

PRIME MINISTER

Making Schools Better

## 1. My aims are:

- to raise standards for all pupils in our schools within the lifetime of this Parliament;
- to ensure that they go on rising thereafter;
- to increase parents' influence over, and sense of responsibility for, their children's education.

2. We hoped that vouchers would be a practical way to fulfil these aims. We have now abandoned that route. I have therefore developed a new set of policies, designed to affect all aspects of the maintained school system. These include:

- i. New standards for 11 year-olds. I shall be announcing standards which pupils across all abilities should have achieved in key subjects when they move from primary to secondary school.(9)\*
- ii. A target for 16 year olds. I shall announce a wholly new aim: that 80 - 90% of pupils should achieve at least the "average" standards now associated with CSE grade 4. (11)
- iii. Agreed objectives in key subjects. I shall develop objectives, to be applied by primary and secondary schools, which define the skills, competence and understanding to be acquired by pupils across the ability range in all the key subjects. (8-9)

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\*Numbers refer to paragraph numbers in the attached note by officials.

- iv. Improvement of 'O' level and CSE. The present academic level associated with O-level grades should be retained; but all examination grades should be linked with absolute standards, not with 'norm-referencing', so that pupils pass or fail because of what they can or cannot do, rather than because they fall into a given pecentage of those examined. (10-11)
- v. Records of achievement. I have already started the process of giving every child a record of his achievements at school. Graded tests should be one element in these records. (11)
- vi. Teaching methods. I intend to hammer home the need for a shift in classroom practice away from over-dependence on sterile written assignments and worksheets towards practical and oral work and improved whole-class teaching - differentiated within schools for different sorts of pupil. (12)
- vii. Improved training and management of teachers. I am acting to approve only good-quality, practical teacher-training courses; to avoid children being taught subjects by those not competent; and to get more teachers in post regularly assessed. (13-14)
- viii. A probationary period for head-teachers. I intend that head-teachers should be required to satisfy a rigorous assessment of performance after two years, before their appointments are confirmed. (16)
- ix. More effective governing bodies for schools. I intend:
- to give parents a majority on the governing bodies of county schools and, with the foundation governors, of controlled schools; (17-18)

- to ensure that governors are properly informed about the costs of their schools; (18(iv))
  - to get local authorities to delegate more financial responsibility to governors; (18(iv))
  - to entrench governors' powers over curriculum, discipline, and appointment of staff; governors of all maintained schools should have at least as much power as they were intended to have under the 1944 Act. (18(ii))
- x. Protection of popular schools. I am discussing with Philip Merridale the possibility of amending the current legislation to reduce LEAs' discretion to reduce the size of popular schools. (19)

3. I shall act through circulars, direct action with LEAs and through HMI's published reports (which are having a visible effect on good and bad schools alike). But we need a Bill on governors and parents in 1985/86. (24)

4. Extra costs should be met by offsetting savings. I have set in hand a review of school-staffing. (22) I am considering how to absorb, within the DES, the additional work which was not provided for in the staff numbers agreed to 1988.

5. These policies should in time raise standards of conduct among our young people - for instance, by reducing boredom and frustration and increasing success. (21)

6. I should be glad to know that you support the general thrust of this plan. I shall be announcing on 6 January, at the North of England Conference, the new aim in paragraph 2.ii and some of the means proposed. From then on I shall firm up the details of my plan. Over the next months I shall be consulting colleagues and outside interests with a view to a White Paper in the second half of 1984 and legislation in 1985/6.

K.J.

9 December 1983

CONFIDENTIAL



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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

12 December, 1983

MAKING SCHOOLS BETTER

The Prime Minister was very grateful for your Secretary of State's minute of 9 December on "Making Schools Better".

The Prime Minister considers that the policies set out in that minute are very exciting, and they have her full support.

(David Barclay)

J.F. Bird, Esq.,  
Department of Education and Science

CONFIDENTIAL

MR

## STANDARDS IN SCHOOLS

1. This note briefly summarises present deficiencies in the performance of the schools, and presents a programme of action to correct them. Some of the proposed actions can be taken relatively quickly. Their combined effect will inevitably take time to work through the system.

### Deficiencies

2. The surveys of schools carried out by HMI over the last few years, together with other work including the collection of evidence from other countries, now makes it possible to identify more precisely than before deficiencies in the schools and action likely to correct them; as well as those things that are good and which should be maintained and spread through the system. It is now possible to document the analysis in the next five paragraphs in such a way as to carry conviction within the education service, and with employers and the public. Despite the evidence of these deficiencies, which justifies the widespread criticism of recent years, it should also be recognised that many parents warmly support the schools their own children attend, and many employers say that they successfully recruit school leavers of the quality they require.

