

UK government outlines frontal assault on education

Jean Shaoul

7 December 2010

The British Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's Education White Paper is a frontal assault on teachers, the right of children to a decent education and the state provision of education.

Far from increasing the number of fully qualified teachers, improving the resources available to them, and reducing class sizes, the government is to deskill teaching and turn to unqualified staff.

As outlined in *The Importance of Teaching*, the white paper published November 24, the government is to tear up the present arrangements requiring teachers to have a one-year postgraduate qualification with predominantly university-based education and training, in favour of school-based training on the job. It means that children will be taught by trainee teachers.

This retrograde move flies in the face of Ofsted reports that show that university training outperforms “on the job” training. But for Michael Gove, the secretary of state for education, teaching is a “craft” or “something you learn in a work-based environment”.

Gove wants to “diversify” the routes into teaching. “Highflyers” wanting a new career will be offered an “accelerated route to leadership,” so that they will not have to start at the bottom. He is keen to encourage former soldiers with a degree to become teachers and will pay for their training. The government is even designing a “bespoke compressed” route for soldiers without a degree. The advocacy of former armed forces personnel in the classroom speaks of a government determined to discipline the young in schools that will be little more than boot camps.

Teachers will be required to focus on “core teaching skills, especially in teaching reading and mathematics and managing behaviour”. The “core” national curriculum is to be reduced in scope.

While promising to reduce testing of pupils to the end of primary and secondary education, the government will actually increase the amount of testing. First, it will introduce testing of six-year-olds. Second, it is to end the modular system of A-levels whereby students submit

coursework rather than taking examinations and can re-sit failed modules, and return to examination-based assessment. Third, it will introduce an English Baccalaureate, a new award, to pupils who achieve good GCSE passes in English, maths, science, a modern language, and a humanity (although the universities are to see their funding for humanities cut). Schools where students achieve this level will score extra points in the school league tables. The net effect will be to further the divide in the educational system in favour of those from more privileged backgrounds.

Head teachers would be given more powers to discipline pupils for activity, not just in schools but beyond the school gates. They will be able to search their pupils for phones and cameras, detain them within notice and use “reasonable” force. They will be able to permanently exclude pupils, while at the same time being responsible for finding and funding alternative education. The focus of inspections will be reduced but will now include pupil behaviour, as well as pupil attainment, teaching quality and school leadership.

The threshold for “failing” schools that triggers intervention is to be raised from 30 to 35 percent of pupils failing to achieve five GCSEs graded A* to C. Weak schools will be forced to become Academies—privately run but centrally funded schools.

At the core of the government's agenda is the dismantling of state education and a “free market” approach, but based on taxpayers' money—in the first instance at least. It wants private companies or voluntary groups to set up their own schools, including schools for children with special needs, under its flagship policy, the “Free Schools” programme, with public funding.

But new schools will need buildings. The government's solution, aimed at removing barriers to setting up free schools, is to suggest that pet shops, funeral parlours, pubs, takeaways and hair salons be converted into new schools without seeking planning permission. Free Schools will also be free to employ unqualified teachers.

All these proposals come on top of a cut in the schools

budget, announced in October's Comprehensive Spending Review, despite the government's promise to "protect" schools from the squeeze. In cash terms, the budget will barely keep up with inflation, rising from £35.4 billion in 2010-11 to £39 billion in 2014-15. This includes the government's much vaunted "Pupil Premium", which will see more money go to schools in deprived areas. Far from bringing extra funding, Gove admitted that this was not new money and many schools will lose out because of its introduction.

Under the guise of ending inequality of funding between sixth form colleges in schools and further education colleges, sixth form funding is to be slashed by £120 million, equal to a cut of £280 per student. It will put jobs, courses and student places at risk. This move comes as the compulsory participation age of pupils is to be raised to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015.

The coalition government has already cut the Information and Communications Technology budget twice and removed centralised technical support for schools. Taken together, with pupil numbers rising, the schools budget means a 2.4 percent reduction per pupil.

The government has also cut the school building programme by 60 percent. Yet there are too few classrooms to accommodate the children expected to need them. London alone estimates that it will need 28,000 more primary school places in the next four years.

Teachers' pay is to be cut. There is to be a pay freeze for all public sector workers earning more than £21,000 a year. Teachers are to pay on average 3 percent more a year in contributions to their pensions from 2012, saving the government £1.8 billion a year. National negotiations over teachers' pay is to be abolished, enabling head teachers to control pay levels and introduce performance related pay.

All this is to be imposed by creating a climate of fear and intimidation. The Department of Education's business plan, published two weeks ago, proposed to publish teachers' pay, qualifications and sick leave records for each school and include the details in league tables. This will give the green light to head teachers to harass and pressurise sick teachers back to work, or force them out of their job.

Gove had intended to end Local Authority control over education by funding schools directly via a "national funding formula", which would abolish a number of different grants and budgets and consolidate the rest that make up most of the £35 billion school budget. The Institute of Fiscal Studies estimated that at least 60 percent of secondary schools and 40 percent of primary schools would be worse off under such an arrangement. Facing opposition from Conservative-run councils, he has pulled back from

this for the time being, instead announcing a consultation over how it could be achieved.

Taken together with the 26 percent cuts in the Local Authorities' budgets that also fund some children's and young people's services, these measures will have a massive impact on the right to a decent education. Local councils have already expressed concern that they will not have the funding to fulfil their statutory duties.

The coalition government's plans for schools follow on seamlessly from those of the previous Labour government and the Conservative government before it. For decades, the trade unions involved in education and children's welfare have refused to lift a finger to prevent successive governments privatising schools by stealth, de-skilling both jobs and education and casualising the workforce. Instead, they collaborated with the myriad measures imposed by Labour aimed at dismantling the public provision of education.

This white paper has met with exactly the same response: absolutely no plans to mobilise teachers and oppose the government. The teaching unions have even welcomed aspects of the government's proposals, including the focus on disciplining pupils.

Not content with organising no opposition, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the largest teaching union, is keen to dissuade others from taking action. It has issued a statement saying that, "the NUT is not calling for school pupils to walk out of lessons and is advising members that they should not encourage pupils to leave their classes". Teachers' union NASUWT's response is to provide information for its members to lobby their members of parliament, and try to persuade the coalition government to change "its direction of travel".



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