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10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Private Secretary

18 September 1986

Dear Bob,

HOW TO GET BETTER SCHOOLS

The Prime Minister this afternoon discussed with Mr. Baker his minute of 12 September about the proposed City Technological Colleges, and related matters. Professor Brian Griffiths was also present.

Mr. Baker said his intention was to float at the Party Conference the proposal for City Technological Colleges. The finance had been agreed. A prospectus would be published a week or so later. City Technological Colleges would establish three important principles: a contract directly between DES and schools, per capita funding and a core curriculum. Once established these principles would provide a good basis for future action and progress after the election. The arrangements for future schools to be set up in this way need not be the same as in the case of the Technological Colleges. The proportion of grant to private money could for example be varied. Initially there might be around five Technological Colleges, rising later to about twenty. To start up new schools was a slow business. Changes to existing schools could be achieved more quickly.

Continuing, Mr. Baker said the second strand of his proposals was the devolution of power to governing bodies and parents along lines already in operation in Cambridgeshire, giving them greater authority both over finance and over the curriculum.

The Prime Minister suggested that it would be useful to seek help from a group of good headteachers to develop the syllabus. Mr. Baker noted that some two years ago Sir Keith Joseph had published a report on the teaching of English. English teaching was in disarray and there was a need now to mount an inquiry into the teaching of English and the English language. Bench marks for establishing children's level of achievement were needed. Mr. Baker said he would come back to the Prime Minister with a proposal. The Prime Minister suggested that a similar inquiry should be carried out into the teaching of mathematics and Mr. Baker undertook to consider this.

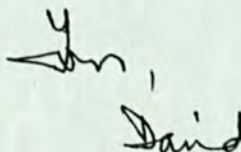
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Turning to higher education, Mr. Baker noted that students at present received grants amounting to some £1500-2000. He was considering a new radical approach to the financing of higher education under which students would receive an entitlement to borrow or receive a grant according to the cost of the particular course they chose to follow. Students could then shop around higher education institutions to find the course of their choice. The UGC would cease to allocate finance. A group of Vice Chancellors was now studying this proposal.

In a discussion of higher education Mr. Baker said that the number of secondary school pupils was expected to drop by about a third during the 1990s. However the demand for qualified manpower would not fall. It would be attractive to put forward a target that at least 20% of the relevant age group should be receiving higher education by the year 2000 (against 14% now). Such a target should not be expensive to achieve. It would mean simply maintaining the present throughput. The Prime Minister remarked that she would like to see a higher proportion of students receiving a technical training.

Mr. Baker said he was also considering proposals to remove polytechnics from the control of local government, along with other institutions. A new grants committee would be required. The Prime Minister noted that the task of a grants committee administering educational institutions at present run by local authorities would be much more complicated than that faced by the University Grants Committee.

In discussion of sex education Mr. Baker drew attention to Backbench pressure for changes to the Education Bill which would give a statutory right for parents to withdraw their children from such education. He was seeking now to devise a compromise under which governing bodies would approve the material to be used in sex education lessons, and give the school but not parents a right to withdraw a child from such lessons. The Prime Minister agreed that it would be wrong to give parents the right to withdraw their children from sex education lessons: the children themselves would suffer because they would be teased.



(DAVID NORGROVE)

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