to complain or replace school leadership where it is deemed to be failing.

The Education Network (TEN), an advisory body for local authorities, has said this will mean less popular schools, “many of which, in urban areas, will be amongst those serving predominantly poor communities,” will be closed. Under these conditions, Labour’s sop of giving pupils from the poorest areas free bus travel to take them to schools of their choice “may become a necessity for some children to attend any school.”

The government’s objectives are made clearer still by reports that it is working on a secret plan to “nationalise” private schools. Currently 7 percent of the school population attends fee-paying schools, rising to one in ten in London. Blair hopes to coopt private and religious schools into the state system, supposedly as a means of increasing pupil places. Once again, the result will be to divert public spending towards the encouragement of an education system geared towards the

privileged few.

Even so, there have been complaints from big business that the government has not gone far enough with its proposals, in its effort to render them more publicly acceptable.

Companies are said to have reacted “cautiously” to the proposed trust schools. Sunny Varkey, from the private education company Global Education Management Systems (Gems), which runs 50 schools internationally, complained, “Why didn’t they catch the bull by the horns? They are halfway through this half-cooked thing.”

Asking businesses to set up a charitable trust as a means of gaining entry to the state system was “dishonest,” he went on. “I don’t want to make a trust for the sake of making money. Make it a free market and the children will benefit,” he said, predicting that government would eventually have to relax any restrictions on companies running schools for profit.

Writing in the *Sunday Times* October 30, Chris Woodhead said that the government’s plans could not work because they had been watered down so as to be politically palatable.

Woodhead worked under the Major Conservative government in its Office for Standards in Education and had been a leading opponent of state-funded comprehensive education. His right-wing credentials, which had earned him the hatred of many working in education, ensured that his services were retained by the incoming Labour government until his sudden resignation in 2000.

Whilst Labour was taking a step in the right direction, “Companies such as Microsoft, which are said to be keen to ‘partner’ schools under the new arrangements, need their heads tested,” he wrote.

“You do not transform an institution if you do not have freedom to take the management decisions you deem necessary,” he went on, railing against those who could not accept “that the only way to raise school standards is to end the state monopoly.”

Referring to significant opposition amongst teachers and parents to the plans, the former general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, David Hart, said that people should stop “whingeing” about the proposals. The white paper stopped short of what was really necessary, he continued, which was to hire business executives to run schools directly.



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