

HOW TO GET BETTER SCHOOLS

I thought it might be useful if I set down some preliminary thoughts for our meeting tomorrow.

Overview

Getting better schools involves an initial but quite fundamental choice between:

- i. achieving greater control over the producers of education (LEAs and schools) by a major shift of power from local to central government and a substantially enhanced rôle for the DES; and
- ii. giving parents greater choice and encouraging the supply of new schools.

The DES paper is deceptive. While it ostensibly argues for two "radical options" - the creation of Government Maintained Schools (GM) and extending the Assisted Places Scheme - its major thrust is to argue for greater central control involving more money, more people and more powers for the DES. It rejects giving parents greater choice (education credits) and its new GM schools are just a variant of existing aided schools, but "managed" by the Department.

The DES Preferred Option

This consists of icing (new GM schools plus more Assisted Places) on a cake (improving the LEA sector, still the great bulk of schools) which means:

- a. a major transfer of power from LEAs to the DES; and
- b. the creation of few really "new" schools and the extension of very little extra choice.

a. Power to the DES

This is clear from the following passages:

"We must take steps to secure for central government the same kind of financial leverage on the education system that it engaged when the 1944 Education Act was drafted."
(Paragraph 5)

"If we want an effective national policy for education, then central government must have more control."
(Paragraph 6)

"We should use the education grant particularly to 'police' the new teachers' contract. Our aim should be legislation to improve the outcome of the work of a statutory review body on pay, and what pay is for."
(Paragraph 24b)

"It is essential to move to a separate education grant régime incorporating a substantial element of specific grant. What is involved is a fundamenal change in the Government's relationship with LEAs. . . There is no half-way house." (Paragraphs 19,20)

"There would also be extra central government manpower costs to implement the programme. . . These might amount to about 50 AEC grades and 50 AMI, in addition to what the DES needs now to do its present job. If we were to proceed to establish a sizeable number of GM schools beyond an initial tranche, further additional staff would be required." (Paragraph 23)

b. New Schools, More Choice?

The new GM schools are not like the old direct grant schools. They involved a hands-off approach by the DES; GM schools involve a much closer relationship.

"The financial relationship between the Secretary of State and the governors of a GM school would require much further consideration." (TP 4, paragraph 4)

"The Secretary of State would need to be able to satisfy himself that his grant was properly administered." (TP 4, paragraph 4)

"Teachers in GM schools should comply with the Secretary of State's policy for the curriculum." (TP 4, paragraph 5)

"It is also for consideration whether the Secretary of State should be associated, formally or informally, with appointments to key posts." (TP 4, paragraph 5)

"It would be open to the Secretary of State to cease to pay grant if GM schools failed to reach standards acceptable to him in relation to the curriculum and teaching quality." (TP 4, paragraph 5)

"By assuming responsibility for maintaining a category of schools, the Secretary of State would become involved in detail in part of the publicly maintained sector of schools, alongside LEAs, in a way and on a scale which are unprecedented. The Department would have to learn how to discharge direct responsibilities in relation to individual schools, and to discharge them in addition to and in combination with the functions which derive from the Secretary of State's more general responsibilities for the education service". (TP 4, paragraph 14)

Not only are GM schools dependent on the DES, but the major "reservoir" for new GM schools would be existing voluntary-aided schools. This is because existing successful independent schools would be reluctant to exchange their autonomy for government control, and entirely new foundations

are unlikely to be numerous unless the financial terms are generous (which are most unlikely). However, the voluntary-aided schools are already among the best in the maintained system at present. The gain in terms of improved choice and performance from this would be marginal.

If voluntary controlled schools transferred to GM status, that would be a more substantial improvement; but out of a total of 4,350 they only amount to 200.

Vouchers and Credits

This kind of scheme is rejected. Some of the arguments against can be dismissed quite easily, but others cannot. The following seem to me important:

- a. In the transition, where certain schools were being run down or closed, some children would receive worse schooling than at present.
- b. No voucher/credit system has been established anywhere in the world.
- c. Unlike previous radical changes (abolition of exchange control, privatisation, sale of council houses) this would meet with hostility from our own supporters - not least Conservative-controlled LEAs.

At the very least, these need to be carefully explored before going down this route.

An Alternative Strategy

1. Welcome the extension to the Assisted Places Scheme - this will certainly increase consumer choice.

2. Welcome the idea behind GM schools. But their very name - Government Maintained - shows them to be a far cry from the independent or semi-autonomous schools which need to be set up; or, indeed, from the previous Direct Grant schools. The proposal for GM schools therefore needs to be reformed such that day-to-day management of the schools remains in the hands of the schools, and the DES involvement is limited to:
 - a. the Government should have the powers to inspect and monitor the educational quality of GM schools; and

 - b. GM schools should be required to provide an annual report and accounts, examination results etc, in a similar way to companies, and the DES (like the DTI) should have reserve powers to investigate the management of a school in the unlikely event of a misappropriation of funds.

Moreover, it is important that GM schools should be allowed to take private pupils who pay full cost fees so as to blur the distinction between private and state schools.

3. As this is Industry Year, and the charity laws for business have been changed, why not tap the goodwill of business by

getting individual trusts or groups of companies to raise endowments for:

- Technology Grant Schools (which would cover 11-18 and specialises in applied science); and
- Technical and Vocational Education Institutions (the logical outcome of the TVEI - which would cater more for basic technical education)

so that each LEA in the country would have one of each. This should meet the approval of those who attended the recent Switch Seminar.

4. Meanwhile, why not also try and get the Church to convert voluntary controlled schools to a more independent status? This would mean that the Churches and the company sponsored schools would be on a par - making their reversal by a future government very difficult.

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