

File ECL
CC BG #6

SUBJECT CC MASTER



10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

27 October 1986

Dear Sir,

EDUCATION WITHOUT LEAs

The Prime Minister this afternoon held a meeting to discuss your Secretary of State's minute and paper of 23 October about education without LEAs. Present were your Secretary of State, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Mr. T. Heiser (Department of the Environment), Sir David Hancock and Mr. Walter Ulrich (Department of Education and Science), Mr. John Anson (H.M. Treasury) and Sir Robert Armstrong. Professor Brian Griffiths was also present.

The meeting took note, without comment, of the principles listed in paragraph 2 of your Secretary of State's minute. The questions attached to that minute were then discussed.

On the aims of the change (question 1) it was agreed that a major objective was to change the ethos of many of the country's schools. This was not simply a matter of setting standards. At present the Government was seen to have responsibilities, but it did not enjoy authority. Education was a national responsibility and the Government should be seen to be exercising it.

It was agreed that question 2, whether education for 5-18 year olds should be wholly or at least largely free of charge, was a mis-statement. The legislation should not require charging but it should also not preclude it.

On question 3, the determination of the curriculum and standards, it was agreed that there was as much need for a core syllabus for primary schools as there was for secondary schools. The secondary schools themselves were not exerting enough pressure on the primary schools to achieve the necessary minimum standards. Syllabuses should be set for key subjects, perhaps English, Mathematics and General Science, which would apply across the country, and they might extend to textbooks and teaching methods. The curriculum and syllabus would inevitably be heavily conditioned by the examinations which were set.

If the Government were to move in this direction checks and balances would need to be created in order to prevent abuse of greater central control. One possibility would be to

create a quango consisting of a number of top class head teachers to advise on the curriculum and syllabus in the core subjects. They might need to enjoy more than advisory powers if they were to provide an adequate safeguard against abuse. It was noted that teachers increasingly accepted the need to set objectives; however they would be very resistant to enforced syllabuses. Your Secretary of State noted that a paper on a syllabus for Mathematics was in preparation.

The meeting then considered the LEA functions not exercisable by schools and colleges described in paragraph 20 of the paper attached to your Secretary of State's minute.

It was agreed that the Government would need to determine the grants to be given to schools (point (1) in paragraph 20). It was also agreed that there would probably need to be some form of regional organisation.

However there were different views about the role of the regional organisation. On the one hand it was argued that per capita payments would need to vary according to the circumstances of the school (for example its size and location) and the regional organisation would need to carry out this task. There would also be a need for intervention to manage the contraction of schools which were losing pupils either through simple unpopularity or through circumstances outside the school's control, for example loss of population. Some of the problems of contraction might be reduced if parents were able to top up a school's income through payment of charges. It might be possible to provide a basic sum topped up by per capita fees, or to set limits on the amount by which the total income of schools could be allowed to fall each year. But closure in particular might well need intervention by an organisation operating between the level of the individual school and the DES. Moreover "umbrella" organisations would provide reassurance and if they were metamorphosed out of the existing LEAs this could help to reduce resistance to the changes.

Against this it was argued that there should be no need to allow variations in the amount provided per capita. Local variations had caused the great complexities and difficulties of the present system for local authority finance. There was also a risk that to protect schools with declining rolls would reward the unsuccessful at the expense of the successful.

On financial propriety (point (2)) it was agreed that the Audit Commission could probably play a major role.

It was agreed that the Secretary of State would need to play a key role in setting educational standards (point (3)). The role of schools inspectors would also need to be greatly increased. This was of course also closely linked to the question of the core curriculum and syllabus.

On the question of securing a place at a suitable school (point (4)) some part could be played by setting per capita funding higher for handicapped or difficult children. The

regional or umbrella organisations would probably also need to have a role, perhaps by running special schools.

On protecting parental choice (point (5)) it was suggested that there would probably need to be a clearing house among groups of head teachers. School transport would also be important.

It was agreed that the question of appointment of members of government bodies (point (9)) was particularly important. The composition of governing bodies was already to be changed under legislation now being enacted. The effects of this would take 18 months to work through. It would be important now to work towards greater delegation of financial authority to head teachers so that they could gain experience of running budgets.

9F/ It was agreed that the meeting should reconvene to continue the discussion.

I am copying this letter to Alex Allan (H.M. Treasury), Robin Young (Department of the Environment) and to Trevor Woolley (Cabinet Office).

John,
David.

DAVID NORGROVE

Rob Smith, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science.