

PRIME MINISTER

MAKING SCHOOLS BETTER

It is important to bolster Keith Joseph's enthusiasm for his new policies, in order to reduce the risk of DES backsliding. You may therefore wish to press home a number of points at your meeting on Thursday

1. "Standards" and "Objectives". Keith proposes to announce the standards that pupils should achieve in key subjects before they move from primary to secondary school. It is vital that this announcement should NOT consist of pious statements about "self-development". By the end of primary school, pupils should be literate and numerate: the meaning of this demand needs to be spelt out, so that every primary school teacher knows what he is aiming at. Much the same applies in the case of secondary schools: "agreed objectives" should not be allowed to turn into mush. We need specific, subjecty-by-subject descriptions of what a pupil should learn.
2. O-Level and CSE. Keith wants to make pass-marks depend on absolute standards rather than on the percentage of examinees obtaining the mark. This is splendid, but it must not become an excuse for letting the present standard of O-levels slip. No decision has yet been made about proposals to merge O-level and CSE. We strongly oppose a merger. And any "harmonisation" should leave intact the O-level system of external examinees: CSE mode 3 (marked in schools) is a disaster.
3. Records of Achievement. Keith himself recognises that a mere list of a child's achievements is not enough. He wants to ensure that children take graded tests in the key subjects, on the same principle as piano-exams: the child takes grade I when he is ready for it, and then moves on to grade II - so that even the stupidest have a ladder to climb. And Keith wants to put the results of such tests onto the "records of achievement". But in the relevant paragraph of the official paper (paragraph 11) there is no explicit mention of graded tests. In fact, DES officials are pretty unenthusiastic about such tests; and they are positively hostile to the idea of testing literacy - the most important area of all. You may wish to strengthen Keith's resolve, (a) by restating that "records of achievement" are not much use without grades tests; and (b) by asking for the DES to produce a timetable for the introduction of tests in key subjects, including literacy. (The Policy Unit is working on this, and will be in a position to argue with DES officials in January, if necessary.)

1. More effective governing bodies for schools. This is the most important part of Keith's package. Giving parents more power over governing bodies, and governing bodies more power over schools, is the most effective way of applying pressure for improved standards. You may wish to press for faster and more effective action than the officials' paper suggests:

- (i) Financial information for governors. The present situation is scandalous: many LEAs do not tell Councillors, let alone governors, what the unit costs of their schools are. We have a strong suspicion that many Chief Education Officers do not know these facts themselves. Keith quite rightly wants to remedy this deficiency. But the officials' paper (paragraph 18 iv) suggests that we should take no action until the autumn of 1984 - and then only in the form of a circular asking LEAs what they are doing to inform governors about the costs of schools. You may wish to press for a Circular as soon as possible, instructing LEAs to provide such information quickly.
- (ii) Delegation of financial responsibility to governors. Delegating some control over finances saves money: when Hereford and Worcester allowed schools to keep and use any money saved on heating, £500,000 was saved in the first year. And financial delegation also allows schools to order their priorities - more on books, less on repainting the cafeteria. But officials propose to delay even enquiring into LEA practice until the autumn of 1984. You may wish to press for speedier movement: a rapid enquiry, combined with the results of the survey of LEA accounting now being undertaken by the Audit Commission, would put us in a good position to take action in 1985.
- (iii) Governors' powers over staff appointments. We believe that Keith should go further than he proposes. Instead of merely "entrenching" governors' present rights, he should legislate to give governors a veto over the appointment of both the head-teacher and junior staff.
- DES officials say: (1) that an LEA needs to "manage its teaching force"; and (2) that giving governors a veto would lead to a series of appeals to the Secretary of State. We

reply: (1) that an LEA which has to impose a given teacher on a school against the will of the governors is not "managing" its affairs very well; and (2) that something is seriously wrong if LEAs and Governors cannot agree on appointments without appealing to the Secretary of State. You may wish to press Keith to give governors a veto over staff appointments.

5. Protection of Popular Schools. At present, an LEA can keep popular schools at 20 per cent below their capacity, in order to prop up unpopular schools. Bob Dunn and Stuart Sexton have argued vigorously for this power to be reduced. Keith has accepted this view in principle; but officials are now arguing against any significant change. You may wish to strengthen Keith's resolve, by pointing out that this change will have an important effect on the ability of the system to respond to parental preference.

Principal Recommendations

We recommend that you should;

- stress the need for graded tests;
- press for firm and fast action to ensure that governors are given proper financial information, and a proper amount of financial responsibility;
- urge Keith Joseph to give governors a veto over all staff appointments;
- emphasise the importance of preventing LEAs from artificially limiting the intake of popular schools.

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