

STANDARDS, FREEDOM, CHOICE:

Essays to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary
of the 1988 Education Reform Act

Edited by Edward Wild



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List of Abbreviations

CTC	City technology college
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher education
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
LEA	Local education authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UTC	University technical college

Foreword

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP

In the beige waiting room of the Department for Education, 30 Education Secretaries hang in serried line. From Rab Butler to Shirley Williams, Anthony Crosland to Margaret Thatcher, they bear testimony to over half a century of radical change – in schools, governments, ideologies and hair styles.

Few can claim to have been more influential than Margaret Thatcher, not for what she achieved in that post, but in appointing Sir Keith Joseph and Kenneth Baker to join her Cabinet she and they transformed the education system. To look back at this remarkable duo's time in office, from my position now, is to be humbled by what they achieved.



Between 1981 and 1989 – the years which led up to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the smashing of the Iron Curtain and a revolution in technology – these two remarkable men reshaped our nation's education system for good. Their mission in Government was the cause which drives our reforms today: to give children from the very poorest homes the quality of education hitherto enjoyed only by the rich.

In the Education Reform Act of 1988 – and the years of painstaking preparation which preceded it – they laid the foundation stones on which our modern school system rests. Assessing the Act now with the benefits of hindsight and history, one is immediately struck not just its ambition but by its scope. As Lord Carlisle (Education Secretary 1979-81) reflected later, “there was a heck of a lot in it”.

Although no rival to the 1993 Education Act in length – at a hundred thousand words long, the longest piece of legislation in the annals of British education – the provisions within the 1988 Act's pages were both radical and wide-ranging. From the introduction of a National Curriculum to the establishment of Ofsted, the first transfer of power from local authorities to schools and the first national testing at age 7, 11 and 14 – it was dazzlingly bold.

But most of all, the Act sought to give the public a greater insight into the state and standard of their education system. The ‘Great Debate’ kicked off by Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's Ruskin speech of 1976 had tended to treat the content and standard of education as a “secret garden”, closed to everyone outside the teaching profession. The Act opened the garden gate, and invited every parent and pupil to step inside.

Battling powerful and occasionally vicious opposition from teaching unions and local authorities, the Act gave the taxpaying public an opportunity to see what their education system was delivering – what was being taught, and when; which schools were performing well, and which were failing dismally; who was succeeding and (even more importantly) who was being left behind. It is thanks to 1988 that we can today have a national debate about the content and detail of our nation's curriculum; that we can all, educational experts and laymen alike, exert the scrutiny which ensures that every child is progressing well, and gives extra help to those who need it.

Introducing the legislation, Lord Baker declared “I would sum up the Bill’s 169 pages in three words – standards, freedom and choice”. The same principles inspire our reforms today. A quarter of a century later, Conservatives in Government are still fighting to drive up standards and drive out secrecy, to give parents and pupils greater choice and greater evidence to inform that choice.

Without the 1988 reforms, we would be forever locked out of that secret garden – and too many children, particularly those from the most disadvantaged homes, would finish education without the knowledge, skills and qualifications which are the key to a successful and fulfilling adult life.

November 2013

Introduction

The Education Reform Act of 1988 was one of the most influential pieces of UK education legislation to be passed in the 20th century. The provisions of the Act brought about a comprehensive reform of the 1944 ‘Butler’ Education Act, and have had a profound impact on the development of the UK’s education system over the last 25 years.

The 1988 Act contained a number of major provisions:

- The National Curriculum and ‘Key Stages’ created uniform subjects and educational objectives for each age band;
- Grant-maintained schools enabled primary and secondary schools to detach themselves from their local education authority and instead receive full funding from central government;
- Local management of schools allowed schools to transfer control over their finances from LEAs to the head teacher and governors;
- City technology colleges (CTCs) made for newly autonomous schools (financially and otherwise) with partial private funding. Ultimately only 15 were set up, but CTCs were the precursor to the subsequent establishment of academies;
- Parents were given the option to specify a preferred choice of school;
- Controls were placed on the use of the term ‘degree’, and tenure abolished for academics appointed on or after the 20th November 1987.

The essays that follow study the Act from every angle. **Graham Stewart** sets the scene with the historical context and **Nick Stuart** discusses the battles in Whitehall and Westminster to take the legislation from Bill to Act. **Dick Palmer** and **Martin Stephen** assess the impact for those working in education, looking at how schools adapted to their newfound independence – for better or worse – and considering some of the consequences of the Act that may have been less than intentional. **Wendy Piatt** stresses the benefits of autonomy for universities, and urges policymakers not to forget this lesson. **Neil Carmichael** looks to the Act 25 years on, as its far reaching initiatives form the basis for current policymaking.

To mark this anniversary, Wild Search has invited a broad range of politicians, educationalists and policymakers to provide their own reflections on the Act and its effects, and how future education policy shall be set. We hope it will be both stimulating to read and capture the essence of this milestone in UK education policy.

Edward Wild
Westminster
November 2013

Money alone is not enough

Dr Graham Stewart

'I haven't found the levers yet' was Sir Keith Joseph's unabashed response to a journalist's inquiry into how he was enjoying being in charge of education, following his appointment as Secretary of State in 1981. Joseph was famously self-critical, but in confessing his failure to exert control he was not reflecting upon personal failings alone. His main target was the limited power that the Department of Education could exercise on schools and what was taught in them. In contrast to the greater level of intervention enjoyed by education ministers in other western European countries, the Department of Education in Whitehall was focussed upon the overall structure of schooling and the spending devoted to it. Its ability to shape what actually went on in the classroom was limited.

It was not just liberal progressives, teacher trade unions and local authorities who opposed greater centralisation over the direction of education policy. Many supporters of traditional methods and mainstream Conservatives also considered giving more power to the Education Secretary an affront to localism and the good judgement of the teaching profession.

The extent to which the Conservative Party's commitment to 'localism' (which at that time meant upholding the rights of local authorities – which were the real arbiters of school policy and staff appointment in their area) even when this resulted in negative consequences was exemplified during Edward Heath's government of 1970 and 1974. Heath's Education Secretary, Margaret Thatcher, was an advocate of grammar schools. However, she was hamstrung by her party's avowal that it was up to local authorities to determine what sort of school was appropriate in their area. She was duly left impotent to stop local authorities across Britain embracing the sweeping fashion for abolishing academic selection in favour of mixed-ability comprehensive schools.

For the rest of the 1970s, Labour and the Conservatives continued to fight more over the structure of schools than the quality and content of teaching. In this tussle, Labour seized the initiative by abolishing direct grant schools (which proved an own goal since most of them – among them the most successful schools in the country – fled into the independent sector rather than become 'one size fits all' comprehensives).

The education battlegrounds in the 1979 and 1983 general elections were marked out by Labour's promise to kill-off the few remaining grammar schools and starve the independent sector into surrender by removing its charitable status, while the Conservatives promised to leave them alone. But even with Conservative victories in both elections, there was to be no rolling back of the comprehensive school tide. Grammar schools did not return where they had been lost. Trying to maintain access to an academic schooling for those of talent but of slender means instead came through the fee-support of the Assisted Places Scheme (which lasted until 1997 when it became one of the first measures to be abolished by Tony Blair's government).

The actual running of schools and the nature of the curriculum continued to lie mostly beyond Whitehall's purview and those expecting an immediate upsurge in school standards following the Conservatives' return to power were to be disappointed. Much of first Mark Carlisle's and then Sir Keith Joseph's time as Education Secretary was instead spent dealing with the fallout from the spending cuts that the Department found necessary to impose at a time when recession was shrinking tax receipts and increasing welfare payments. The philosophically-minded, self-questioning, Joseph proved no match for the massed battalions of moral certainty marshalled by the National Union of Teachers. During 1985, the teaching unions organised a succession of strikes over their members' pay and conditions.

This is not to say that major reforms were not pushed through. One area where the Department of Education, rather than local authorities, could directly influence schooling was by shaking-up the exam system. While concerned by low academic standards in so many schools, Joseph was also a convinced believer in the value of vocational study and the encouragement of entrepreneurial skills. As such, he was troubled by a system in which non-academic pupils left with little of value to show for their efforts and this partly underlay the decision in 1986 to dismantle the two tier exam certificate system of (more easily marked, often vocational) CSEs and O-levels in order to create a single tier GCSE exam system.

What was more, some of the foundations for the 1988 Education Act were laid during Joseph's tenure. Although the Conservatives' manifesto for the 1983 general election reaffirmed the status quo that, 'exactly how the money is spent, and how schools are run, is up to local education authorities' the belief that standards could be driven up by greater parent power was also trumpeted and this was to be one of the key themes of Tory education policy.

Having allowed parents to challenge their local authority's decision on which comprehensive school their children attended (previously parents had enjoyed no automatic right of appeal), Joseph believed that they could better hold schools to account if they had the information to do so.

Previously, the findings of HM Inspectorate reports on schools had been strictly secret. In trying to make these verdicts public, Joseph had to fight off his department's ingrained hostility to disclosure – but he succeeded. He also increased the number of inspections and assessments of teacher performances (though sacking teachers for anything other than gross misconduct remained difficult). Furthermore, schools would henceforth have to publish prospectuses that included such information as their exam results. Again, schools had previously enjoyed the right to conceal such evidence from public scrutiny – as if it was no business of parents to know how the school to which they entrusted their children was actually performing.

Permitting greater and more informed parental power continued to be seen as the driver-up of standards. But with school policy largely determined by the town hall's local education authorities, there were limits to what could reasonably be achieved through parent activism alone unless the parents were to become local councillors themselves with all the other competing interests that standing for election involved.

In particular, there was – as the Tories saw it – the problem that as the 1980s progressed, mid-term dissatisfaction with Thatcher's government helped return increasingly left-wing Labour councils. The ensuing battle between Whitehall and town hall was not just about education, it covered almost every area of local provision and the sums raised locally to pay for them (resulting first in rate-capping and then, in a disastrous misjudgement, with the poll tax). Nevertheless, it was the actions of a few councils that particularly undermined the cause of local authority control of schooling.

Some of the policies became notorious. The Inner London Education Authority championed teaching the children of immigrants in their 'mother tongue' rather than English. Haringey council launched courses in homosexuality for nursery school children. Brent council began recruiting 180 'race advisers' whose job it was to sit at the back of classrooms monitoring the 'progress and attitudes' of teachers towards their ethnic minority pupils at a time when the borough's education budget was under pressure and senior teachers with considerable experience were resigning over what they claimed was a culture of politically motivated witch hunts. These were among the exceptional cases but, for the Left, they proved Pyrrhic victories in that they succeeded in irritating the Conservatives so successfully that the Government dropped its previous defence of local authority autonomy over the running of schools and staff appointment.

It was against this backdrop that the Conservatives' 1987 election manifesto concluded that attempts, so far, to raise standards had largely failed. 'Money alone is not enough' it admitted. 'Increased resources have not produced uniformly higher standards. Parents and employers are rightly concerned that not enough children master the basic skills, that some of what is taught seems irrelevant to a good education and that standards of personal discipline and aspirations are too low. In certain cases education is used for political indoctrination.'

