

UK schools threatened with closure or privatisation

Jo Marsh

5 December 2011

England's schools inspectorate, Ofsted, is carrying out trials on the latest of a series of measures designed to pressure schools into either taking on academy status or facing closure.

Under the guise of "raising achievement", the government is making it impossible for schools, particularly those in areas of poverty and deprivation, to achieve "outstanding", "good" or even "satisfactory" inspection results. This will speed up the process of transferring all schools out of local authority control and into the hands of privately run "academy groups."

According to the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, "Schools with a notice to improve will be inspected three months after being put in this category and will be re-inspected within a further six months. If the school does not improve, it will be placed in special measures. Currently, schools receive a monitoring inspection six to eight months after their previous full inspection and are re-inspected after 12 to 16 months. For those placed in special measures, the process will be similarly accelerated."

This comes on top of a new inspection framework to be introduced in January 2012 that will reduce from 27 to just 4 the headings against which a school is judged. These are:

- The quality of teaching
- The quality of leadership and management
- The behaviour and safety of pupils
- The achievement of pupils.

These changes target schools working in disadvantaged communities because they focus on raw test results, removed from any social context. Schools with a large proportion of children speaking English as a second language, and/or children living in poverty will be expected to achieve exactly the same results as children from better-off areas.

Patrick Leeson, Ofsted's director of education, stated, "If you are judged by inspectors to be not promoting or achieving good enough rates of progress for pupils *whatever their starting point* [emphasis added], the school will be judged inadequate."

The *TES* reported, "Confidential Ofsted documents seen

by The *TES* suggest that more than 5,300 schools with below-average test results will be placed in special measures or given a notice to improve unless they can show they are 'closing the gap' with the national average."

Since the new framework was announced, school staff in deprived areas around the country have been working extra hours, attempting to meet these impossible targets.

Nick Davies's book, *The School Report: Why Britain's Schools Are Failing* (2001), pointed to research by Dr. Phil Budgell, former chief inspector of schools in Sheffield. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in its review (See *The School Report: Why Britain's Schools are Failing* — a book by Nick Davies.)

"Matching census data on household poverty with individual pupil's addresses, Budgell produced an index of disadvantage for Sheffield—a table ranking all 27 secondary schools according to their social intake. He then compared this with academic outcomes. The pattern was clear: more than 90 percent of the difference in exam results between schools was accounted for simply by reference to the poverty, gender and final-year attendance of the children enrolled there. Schools were only able to influence 5-10 percent of the outcome."

Since July, Ofsted has also been carrying out unannounced "dawn raids", designed to catch out schools with pupil discipline difficulties, again usually in areas with severe social problems.

The coalition government is continuing a process that began with the 1988 Education Act. Steered by then Conservative education secretary Kenneth Baker, it introduced League Tables for schools and pegged school budgets to the level of pupil intake. Since those schools that did not perform as well in the League Tables attracted fewer pupils, they received fewer resources, making efforts to combat their inbuilt disadvantages even more difficult.

As Baker admitted to Nick Davies at the time, "I would have liked to bring back selection, but I would have got into such controversy at an early stage that the other reforms would have been lost."

Asked whether he realised that his measures would effectively kill off the non-selective comprehensive schools introduced in 1968, Baker replied, “Oh, yes. That was deliberate. In order to make changes, you have to come from several points.”

In the same way, the coalition government is today attacking the state provision of education from many angles. The massive expansion of academies run by private groups is a major factor. Some 1,000 schools have converted since September 2010, bringing the total to 1,300. There are also now 40 so-called “Free Schools”, which can be set up by parents, teachers, charities and businesses and tend to be in more affluent areas.

The government is taking £1 billion of funding from local authority education budgets to enable academies to “buy in” services that up to now have been provided free by the Local Education Authorities (LEAs), usually from academy chains that are set to become privately run education authorities. The money is even being taken from LEAs where no academies exist to put further pressure on schools to convert.

Meanwhile, 100 new Teaching Schools have been established that will have a number of roles, including encouraging much more school-based rather than university-based training for teachers. This will downgrade training by basing it on mostly practical work, rather than developing a theoretical understanding guided by internationally developed pedagogical work. New applicants will have to go through a teaching school that will then allocate a university and influence the type of training teachers receive.

Most LEA advisors on specific subjects, who support teachers, have been made redundant, giving the lie to the idea that these developments are about “raising standards.”

The government is now proposing a new role called a Specialist Leader in Education (SLE), to be “brokered” by Teaching Schools. These “outstanding” teachers will not receive any extra pay, but will be expected to go into schools and “drive forward school improvement”—a service for which the teaching school will charge by the hour.

Importantly, academies and free schools are not bound by the current pay system for teachers. As educational author Phil Beadle explained, “By implementing a system that requires education to be funded by the state, but controlled by an ever-increasing number of voluntary sector sponsors, they destroy the unions’ ability to negotiate pay and conditions centrally and, in doing so, make it virtually impossible to retain any cohesive national pay agreement.”

This is a well-thought out divisive manoeuvre that comes alongside the recent attack on teachers’ pensions.

It is no accident that the former education director of one of the biggest academy groups, ARK (Absolute Return for Kids), Sir Michael Wilshaw, a man known for his adherence

to strict discipline and a traditional curriculum, has recently been appointed Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools from January.

The emphasis on behaviour in the new Ofsted framework is a response to the growing social crisis and the lack of perspective for young people, whose options are being closed down as the Educational Maintenance Allowance is withdrawn, university fees have risen to a prohibitive £9,000 per year and unemployment rises inexorably.

Under these conditions, young people are less motivated to struggle to understand difficult subjects, and behaviour in schools has deteriorated. The response of Wilshaw and the government—by enforcing almost military discipline and with ever-stronger sanctions (including the abolition, in this year’s Education Act, of the requirement to give notice for detention)—is to try and force young people to conform and fear authority.

Wilshaw has already signalled his plans to continue attacks on teachers, saying, “What we’ve got to do in schools is ensure that there are strong performance management systems in schools, very robust ones, to identify not just the hopelessly ineffective and incompetent teacher, but also those that are coasting and letting children down.”

It is not teachers who are letting children down, but an outmoded system designed for a small minority to achieve success while failing the majority. This education system cannot be reformed within capitalism and certainly not by the measures being introduced today, which are aimed at privatising schools, narrowing the curriculum to the “basics” needed to perform low-paid menial work and further widening the educational gap between rich and poor.

Only a complete reorganisation of education under democratic workers’ control can create the conditions for children to fulfil their potential and develop culturally to appreciate the world and flourish within it.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact