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England: New Governments, New Policies

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But 'tis the talent of our English nation,
Still to be plotting some new reformation

—John Dryden (1631–1700)

The world's views of English society and English education are formed largely by a mixture of BBC costume drama, Hollywood, and the classics of English literature (most recently *Harry Potter*). So the images that spring to mind are of boarding schools and quaint uniforms, of young “gentlemen” (and royal princes) on the playing fields of Eton, and of Oxbridge quadrangles and dreaming spires.

Eton remains a great school, but it and, indeed, the other great “public” boarding schools have long ago lost the inside track to political success and thus their dominance in society. The last four leaders of the right-wing Conservative Party have been a small shopkeeper's daughter, a man who left school at sixteen to be a bank clerk, a small-town Yorkshireman who retained his regional accent, and a nongraduate army officer. The last of these is also the only one of the four to have attended any sort of private school at all (although, ironically, Tony Blair, a member of the Labour Party, was entirely privately educated). The percentage of English schoolchildren who attend private schools is about 8 percent—less, for example, than the U.S. percentage. What is true, however, is that the private or, as they are now usually called,

independent schools dominate entry to the most prestigious, most competitive university courses by virtue of their students' performance in public examinations. This is especially true for the big private day schools of London, Birmingham, and Manchester—England's three largest cities.¹

This chapter focuses on the past fifteen years of frenetic school reform and on the social and economic reasons that education policy has been so high on the political agenda. However, in order to understand the context of reform, and also because outsiders' views of the English system are often formed by very partial media images, it is first of all worth outlining the structure of English education today.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

With a few exceptions, English schoolchildren attend first a primary and then a secondary school from which they may leave full-time education or move on, at age sixteen or eighteen. Most attend a neighborhood primary school and then move to a large, nonselective secondary "comprehensive" school serving the full eleven to eighteen age range. However, at age sixteen, following important and high-stakes public examinations (the General Certificate in Secondary Education [GCSE], normally taken in nine or more subjects), some will leave school for the job market or apprenticeship and others will move to a college (which in the United Kingdom is not a term applied to universities). This may be a "sixth-form college," which specializes in education for sixteen to eighteen year olds and offers both academic and vocational options. Alternatively, it may be a "further education college," an institution that resembles an American community college but also offers courses, both academic and vocational, to sixteen to eighteen year olds. For those who remain in secondary school, the most important and highest-recruiting courses are those leading to academic examinations: namely, A levels, the "General Certificate of Education (Advanced level)," normally taken in three or four subjects.

A levels, like the GCSEs, are public examinations with very high stakes for the individual candidate. Students' GCSE results determine which course they will follow after age sixteen and, in particular,

whether they will be among the 40 percent or so who enter A-level classes. A-level results, in turn, determine which course at which university a student will enter. Although it is entirely possible to enter some form of higher education without A levels, they form the gateway to desirable courses in high-status universities.

Most of the younger students who move into further education do so in order to follow a vocational or semivocational program, of which schools tend to offer only a limited selection. However, a good number of college students also work toward A levels. Either way, age sixteen marks a critical selection point, when students are steered toward very different options. Until then, there is very little formal selection or sorting in the state system, and promotion is effectively automatic and age dependent. The lack of selection or tracking before age sixteen makes the current school system very different from that of the post-war period. It was in 1945, after World War II, that England finally moved to universal secondary education. It did so by establishing a system that assigned eleven year olds to either academic "grammar schools" or nonacademic "secondary modern schools" on the basis of an academic examination taken in the final year of primary school, the "11 plus."² Between 1965 and 1980 that system was swept away in favor of the nonselective comprehensive secondary school.

Funding for state schools in England (and indeed the whole United Kingdom) comes almost entirely from the central government, but between it and the schools lies the administrative tier of local education authorities (LEAs). Although, as discussed later, the LEAs have lost a great many of their powers in recent years, they have ultimate responsibility for the way schools are organized in their area, including, notably, whether secondary schools have a "sixth form" of sixteen to eighteen year olds or whether these students will be consolidated in a few schools or a sixth-form college. There are also local differences in the extent to which an LEA shares its powers and responsibilities—notably in the cases of "aided" schools with a religious character and origin. As in much of Europe (and unlike the case in the United States), a good number of English schools are church schools in the broadest sense—Catholic and Church of England but also Jewish and, most recently, Muslim. These schools are entirely non-fee-paying; are subject to all the same curriculum, admissions, and other

policies as any state schools; and may admit pupils of other faiths. However, they retain a religious character; they may give preference in admissions to pupils of the relevant faith; and the churches are involved in their governance. This situation dates back to the origins of mass education in the nineteenth century, which was largely the creation of the churches (West, 1970), and to the compromises with the latter that heralded the nationalization of elementary education in 1870. The existence of religious schools within the state system is not a major area of controversy, and their reputation with parents is usually high (Dennis, 2001; Gordon, Aldrich, & Dean, 1991; Jenkins, 1995).