The belief that in many local authority schools even the basics of English, maths and science were not being taught ensured the enforcement of a national curriculum, with testing at the ages of 7, 11 and 14 to measure pupil progress ahead of the GCSE exams at age 16. Even Labour's 1987 manifesto had come round to the conclusion that 'a common system of assessment for all 16 year olds which will encourage effort and accurately record achievement at school' was necessary, albeit with the emphasis not on mastering the basics but upon ensuring 'a broad, balanced and comprehensive curriculum, providing genuinely equal opportunities for boys and girls, and for the ethnic minorities to meet the needs of our multi-cultural society.'

For the Tories, having a national curriculum facilitated the overall goal of providing comprehensible information upon which parents could assess how their children's schools were performing and the path was accordingly cleared for what, during the 1990s, would become school league tables.

Two other provisions which were central to Kenneth Baker's 1988 Education Reform Act seemed, at the time, to be damp squibs only to prove central to how schooling has subsequently developed. The first was the institution of City Technology Colleges which were funded by central government (with additional business sponsorship) rather than local government with the aim of offering a schooling that while adhering to the National Curriculum would have a scientific and technological focus. Meant for inner city areas, they ran up against the problem of self-interested local authorities refusing to grant them planning permission. Only fifteen opened, though they were to prove a motivation for the academy schools of the early 21st century.

The other main feature of the 1988 Act was the confirmation that schools could break free from their local council's education authorities. School heads and governors were given the right to manage how their budget allocation was spent and to decide who to appoint. They even gained the right – if parents and governors voted for it – to opt out of local authority control altogether, their finances being supplied directly from central government instead under what was termed 'grant maintained' status. By such means, they could gain autonomy to run their own affairs.

In the short term, it was a liberty few chose to grasp. Out of 24,000 schools, only 50 opted for grant maintained status by the end of 1990. The term 'opt out' was perhaps unfortunate, in that it encouraged the misinformed to believe that it meant leaving the state sector and was a form of 'back door privatisation.' The prospect of a returning Labour government abolishing the status also made some schools understandably reluctant to take the plunge.

Indeed, Tony Blair's government duly rushed to abolish grant maintained schools in 1997. However, three years later Blair's administration found itself doing a partial u-turn, recreating aspects of the grant maintained concept for the new academy schools that proliferated outside direct local authority control and which, thereafter supported by the Coalition government, numbered over 3,300 by the autumn of 2013.

When we view the legacy of Kenneth Baker's 1988 Education Reform Act we should thus remember the work of his predecessor, Keith Joseph, in settling the ground, but also look forward to the influence of Andrew Adonis and Michael Gove in resurrecting the powerful notion that localism can mean self-government rather than local government.

From Bill to Act

Nick Stuart

Many of the intellectual foundations for the Education Reform Act were laid in discussions at the Education Department in Keith Joseph's tenure as Secretary of State. He set out the case for a national school curriculum but wished to see it introduced by broad agreement; he introduced more powerful school governing bodies in the 1986 Act and defined their role and the role of the headteachers, but left local authorities largely in charge; he played with ideas for schools opting out of local authority control but shied away from them; and he put ILEA (the Inner London Education Authority) on notice but stopped short of abolition. In the year leading up to the 1987 general election, Kenneth Baker crystallised the many long debates that had gone before into the ingredients for legislation. It was his political skills that moved us from contemplating educational reform to doing it.

The 1987 Conservative Party manifesto sketched out the principal reforms, most of which had been foreshadowed in announcements made over the previous months. The Conservatives would legislate:

- For a national core curriculum with attainment tests at 7, 11 and 14 to measure pupil progress;
- For local management for schools: within 5 years all governing bodies of secondary schools and many primary schools would be given control over their own budgets;
- To increase parental choice by requiring schools to enrol children up to the physical capacity of each school and by establishing City Technology Colleges funded directly by central government;
- For state schools to opt out of local authority control as grant maintained schools;
- To enable Inner London Boroughs to opt out of ILEA and take over provision of education in their area;
- To make polytechnics and other direct grant FE institutions free standing statutory corporations independent of local authority control and to delegate budgets to the remaining FE colleges.

With the election won, the government was in a hurry. Margaret Thatcher told me that education would be the flagship bill in the first session of the new parliament. It had to be ready. She gave me more civil service resources by agreeing to an open competition for additional staff. Time was short. In the Department I put together interlocking teams, each responsible for a key aspect of the Bill. We set about defining the policy and setting out the detail in consultation documents. Whilst we consulted – largely over the school holiday period, to the outrage of the education service – the legislation was being drafted in parallel.

The Bill was introduced into Parliament inside six months and had its second reading on the 1st December 1987. Against the better judgement of the Parliamentary Draftsman, it was called the Education Reform Bill: he regarded the word “reform” as superfluous since that was the purpose of any bill. We regarded it as symbolic of fundamental change, a watershed in education legislation with profound consequences for the service.

The passage of the legislation did not go smoothly. There was relatively little controversy over the provisions for the national curriculum, which established the notion of a broad and balanced curriculum with the core subjects of maths, English and science at its heart. Keith Joseph was virtually a lone voice as he opposed the notion of a statutory curriculum in the Lords. Nor did the relatively modest proposal for more open enrolment and the more far-reaching provisions for the delegation of financial budgets to schools take up much parliamentary time. There were, however, two formidable boulders on which the Bill almost foundered – the provisions for London and for religious education and collective worship.

Privately, I had expressed doubts to Kenneth Baker shortly after the election about the feasibility of dismembering ILEA in a piecemeal fashion as and when individual boroughs sought to opt out. It would make what was left behind unworkable, create permanent uncertainty, and lead to ineffective education and bad value for money. I do not know what Kenneth Baker thought but he told me that he was committed to legislating for the proposals as set out in the party manifesto. As early as the second reading debate, it became clear that the provisions we had drafted could not stand: they were criticised by both Norman Tebbit and Michael Heseltine, both of whom argued succinctly for ILEA’s abolition. In due course, Kenneth Baker acquiesced: new provisions for the abolition of ILEA were introduced at report stage and, despite some strong opposition in the House of Lords led by the Bishop of London, this version prevailed.

The revisions issues proved much more formidable. Issues surrounding church schools and religious education had bedevilled virtually every piece of education legislation up to 1944; I thought that the religious settlement embedded in the 1944 Act had effectively resolved them. Not a bit of it. First, the Roman Catholic hierarchy were deeply hostile to the notion that Roman Catholic voluntary aided schools should be able to opt out of LEA control against the wishes of the Diocesan authorities. Papal Bills were brandished at us. This was resolved only by the Duke of Norfolk who became convinced that it would be wrong if alone among parents, Roman Catholics were denied the right to vote for and to choose grant-maintained status. More difficult yet were issues around the content and nature of religious education and collective worship in non-church schools, including grant-maintained schools and CTCs.

There were distant rumbles of thunder during the passage of the Bill in the Commons. After discussion with the churches, it was conceded that religious education should form part of the basic curriculum which would take its place “before the core and foundation subjects”.

In addition, it was agreed to introduce a series of clauses in the Lords to enhance the role of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs). But, though welcomed by the Bishop of London, that was not enough. Led by Baroness Cox, a substantial body of peers came out in favour of strengthening the Bill to clarify that the nature of religious education and collective worship in schools should be predominantly Christian. She introduced amendments to that effect with all-party support.

A further amendment to require all maintained schools to take part in an act of Christian worship every day led to the deeply embarrassing situation of the Bishop of London facing defeat, saved only by the government ensuring that the majority of those present abstained, postponing a decision.

There followed exhaustive consultation behind the scenes over the following month. The Bishop returned to the Lords on the 21st June with a package of amendments which received widespread support. Not a compromise, said the Bishop, but:

“A positive and creative approach to religious education which, while taking the interests of all seriously, achieves the...aims...of acknowledging and providing for the valid concerns of other faiths, which is appropriate to our educational system, recognising that those who profess those faiths are part of our nation, and at the same time securing the centrality of the Christian tradition of this country.”

Although the seismic struggles over religious education and collective worship took up much energy and effort at the time, their subsequent impact has been small. Elsewhere, the impact was profound. We moved quickly. At an education conference that autumn, I promised a blizzard of regulations and circulars of guidance to implement the principal provisions of the Act. We worked with local authorities to ensure that all of them had submitted acceptable schemes of financial delegation to all their schools by April 1989. The National Curriculum Council and the Schools Examination and Assessment Council, already in shadow form, were formally established. Work on detailed curriculum schemes for each of the foundation subjects by committees established by the Secretary of State was already well underway. ILEA was abolished by April 1990 when each of the Inner London Boroughs and the City of London assumed its education functions. Schemes of financial delegation to FE colleges were rapidly introduced and the polytechnics were incorporated, funded by the new Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council.

This account is written from the viewpoint of civil servants working at the time to create and put on the statute book a ground-breaking piece of legislation whose impact continues to reverberate today. It was a remarkable effort accomplished in the teeth of much hostility and intransigence from the greater part of the education service. At a conference in Devon, I was confronted by Conservative councillors, deeply opposed to the reforms, who accused me of leading a malign civil service conspiracy, which had subverted Kenneth Baker. There have been many more Education Acts since 1988 but in large measure they have built on the foundations established then. At second reading, Kenneth Baker said that the Act could be summarised in three words: standards, freedom and choice. In 2013, they are still the hallmarks of reform.

A tumultuous time

Dick Palmer

From my vantage point working in colleges in London, the period around the 1988 Education Reform Act, and the major developments that ensued, was both a tumultuous and exciting time – both in a professional and a personal context. The new freedoms afforded to colleges were in many ways a forerunner of the freedoms and flexibilities we see being extended today to academies, free schools and UTCs. The experiences of the FE sector during the late 1980s and the 1990s highlight that there were both benefits and some key challenges surrounding this particular policy thrust. And for me, it meant moving to the capital where I hoped to see educational innovation at its best.

Arriving in London in 1987, having been a main grade lecturer in Leeds and York, I took up post as a Senior Lecturer at South East London Technical College (SELTEC), before moving on to become Director of Computing at South London College around the time of the break-up of ILEA. I returned to SELTEC in 1992 (which by then had become Lewisham College), as a Director of Faculty, with the incorporation of colleges beckoning. As my career in FE was developing, so the sector was changing radically – with changes being even more pronounced in London because of the abolition of ILEA.

On one level ILEA brought clear benefits. The authority was influential and provided a strong voice for London's schools and colleges, with the result that they enjoyed a larger share of the national funding pot than might otherwise have been the case. Great news for London – but not such a good deal for colleges in the rest of the country, in places like Leeds where I had come from or Norfolk where I was eventually to move on to. ILEA was also in a position to provide pan-London resources and support for the schools and colleges under its umbrella – for example, in the form of professional development centres and IT labs that could be used by lecturers and teachers across the capital.

However, all of this came at a cost. ILEA felt like it had become a huge administrative entity, with a very large staff, occupying a big part of County Hall. Add to this the ILEA-run training and other facilities throughout London and you had a lot of resources from the education budget which were not going directly to the frontline of schools and colleges. Furthermore, ILEA inevitably created an added tier of bureaucracy, sandwiched between the education department on the one hand and the London boroughs on the other.