3. Many school pupils, especially but not only among those of average and lower ability, achieve less than they should throughout their primary and secondary schooling and across much of the curriculum. This is true of their ability to use language effectively, in speech and in writing; of their ability to apply basic mathematics; of their understanding of science and its applications, and of the development of practical/technological skills and understanding. The last of these is especially important in the case of higher ability pupils.

4. Many pupils, when they come to leave school, are not equipped with as broad an educational base as they should have, either in terms of learning and skills or in terms of the development of personal qualities, for employment, training or further and higher education. This is true even in the case of many with relatively high ability who are successful in obtaining employment or in further or higher education. Moreover, many school leavers are neither as well prepared for adult and working life as they could and should be nor are they equipped with an adequate understanding of its economic and other realities.

5. Evidence about the standards achieved by West German school leavers, reported by HMI who recently visited the Federal Republic, is important. HMI describe these standards as impressive, particularly those of less able pupils who appear to perform better across some seven or eight subjects than do similar pupils here. These higher levels of attainment appear to result in large measure from a combination of setting clear and attainable goals for the broad mass of pupils; the existence of agreed, broad curricular objectives and guidelines on which pupil assessment is based; and the linking of those to different levels of qualifications which are respected and understood by pupils, teachers, parents and employers.

6. Against this background, and in the light of HMI evidence, the deficiencies in English schools appear to result to a substantial extent from the following causes

- i. In many schools, and in many classrooms, learning objectives are not sufficiently clear, fail to differentiate sufficiently between levels of ability, and yet often fail to demand enough from all pupils, including those deemed to be most and least able.

- ii. This is true of primary and middle schools where, for example, some schools show a tendency for teachers' demands and expectations to focus on the average in a class. There is a widespread need for effective assessment, and for agreed targets for all pupils to fill the need which the eleven plus used to meet for some pupils. But it is also true for many secondary pupils, and is in marked contrast to some of our competitors.
- iii. Many primary schools also fail to exploit the potential value of actively involving parents in pursuit of specific targets, and more co-operation is needed between secondary schools and employers. Syllabuses and teaching methods for all secondary pupils are too heavily influenced by an examination system geared to pupils of high ability, and involve too theoretical and narrow an approach to the curriculum for many of them.
- iv. By comparison with our competitors schools overdo written copying and assignment work, which is often intended to match individual needs yet fails to do so, and provide too little whole-class teaching and oral work, varied in pace and style.
- v. Too often the examination system operates so as to deny pupils recognition for their achievements or to exclude them from further participation in some aspect of education or employment - in contrast to West Germany, for example, where the aim is to ensure that 90% of school pupils receive a certificate which qualifies them for further education or employment. Yet at the same time the standards achieved by our best pupils, within the limits of the relatively

narrow A level based curriculum provided for them, compare favourably with the best achieved in both West Germany and other European countries.

- vi. Too many of the teachers lack both the quality of academic background and some of the professional skills needed in the schools today, and there are weaknesses in management in some schools and local authorities. One particularly disturbing result of these weaknesses is that far too many teachers have too low an expectation for some or all of their pupils so that these are not sufficiently stretched in the interest of reaching their potential.

#### Proposals for action

7. To remedy the deficiencies described above will take time. We are seeking to improve the output from a process which takes at least eleven years for each individual pupil to pass through. Each stage makes its own important contribution. Moreover the remedial action must not damage what is currently good, particularly the standards associated with the higher O level grades and the A level examinations. What is needed is a curriculum, together with appropriate methods of delivery and assessment, which will stretch and motivate the great majority of children from the beginning of the primary phase to the end of their secondary education, and enable them to leave school properly prepared for employment or further education, and the responsibilities of adulthood, in accordance with their abilities and aptitudes. Such a curriculum would be welcome to parents and employers alike. The Government can harness their influence in the firm action it now needs to take to bring about the necessary changes.

#### Curriculum

8. Action is in hand to require LEAs to report on their policies for the school curriculum in the light of the guidance



given by the Department two years ago; by mounting pressure on the education system to make a reality of the recommendations of the Cockcroft Report on Mathematics; by developing guidance on science and foreign languages; by various current initiatives (including (i) the TVEI, (ii) the micro-electronics in education programme, and (iii) lower-attaining pupils programme) which will help to make the curriculum more practical and applicable; and by the introduction of the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education. Every school should offer a curriculum which is broad but which concentrates on the essentials in each subject area, differentiates for variations in the ability of its pupils but stretches them all, and develops their personal qualities and standards of conduct, the competence needed to cope with a fast-changing world and the necessary grasp of its economic and other foundations.

9. The next step should be the rapid development of agreement between the Government, the education service and its users on the objectives to be pursued in each aspect of the curriculum, and on the levels of skill, competence and understanding to be secured by the end of the primary phase and at age 16. As regards the primary phase the development of objectives for the main subjects will enable the Secretary of State to announce overall objectives to be attained by pupils when they transfer to secondary education.

#### Examinations and assessment

10. The influence of the examination system on the schools is very strong and is crucial for standards in the later years of secondary education. The work now proceeding on national criteria for 16+ examinations will, once the criteria are applied in practice, improve both the examinations and the curriculum by clarifying and promoting the objectives outlined in paragraphs 8 and 9. But it is nevertheless desirable now to set a more ambitious target for pupils' attainments

at age 16, and to begin the task of reshaping the ground rules of the 16+ examinations so that these can reflect and acknowledge the higher attainments school pupils as a whole should achieve, while ensuring the retention of the standards associated with both A level and O level Grade C (the pass level).. At present the CSE Grade 4 is explicitly "norm-referenced" in that it is defined as indicating the standard of attainment in any subject expected from a candidate whose ability in that subject is average for the 16 year old age group as a whole. This explicit norm-reference, the only explicit "standard" in the present school examination system, carries an influence beyond its worth.

11. The move, already initiated, towards making the grades awarded in the 16+ examination more "criterion-referenced" ie to relate these grades more directly to specified, absolute levels of attainment, is of great significance in the longer term. In particular, it will make it possible to set the education service the target of bringing something like 80-90% of all pupils to a level of attainment not less than the level currently associated with CSE Grade 4, at least in English and mathematics, and preferably in other subject areas as well, and to give public recognition to progress towards that target through the award of examination certificates. This target also implies levels of attainment for pupils of average ability well above the obsolete standard now associated with CSE Grade 4, and the attainment by a higher proportion of pupils of the standard now associated with the O level Grade C (the "pass" grade for O level) and by O level grades A and B. The Government's initiative on records of achievement for all school-leavers, using Education Support Grants, will complement such an approach to examination attainment by encouraging schools and enabling employers to take other achievements of pupils more seriously, requiring teachers to assess pupil progress more systematically in relation to examinable and non-examinable learning, and helping to motivate pupils.

## Teachers and teaching methods

12. These improvements in the curriculum and its assessment will both encourage and need some changes in the working practices of schools. We now have strong evidence from HMI, experience in other countries, and the Cockcroft Report on Mathematics, that many schools would serve their pupils better if they adopted more clearly differentiated learning objectives for different groups of pupils, made explicit the progression and continuity needed for successful learning, and at the same time fitted teaching styles to the task in hand in particular in the better use of whole-class and oral work. There is at present too much indiscriminate use of individual worksheets within classes of pupils working at different speeds where the more able simply do more of the same rather than tackle something progressively more demanding. This points, particularly in secondary schools of all types, away from mixed ability approaches and towards organisation in relatively homogeneous groups. This organisational emphasis, moreover, is likely not only to facilitate higher overall educational standards but also to be less demanding on resources. The Secretary of State has no power to impose these changes, but a firm policy statement, based on solid evidence and resolutely followed up through the Secretary of State's power to require reports from LEAs and the publication of HMI reports, will have a strong influence, especially if school governing bodies, with much stronger parent representation (see paragraph 1g), are enabled and encouraged to take an active and informed interest in the work of the schools.

13. The Government's plans for teacher training and amendment of the teachers regulations set out in Teaching Quality (Cmnd 8836) will help to ensure that the skills and qualifications of individual teachers and their teaching programmes are properly matched. The Secretary of State intends shortly to announce the new arrangements for the approval of initial

teacher training courses, and the criteria to which they will have to be subject. These arrangements will make it much more difficult for unsatisfactory teachers to enter the profession, and ensure that training is more practical and school-based. Working them out in practice will require steady effort over two or three years.

14. The Secretary of State's minute of 25 October to the Prime Minister (endorsed in the 31 October letter from the Prime Minister's office) set out his proposals for improvements in the management of the teacher force.

15. Further action is however needed to help ensure that head teachers are the best that can be found, are trained to manage, and that those who prove unsatisfactory do not remain in post. The report from a DES-financed research project on the appointment of head teachers (the POST project) is about to be published, and is to be studied at a conference early in 1984. The findings are controversial, but nevertheless a cause for concern. There is also some evidence of undue political influence on some appointments, of assistant teachers as well as heads. Appointment procedures need to be made more open and more clearly dependent on professional suitability for the posts to be filled.

