PICKING UP THE PIECES

Issues facing the English School System

1.   Aims

There is no agreed set of aims for the education system against which achievement and policies can be judged. Consequently narrow measurable targets have dominated the debate over how well the system is performing. These have had the effect of distorting and narrowing what goes on in schools.

Actions

- *Develop a statement setting out the aims of education;*
- *Ensure that this statement has broad support amongst all stakeholders and that it contains a commitment to inclusive education and full regard for the diversity of our population;*
- *Identify how the achievement of these aims can be assessed at national and at school level;*
- *Ensure that all aspects of education policy and practice contribute to the achievement of these aims.*
- *Require schools to work with other providers of children's services so as to meet the broader objectives of Every Child Matters.*

2.   Democracy

Opportunities for local communities to have any influence over their local school system are being diminished and decision-making is being concentrated in the DfE. Academies and free schools are not locally accountable and key information is often unavailable because they are regarded as private institutions. The values of collaboration and partnership are being undermined.

Actions

- *Establish clear responsibilities for local authorities in planning, commissioning and monitoring of all schools in their area;*
- *Ensure that local communities are empowered to play an active role in the planning, commissioning and monitoring of education provision in their area;*
- *Require all state funded schools and any linked trusts and sponsors, the DfE and all government agencies to be accountable for their decisions and for the use of public money by complying with freedom of information and publishing data of all kinds.*
- *Place a duty on all schools to collaborate in meeting the needs of all pupils (for example by ensuring access to the full range of 14 to 19 courses) and in enabling teachers to share best practice.*
- *Restore a working partnership with trade unions and re-establish a national framework for pay and working conditions*

3.   Politicisation

A democratic and decentralised structure of education was established in 1944 so as to ensure that power to control ideas, culture and thinking were not concentrated in one person's hands. However, education has become increasingly politicised. Too much control over curriculum and pedagogy is now concentrated in the hands of the Secretary of State, resulting in unacceptable centralisation.

Actions

- *Establish an independent Office for Educational Standards with the responsibility for identifying and sharing best practice and promoting evidence based policy making;*
- *Establish structures at arm's length from ministers for the detailed development and management of the curriculum and examinations.*

4.   Selection and Access

In areas where there is selection by test, too many pupils are denied opportunities with the result that overall attainment is lower than it should be. Moreover admission arrangements are becoming ever more complex as more schools set their individual criteria. This makes it harder for parents to make informed choices and in some cases prevents them getting access to their local school. There is evidence that Fair Access procedures are breaking down with damaging effects on the education of vulnerable pupils. There is a serious shortage of school places, currently in primary but soon in secondary as well.

Actions

- *End immediately the system of partial selection by "aptitude" and require local authorities to end all selection by testing;*
- *Revise the admissions code with the aims of ensuring more consistent and transparent admissions criteria and reducing socio-economic segregation;*
- *Require all schools to publish background information on both applicants and pupils admitted as proposed by the RSA Academies Commission;*
- *Ensure that all schools co-operate in fair access arrangements to ensure that the needs of excluded and vulnerable pupils are met in an equitable way;*
- *Make local authorities responsible for planning to meet the shortage of places (including for the full range of special educational needs) and give them the powers and resources needed to do this effectively;*
- *Allocate capital resources according to the need for school places and for the refurbishment of existing schools.*

5.   Achievement

Many young people achieve excellent results in schools in all parts of the country. However more young people fail to achieve the standards needed to succeed in adult life than in many other school systems. This underachievement is particularly to be found amongst some ethnic groups (including some white pupils), boys and children from poorer families. These gaps were reduced by the Labour government but are now likely to be reinforced by increasing poverty, worsening socio-economic segregation and the narrowing of the curriculum and approaches to assessment.

Actions

- *Ensure all children have access to high quality, free early years provision and re-establish the network of Sure Start centres;*
- *Reduce the current concentration of children from poorer homes in particular schools;*
- *Ensure that pupils falling behind have the personal support needed to catch up;*
- *Build on the example of the London and City Challenges to help raise attainment and narrow achievement gaps in other areas;*
- *Ensure that all effective schools make an appropriate contribution to system wide improvement, for example through partnerships with other schools or by leading professional development in their area;*
- *Require local authorities to take the lead in supporting and intervening in schools where standards are unacceptable;*
- *Reverse the policy of narrowing the curriculum and ensure that the curriculum and the examination system are designed to motivate and support children and young people at risk of under-achievement;*
- *Improve the quality of teaching (see 10).*

6. Curriculum

Current plans for the curriculum are incoherent. The National Curriculum no longer applies to many schools. The government's emerging curriculum is not based on any statement of aims and is largely confined to factual content. It is not being planned as a connected whole, varies wildly in respect of the level of prescription and is based largely on ministers' views rather than a professional and stakeholder consensus.