The 1988 Act and the dissolution of ILEA was a first decisive step on the road to independence for London's further education colleges. Initially this was a mixed blessing as it quickly became apparent that the local authorities often did not have the infrastructure and experience for dealing with colleges. The local authorities knew about working with schools, but they did not know about colleges in the same way ILEA had. Of course this was to be a short-lived problem, as colleges were to be completely set free from local authority control after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

Almost twenty years ago, the flexibilities and freedom from local authority control that successive governments have given to academies were being already pioneered by colleges.

In a few short years colleges had gone from being accountable to London's mega local authority in the form of ILEA, to being directly run by the local authorities, to independence. Needless to say, there was a lot of positioning taking place between the colleges and the local authorities during this period. As with academies today, there was a lot to work out between independent institutions working to their strengths and doing what they saw as best for their patch, and a local authority charged with taking a view across a wider area and meeting the needs of all learners in its vicinity.

The new-found freedoms for colleges in the post-incorporation era brought about a complete culture change. Where previously the London colleges had all been part of the ILEA family, they were for the first time in open competition. With travel between London boroughs being so easy for students, then as I believe it is still now, this competition was real and effective. This led to greater differentiation between colleges. We started building our own unique selling points: promoting ourselves for having a particularly strong computing offer, or for our basic skills provision, or serving the needs of our ESOL students, and so on. Colleges started branding and marketing themselves openly, in direct competition with one another. Increased choice for students in London was a reality that genuinely enhanced the learning opportunities available.

We can see many of the same processes happening today with academies, academy chains and free schools differentiating themselves from the competition and seeking to offer parents and students increased choice. However, what worked so well in the London context does not necessarily translate readily to the rest of the country. Certainly in Norfolk, where I am based, issues of rurality and the availability and cost of transport represent a huge practical barrier to truly effective choice being realised for large numbers of students.

In reflecting on the 1988 Education Reform Act and the path to colleges' independence, it is also important to remember there were some significant hiccups along the way. If the only accountability lies with the centre, we saw that people will work out ways of getting around it. There was clearly poor behaviour by some institutions, resulting in notorious cases around franchising and financial mismanagement at colleges such as Bilston and Halton.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the college experience, it is this: bring on greater freedoms and flexibilities, as this enables well-run institutions to do so much more for their students, employers and the community; but, this has got to be counterbalanced with really strong accountability frameworks and local measures for assessing how an institution is doing. There is a good story to be told around increasing freedoms and flexibilities, but it cannot be separated from key questions around accountability and an honest appraisal of the limitations of choice in areas outside the major conurbations.

Freedom, independence and power

Dr Martin Stephen

The much-vaunted Education Reform Act of 1988 was rather like the cull of badgers in 2013: a very messy business that aroused the most intense of feelings both for and against, probably necessary but by no means a guaranteed success. What is also rarely pointed out is that it was also, in one area at least, the biggest missed opportunity in post-war educational legislation.

It is conventional to give much of the credit for the 1988 Act to Sir Keith Joseph, a man whose intellectual brilliance was only matched by an appalling inability to come across well in the media. In fact the Act, or something similar, was made more or less inevitable by the mess state education had been left in by Shirley Williams and those responsible for the abolition of the grammar and direct-grant schools in 1976. However good grammar schools were and are, the system pre-1976 more or less guaranteed that whilst up to 30% or so of children who made it to grammar schools were by and large well served, the price of grammar schools was that 70% of the populace were consigned to less attractive and less sought after schools. A major reason was that successive governments had failed to invest in the Technical Schools proposed in the 1944 Education Act. These schools could and should have established vocational education for the first time as a runner in the UK education system, and would have given a credible alternative for those who failed the 11+. In any event, the grammar school system as it was practised in the UK prior to 1976 stamped over two-thirds of children in the UK as non-academic, and non-anything, citizens, a recipe for revolution and a situation that meant the grammar schools carried within them the seeds of their own destruction.

The problem was that in the headlong rush to introduce the comprehensive school, the abolitionist zealots failed to recognise or learn from the grammar schools that had sent more working-class children to Oxford and Cambridge during their existence than any UK system before or since, or even realise that they were not all bad. The one-size-fits-all comprehensive was introduced for ideological and not educational reasons. It was not the panacea everyone was told it would be. Those who introduced it to the UK failed to ask how what was good in the grammar schools could be transplanted into the new comprehensives. There was a naïve assumption that the best and most able would automatically succeed, ignoring the fact known to any farmer that it is not only the cream that rises to the top. Nor did those responsible for advocating comprehensives learn the lessons of what is arguably the longest-established comprehensive system in the world, the US High School, where experience showed that all the ideology in the world could not change such schools from being chameleons that took on the colour of their local surroundings.

In any event, it was clear before 1988 that the system was not working, and the 1988 Education Act was as much a damage-control exercise as it was an exciting new advance. It was also, in its own way, as much an act of politics as had been 1976. Those nasty local education authorities were hotbeds of left-wing ideology, and those nasty teaching unions needed to be taught a lesson. Yet there was much that was good in the Act.

Local management of schools could act to release schools from a bureaucratic stranglehold, and the whole tenor of the Act was to encourage Heads, Governors and schools to take responsibility for and ownership of the education they offered. The National Curriculum did actually make sense – surely parents ought to know what we want our children to learn and when they should have learnt it by? – and Key Stages did work to stop schools hiding their results in the shadows. It said loud and clear that there were minimum standards parents had a right to expect every child to achieve, and in the final count teachers were there to deliver those standards to the children in their care. Yet it did more than simply focus on results. It changed the culture of education in schools, driving them to a new accountability to parents. City Technology Colleges were a brilliant idea, and a majority of the few that were founded have survived to be beacons of excellence.