16. In addition, on the Secretary of State's instructions, the Department is giving urgent attention to the practicability of introducing a probation scheme for newly appointed head teachers of maintained schools. This would require the employing authority to inform the Secretary of State of such new appointments and to certify satisfactory performance in post on the basis of a proper assessment, over probably a two year period, before the head's appointment could be finally confirmed and taken off the probationary list. The authority would be required to dismiss from the post any head who failed this probationary assessment.

## Parents and governors

17. These initiatives should be complemented by making more effective the influence which parents and school governors exercise. It has already been decided to bring the school government provision of the 1980 Act fully into force by September 1985.

18. It is now proposed:

- i. to strengthen parental representation on the governing bodies of county and controlled schools to deny the majority to LEA appointments giving this instead to the parents of children at the school elected by their fellow parents together with, in the case of controlled schools, the foundation governors. (The composition of the governing bodies of aided schools would not be changed).
- ii. to legislate a new statutory framework for the government of county and controlled schools which will entrench the powers of governors in relation to the LEA in respect of the conduct and curriculum of the school and in relation to discipline. In all this the LEA would retain a limited role consistent with the duty to secure the provision of sufficient and efficient education. The legislation would also secure that (contrary to some present arrangements) governing bodies are always involved in the appointment of head teachers and (subject to any voluntary delegation to the head) of all other teaching staff, on the basis of broadly defined procedures which preserve the LEA's ultimate right to insist on the appointment of a particular person in the interest of fitness and the management of its teachers. Such arrangements could not prevent a determined attempt to politicise staff appointments but would introduce helpful safeguards.

- iii. Governing bodies should be required each year to circulate to all parents of pupils at the school a report on the discharge of their responsibilities; and to submit themselves subsequently to questions and discussions at a meeting open to all such parents.
  
- iv. In the Circular issued in the autumn of 1984 about the school government provisions of the 1980 Act, LEAs should be asked to report on what they are doing to ensure that governors are properly informed about the costs of their schools, on the scope for delegating more financial responsibility to governing bodies as one means of securing value for money, and on their arrangements for appointing suitable governors and ensuring that governors are fully aware of their powers and are appropriately trained to exercise them effectively. This would pave the way for more detailed guidance, following the legislation envisaged in (i)-(iii) above, about the functions of governing bodies in the light of that legislation.

19. In the interest of increasing parental choice:

- i. Subject to informal consultation yet to be carried out it is proposed to limit still further the freedom of LEAs to reduce the size of popular schools at a time of falling school rolls without the approval of the Secretary of State on the basis of a statutory proposal under Section 15 of the 1980 Act;
  
- ii. it is intended to consider for the years after 1984-85 the possibility of a modest extension of the Assisted Places Scheme, if resources can be found.

20. The Secretary of State is exploring with the Church of England whether they wish to seek a power to enable controlled schools to achieve aided status, with a view to further consideration of this possibility.

#### Standards of Conduct

21. There is research evidence to suggest that a school which offers good education has a beneficial effect on conduct in the community it serves, outside as well as inside the school. The Secretary of State intends shortly to issue a circular to LEAs as the first step in a sustained initiative to make the Education Welfare Service perform more effectively its main role of improving school attendance.

#### Resources

22. Some of these intended improvements will tend to increase the resources required for schools. TVEI schemes, for example, already point in the direction of more equipment and lower pupil/teacher ratios for some pupils at certain stages. At the same time it is clear that existing resources are not always used to best advantage. Too much of the overall improvement in pupil/teacher ratios from around 22:1 in the early 1970s to 18:1 today has been absorbed by uneconomically small schools and a general reduction in teaching group sizes. The Secretary of State has accordingly set in hand a Departmental review of the changes in working practices in the schools associated with this change in pupil/teacher ratios, and the extent to which these are justified by quality considerations and the inescapable effects of contraction. This, together with current work on the curriculum, may enable the Government to establish a clearer policy on what school staffing standards should be. Some of the cost of the necessary improvements can, and should, therefore, be found by economy and redistribution of local authority expenditure on schools; some of the improvements may take longer than desirable because of resource constraints.

### DES Manpower

23. The proposals set out above in relation to governing bodies and parents will add to the Department's workload. They will require the specific assignment of DES manpower for their initial introduction and subsequent administration, for which provision has not been made in existing plans for DES staff numbers to 1988. The Department's aim will be to find the resources to permit the proposals to go forward by compensating savings elsewhere in the DES programme.

### Legislation

24. The proposals in paragraph 18(i)-(iii), and in paragraphs 19 and 20 will require legislation, much of which is likely to be complex as well as controversial (in that it would diminish the powers of LEAs in favour of governors and parents) Thorough consultations and technical preparation would be essential. The Bill could be ready for the 1985-86 Session and its provisions in force in September 1987.