Actions

Revise the National Curriculum so that it:
- *Addresses all the aims of education (as required by section 1 above);*
- *Provides an outline entitlement for all children and young people;*
- *Provides a coherent curriculum from the early years to post 16;*
- *Allows substantial scope for local area and school level curriculum planning and development;*
- *Applies to all state funded schools;*
- *Removes the distortion caused by the English "Baccalaureate" and restores the place of artistic, technical practical and physical education in the overall curriculum at least up to age 16;*
- *Adequately meets the needs of pupils of all abilities and backgrounds and takes full account of the range of learning difficulties and disabilities.*

Ensure that this curriculum:
- *Is supported by a comprehensive and independent information, advice and guidance service;*
- *Leads on to a comprehensive programme of post school opportunities.*

7. Examinations

The volume of high stakes testing has already led to a narrowing of both the content of the curriculum and approaches to teaching. Current planned changes to the examination system will worsen this. This is because of the over-riding focus on the English Baccalaureate subjects and the narrow range of assessment techniques to be used. Moreover the proposed implementation process and timetable is widely considered to represent a substantial risk.

Actions

- *Ensure that, as the participation age is raised to 18, a coherent 14 to 19 phase is planned that offers all young people appropriate recognition of their educational achievement;*
- *Require all qualifications to use assessment techniques which enable young people to demonstrate a wide range of skills and qualities as well as knowledge and are accessible to those with specific learning difficulties;*
- *Ensure that there are a broad range of qualifications, academic, practical and vocational, which enable young people to access the full range of post school opportunities;*
- *Reduce the volume and cost of examinations especially at age 16.*
- *End national external testing in primary schools and separate diagnostic assessment of pupils from the assessment of school effectiveness*

8. Inefficiency

The Public Accounts Committee has identified a huge and unjustified overspend on the academies programme. Current policies are also leading to the creation of school places where there is no shortage with a consequent waste of both capital and revenue. As there is now no effective oversight of many schools, there is a significant and growing risk of financial mismanagement and even fraud. As the number of

academies increases, centralised monitoring through the Education Funding Agency will become increasingly crude and ineffective.

Actions:
- *Require local authorities to monitor financial management in all state funded schools;*
- *Prevent any organisation from taking a profit from the management of state funded schools;*
- *Require all trusts and sponsors to publish full details of their activities and their financial affairs as is normally required of public bodies;*
- *Ensure that new school places are only created where there is a clear demand for them.*
- *Ensure that all private training providers maintain high standards of both teaching and learning and financial management*

9. Inequality between Schools

There is both a practical and a perceived inequality between schools. Too many schools openly practice complete or partial academic selection and others find ways of covertly manipulating their intakes. Academies and free schools have been funded more generously than other schools. There is a widespread perception of a hierarchy of schools which distorts intakes and leads to an unacceptable level of socio-economic segregation. International OECD research has identified this as one factor that contributes to higher levels of underachievement.

Actions:
- *Place all publicly funded schools within a common administrative and legal framework;*
- *Give all schools the same freedoms and responsibilities;*
- *Reform admissions procedures and end selection;*
- *Revise the school funding rules so as to ensure that all schools are funded on the same basis.*
- *Restore the right of local areas to determine their local funding formulae;*

10. Professionalism

In high achieving countries teaching is a high status profession. Initial teacher education is rigorous and challenging, sometimes to masters level. There is clear evidence that current policies are alienating a very high proportion of teachers. Schools are subjected to a punitive accountability regime. Structures supporting professional development have collapsed in many areas. Scope for professional innovation has been reduced and a culture of conformity is being imposed.

Actions:
- *Restore the independence of Her Majesty's Inspectorate;*
- *Redesign published performance data so that it recognises the achievements of all pupils, promotes high standards in all areas of the curriculum, is not based on narrow testing and takes account of pupils' starting points;*
- *Recognise that pedagogy is a professional issue and establish structures for the professional dissemination of research findings and best practice;*
- *Ensure that teaching is seen as a high status profession with high academic and professional expectations of all new entrants, including qualified teacher status;*
- *Enable all teachers to have access to high quality professional development including opportunities for school to school collaboration.*