The trouble was that there was quite a lot of baby in the bathwater. The transfer of power and authority to the State and away from local bodies made education even more of a political football, the only difference being that it was Westminster that called the tune, not local politicians. In some cases Government legislation was just as much of a stranglehold on schools as the old LEA had been. Most of all, the massive smack of central authority heralded by the Act was a crucial element in ushering in the Era of Testing, whereby children in the UK became the most frequently examined in the world – and look where that has got us according to the latest 2013 PISA/OECD findings. We seemed at times to be weighing the pig and not fattening it to an extraordinary extent. There were more targets than in an archery competition, underpinned by the classic mistake of assuming, as all governments do, that by setting a target you help a school to achieve it. Recent research conducted by Tony Blair's equivalent to Sir Keith Joseph, Sir Michael Barber, suggests that a degree of autocratic government control is essential to lift a state sector from bad to good, but a complete reversal, whereby up to 80% of decisions are taken at the chalk-face by Heads on site, is needed if schools and the system they are in are going to move from good to outstanding. Ironically, too much government control can disenable rather than strengthen those who in the final count have to deliver, namely Heads and teachers, by taking ownership of the system away from them.

The 1988 Education Act injected a degree of reality and accountability into our schools that was needed, but at the same time took out a lot of creativity and time for children to gather flowers by the wayside. It paved the way for city academies and free schools, doing quite a lot of dirty work so that later Secretaries of State for Education such as Michael Gove had a much clearer run for genuine innovation. The 1988 Education Act did not cure the patient, but it did stabilise them enough for serious surgery to be undertaken later.

It also missed a major opportunity to bring UK independent schools, educating a mere 7% of the populace but gaining nearly half the top university places, more into the mainstream. Whilst UK state schools were struggling to maintain respectability in the international PISA/OECD tables, UK independent schools were rated as amongst the best performing in the world. Labour was bitterly opposed to independent schools, and the Conservatives in 1988 simply decided to leave them out of it altogether.

Ironically, it was a Labour government under Tony Blair and David Blunkett which extended an olive branch to independent schools in 1998, with the formation of the Independent State Schools Partnership Scheme, which slowly and painfully is inching towards a mixed economy in education, where public and private can sit side by side and even learn from each other.

The 1988 Education Act tried to give parents choice, alongside introducing a new culture of disclosure, but in fact for parents with no choice over where they lived all it did was allow them to find out how badly their local school was doing. In one sense it and every Education Act since 1944 has ducked the main issue, which has still to be properly addressed. Arguments over selective or non-selective schools, systems of schooling, whether Shakespeare should be compulsory and so on are so many straws in the wind in comparison with the fact that a school is only as good as its Head and its teachers. All the legislation in the world falls flat on its face and is dangerously close to arranging the chairs on the Titanic unless we can recruit the brightest and the best in to teaching. If we want to finish off what 1988 started, we do not need another Education Reform Act. We need A Supply of Outstanding Teachers Act. In the final count, 1988 redesigned the bottle. The defining Act will deal much more with the crucial ingredient that goes in to the bottle.

Autonomy

Dr Wendy Piatt

Twenty five years since it received Royal Assent, the problems the Education Reform Act was designed to solve – and the solutions it suggested – are still the basis of education debate today.

In the intervening period, successive governments have wrestled with the question of how to create a system where any child, irrespective of background, receives a first-class education.

Kenneth Baker's radical solution was to start the process of giving greater freedom to schools. In many ways he was echoing the lessons of autonomy that had long been the hallmark of the best universities.

Greater school autonomy, in the shape of Grant Maintained Schools, City Technology Colleges and the move to give schools greater direct control of their finances, were the first fruits of an acceptance that sustained improvement in the system would not happen until you gave schools the freedom and responsibility to run their own affairs.

Our leading universities have long known that autonomy is the key to excellence. Autonomy in governance, recruitment, academic and financial affairs enables good universities to manage their resources more effectively and efficiently. It helps them respond to new challenges swiftly, recruit and attract top staff and allows them to focus on the long-term pursuit of knowledge. Universities will not flourish if they are over-regulated. International research shows university freedom leads to better outcomes. As the World Bank observed in 2009, autonomy is a characteristic of world-class universities. It is no accident that the most successful countries for higher education, the US and UK, are those that give their universities the greatest freedom.

Since the passage of the Education Reform Act subsequent reforms have given schools more and more freedom. In an exciting development, driven by some of the pioneering academies, schools have used their freedom to develop much better links with universities. For example, a number of Russell Group universities actually sponsor academies or have set up free schools.

The Education Reform Act included some important changes to the higher education landscape, particularly with changes to degree awarding powers, the creation of the funding bodies that later become HEFCE and steps which would lead to bigger changes in higher education in 1992. But as Governments have handed more powers to head teachers in schools, they have gradually increased the amount of regulation and bureaucracy imposed on universities.

Did the Act succeed in its aims? It certainly hastened a revolution in the ways schools are run, but we still have some way to go to achieve a first-class education for everyone. Russell Group universities see this all too clearly, as raising achievement in schools is key to success in widening participation in Higher Education.

Our universities have put a lot of thought, work and money into making sure we get the brightest and best students regardless of their background. Some great work has been done but the figures still tell a simple truth; pupils from modest backgrounds are less likely to get into a top university.

The main reason is that not enough pupils get excellent grades in the right subjects. In 2011 the proportion of A level students from independent schools getting three A grades or above was nearly four times greater than the proportion in comprehensive schools. 72% of private school students apply to university with two of the facilitating subjects (those subjects which give you the most options to study at Russell Group universities) compared to 42% of state education pupils. Equally worrying was research last year by the Sutton Trust that showed less than half of teachers would recommend their very brightest students apply for the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

While these inequalities in educational achievement remain it is hard to say with confidence that the Education Reform Act or any of its successors have achieved their ultimate goal, but in recognising the importance of autonomy the Act did make it more likely.

Education: fit for a modern Britain

Neil Carmichael MP

Prime Minister James Callaghan launched the ‘Great Education Debate’ at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1976. It has rumbled on ever since, with such landmarks as the Education Reform Act of 1988, a National Curriculum, and, more recently, academies and free schools. The pace and urgency of reform is now driven by the global race in terms of economic competition and the need for increased mobility, but a number of original concerns about the quality and output of some schools remain, thus ensuring education’s continued place in the political spotlight.

This whole process – lasting across four decades – has been a toxic mixture of rational decision making and incremental interference, but at least the principal characteristics of the education system are almost established: autonomy for schools and colleges; institutional self-improvement as a continuous process; parental choice; focus on pupil/student learning and achievement; and rigorous testing with a properly calibrated and robust examination system. Although education remains a cleavage political issue as far as detailed policy changes are concerned, there is widespread agreement over the need to ‘do something’ in order to improve the overall output of our schools and colleges.

The enabler of the recent wave of reforms has been the change of the balance of power between the Department of Education and the local education authorities. The difference between Labour’s Anthony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science between 1965 and 1967, where he “requested” LEAs to present plans to introduce comprehensive education in his famous Circular 10/65, and the more directive powers of his successors since 1988 and the Education Act of that year are instructive. For this reason alone, the prospects for our young people are much improved.

To complete the reform agenda and be sure of having an education system capable of providing equality of opportunity, matching educational outputs with economic and social priorities, creating a learning environment not only inside educational institutions but beyond and throughout adult life; and matching educational outputs of our international competitors, several more measures should be adopted or enhanced.

Wasting good people

As Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Schools and Colleges, has noted, too many children are part of the long tail of underachievement and, from this position, it becomes almost impossible for one of these children to catch up, resulting in only one in nine young adults gaining adequate qualifications for employment. This is disastrous for two reasons; firstly, the number of NEETs (not in education, employment or training) is constantly replenished and, second, it represents a huge lost opportunity in human resources, with, predictably, the regions furthest from London doing worst of all.

Tackling this endemic failure is therefore necessary in order to address the lack of social mobility in our society and the increasing productivity gap between the United Kingdom and economic competitors (the gap between the UK and Germany is now a staggering 29%). To underline this point, any advantage attained through the efforts of highly educated elites is swiftly squandered by a failure to translate such achievement into a meaningful contribution to the real economy, evidenced either by the recruitment of economic migrants or the export of technology and ideas.

Leadership

No organisation can properly succeed without effective leadership and management, and schools and colleges are no exception. Educational governance has not been comprehensively revisited since 1944 and, even then, the changes made were more in sympathy with the original voluntary and church structures already in place from Victorian times, than in appreciation of the requirements of effective accountability and strategic planning.

To strengthen governance and, by extension, leadership in the form of head teachers and principals, governing bodies should be made of capable individuals selected on the basis of the skills they bring and encouraged to operate as a corporate body responsible to key stakeholders, including, first and foremost, the parents and carers of their pupils and students. Furthermore, governing bodies should be small enough to ensure each member is properly valued.

Governing bodies should also contribute to the framing of the institution's place in the careers market. To this end, businesses and other large employers should be encouraged to put forward nominations for membership of governing bodies. Governing bodies can be an interface between employers and educationalists so they can influence each other as priorities change.

To make this work, businesses and educationalists must engage more readily – formally and informally. Through reconstructed governing bodies, employers will be able signal their immediate priorities in terms of the labour market, while schools and colleges will garner a more acute awareness of the career opportunities for their pupils. Informally, local networking and school partnerships will extend and enhance awareness of developing socio-economic conditions.

Professionalism

Teachers are professionals but the structures representing them and perceptions of their status vary considerably across the western world and, increasingly, in emerging and newly established economic powers. For a first class education system, first-class individuals are required as teachers. This is not just about pay and conditions, but also a function of reputation, career development and self-governance, as in the case, for example, of lawyers.

One option is to expand and develop training and representation, through an enhanced role for the Royal College of Teaching. Teach First and similar organisations also have potential to reinforce the status of teaching. Creating a linear approach in education, where nursery cover to post-graduate study is properly connected through all the stages would, simultaneously, create a stronger sense of professionalism, distribute appropriate value for each intervening stage and provide a more structured career progression system.

Again, Sir Michael Wilshaw has been at the vanguard of this particular part of the debate through his interest in empowering head teachers to reward the most capable teachers with increased salaries and enhanced rank. He has made the same points in connection with head teachers.

Inspections, monitoring and interventions

The inspection regime has recently been reformed. Key changes have included the increased focus on teaching and learning, and leadership and management, as opposed to such matters as community engagement. This has had the effect of putting a spotlight on governance but also ‘progression’ and ‘intervention’ in the classroom.

With too many schools still languishing in the lower half of inspection outcomes – grades three and four – the question about consequences of continual coasting or worse remain valid. When it comes to leadership, there is a case for empowering Ofsted with the ability to replace governors with an ‘Interim Executive Board’, especially if either the LEA in the case of maintained schools or a chain of academies fails to take timely action. In parallel with this argument is the debate about the so-called ‘middle tier’ between the schools or clusters and the Department for Education. Recently, the Education Select Committee has recommended Ofsted inspections for academy chains, thus implying an enhanced responsibility role for them. However, the haphazard nature of their structures could make comparisons difficult.

Relying on the LEAs is no longer the answer, not least because of the huge variance of quality between the best and the worst, and their diminished role in directly providing and supporting education. Nor can the newly formed regional structure of Ofsted be expected to take on both the poacher and gamekeeper roles.

A reliable monitoring mechanism connected to the Department for Education is required which is neither intrusive enough to deter self-improvement nor too detached, risking sudden or dramatic failure. This should begin to emerge through the reforms to examinations and qualifications, but the most exciting prospect is to be in a position to construct a system to measure and record destinations – careers, universities and lifestyles – after school and college.

Self-improvement

All organisations need to have the desire and capacity to improve. Incentives from outside including government, competition between units and collective or individual ambition can all drive improvement, so it is necessary for leadership at every level to create the right environment for these to take root.

Mechanisms for self-improvement in schools are numerous but the essential ingredient is the willingness to make use of them. This is where leadership matters, either of the school (or college) or, by extension, a cluster, partnership or chain. The Education Select Committee attaches considerable value to cooperation and has recommended a series of measures to encourage the formation of appropriate structures. It has also recommended a new role for Ofsted to inspect multi-school structures.

In line with this theme, Sir Michael Wilshaw has strongly promoted the concept of ‘super-head teachers’, rewarded on the basis of their performance, especially in improving schools, and consequently taking on a higher role leading a group of schools.

Machinery of government

Forming a coalition government requires detailed negotiations and compromises between political parties, so opportunities to restructure the machinery of government were constrained in 2010 and might be again in 2015. Nevertheless, the much criticised division between the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills over post-16 education should be addressed.

The Education Act of 1944 created the original Ministry of Education, very much a structure concerned with policy rather than delivery. The subsequent restructure in 1964, creating the Department of Education and Science, continued this tradition. The Education Act of 1988 secured more delivery responsibilities for the Department, but the relatively short-lived Department of Education and Employment (created in 1995) exposed the cultural differences between a policy department and a delivery department in the form of the Department of Employment, which was more familiar with benefit processes and often ill-fated interventions into industrial relations.

Taking these two strands of argument together, there is a case for a fully unified Department for Education with updated equipment to monitor and, where necessary, intervene in matters connected with the performance of schools, colleges and universities. This would support the creation of a linear approach to education covering all age groups.

Conclusion

The Education Act of 1988 set the scene for a proactive Department for Education and also, through the original concept of local management of schools, more autonomy for schools, yielding self-improvement in the place of bureaucratic interference from local authorities. The key to building on the progress so far is enabling effective but accountable leadership to thrive at every level.

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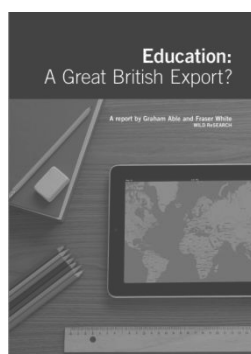
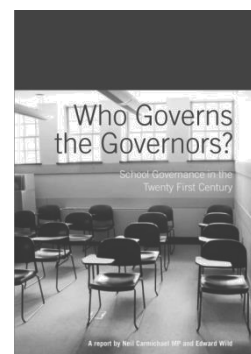


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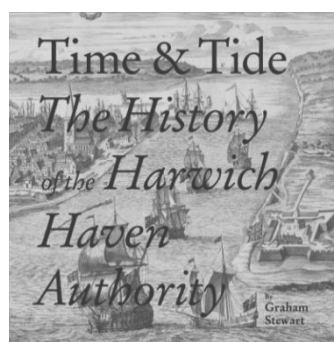
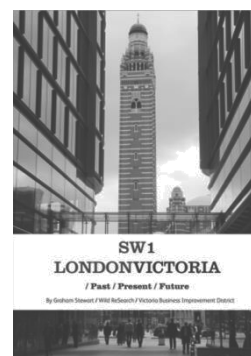
Who Governs the Governors? School Governance in the Twenty First Century (2011) by Neil Carmichael MP and Edward Wild explores the subject of education, governance and leadership. Its sequel, ***Stronger Boards, Better Education***, was published in March 2012. The reports have led to the formation of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Education, Governance and Leadership.



Education: A Great British Export? (2011) by Graham Able and Fraser White makes a robust case for the value of education as a driver for UK economic growth. It led to the formation of the ExEd Group.

Robin Hood Gardens, Blackwall Reach: A search for a sense of place, (2011) by Dr Graham Stewart, examines the history of an area of East London and explores the plans for its redevelopment by Swan Housing Group.

London Victoria SW1: Past, Present and Future, (2012) by Dr Graham Stewart, examines the history of this part of Westminster from the sixteenth century to the present day. It was commissioned by the Victoria Business Improvement District.



Time and Chance: Preparing and Planning for a Portfolio Career, (2012) by Edward Wild is based on interviews with a broad group of Chairs, Non Executive Directors and Trustees who share their first hand experience and insights to provide its readers with practical advice on how to establish a portfolio career.

Our most recent report ***Time and Tide: A History of the Harwich Haven Authority***, by Dr Graham Stewart, was commissioned by the Authority to celebrate their 150th Anniversary this year.



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The Education Reform Act of 1988 was one of the most influential pieces of UK education legislation to be passed in the twentieth century. The provisions of the Act brought about a comprehensive reform of the 1944 'Butler' Education Act, and have had a profound impact on the development of the UK's education system over the last 25 years.

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