This chapter focuses on school reform, but it is also important to be aware of how much English higher education has changed in recent years. The country now has one of the highest participation rates in Europe and the highest graduation rate (measured in terms of proportion of the population achieving full bachelor's degrees). Over 40 percent of an age cohort now moves more or less directly into some form of higher education, and the government's target is for 50 percent to do so in the near future (Department for Education and Skills, 2003; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2002). The university sector is extremely hierarchical, with very competitive entry for the top institutions. The rapid expansion of higher education has had a direct effect on schools because it means that a large and growing proportion of the population is concerned directly with how well schools perform, in the sense of producing students with good A-level grades and, therefore, the likelihood of progressing to "good" universities. Although the private schools enroll only about 8 percent of students overall, they produce a far higher proportion of the country's A-level candidates and, especially, of candidates who obtain good A-level grades in traditional academic subjects.

Finally, in understanding the English educational (and indeed political and social) scene, it is critical to grasp the enormous power of central government. The fact that fundamental reforms of secondary education, established in 1945, could be swept away almost entirely within thirty years, underlines this point: The successive changes to be discussed later reflect the same phenomenon. Britain has no written constitution. It has a first-past-the-post election system, which

awards legislative seats to the constituency candidate with the most votes cast (very often a minority of the total), with no element of proportional representation.³ This system tends to produce large parliamentary majorities for a single party, rather than the coalitions common in many other countries. Party discipline is strong, and the upper house (the House of Lords) has few powers. All this means that a British government has been able to pass whatever laws it likes, provided the members of its own party will accept them. Although these powers are now circumscribed in many areas by the treaties of the European Union, in others—including education—there are no such restraints. The result is that governments can be, and frequently are, extraordinarily radical in the changes they introduce and very often inspired by clear ideological principles. The veneer of age and tradition overlaying English life often conceals this not only from foreigners but from the English themselves, who tend to see themselves as mired in the past and as practical, moderate, nonideological people. In education, at least, the facts suggest otherwise.

DIAGNOSING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM: EDUCATION AS PROBLEM AND CURE

For fifteen years English schooling has been in a state of more or less constant change. Moreover, other enormous upheavals preceded these by only a couple of decades. The reforms that shape today's schools started under the Conservative administrations of Thatcher but reached their apogee (or possibly their nadir) in the early years of the Labour administration headed by Tony Blair, when an average of one new directive or policy paper *a day* issued forth from the national ministry of education. Underlying this ferment was a conviction among politicians, shared by the national media, that state education was failing.

This section is concerned with the origins of this view. The response to it, again under major political parties, has been informed by two basic principles, which are also in tension. The first is a commitment to centrally driven reform (as the only way for revolutionaries or reformers to realize their objectives in, as they see it, the face of local

obduracy and self-interested opposition). The second is a belief in choice, variety, and, to varying degrees, the efficiency of market principles. These two principles, and their translation into education policy, are discussed later.

Concerns over the quality of education emerged first and most starkly with respect to primary schools and the teaching of reading and mathematics. In the 1950s and 1960s preparation for the 11-plus examination dominated the upper years of primary education. There was a general feeling that the result was often narrow and stultifying and failed to encourage the full intellectual or creative development of pupils. A major governmental review, chaired by Bridget Plowden (1967), led to a report titled *Children and Their Primary Schools* that became synonymous in policy discussion with a general "progressivism," a belief in unstructured classrooms and individualized learning, and opposition to any form of testing. In fact, read today, the Plowden Report seems entirely moderate, full of common sense, and very different from its popular reputation. However, it was contemporaneous not just with a general revulsion against categorizing children permanently at the age of ten or eleven, which led to the abolition of selective secondary schooling in favor of comprehensives, but also with the emergence of an influential set of "progressive" ideas that went far beyond anything advocated by Plowden as national policy. These, in turn, were attacked aggressively by conservative-leaning writers, whose "black papers," linking progressive ideas to a decline in educational standards, received widespread publicity (see, e.g., Aldrich, 2002).

The establishment of comprehensives started in earnest in 1965 under a Labour government. Many Conservatives were strongly against the abolition of grammar schools, but although they were in power from 1970 to 1974, the process continued unabated. The actual organization of schools was the responsibility of the country's LEAs, most of which had well-advanced plans by 1970, with, often, a great deal of bipartisan support. In some localities, grammar schools were "saved," but Thatcher, in her period as a Conservative minister of education (1970–74), signed off on more local reorganizations (into comprehensive schools) than any other minister before or since.

In much of the country, meanwhile, primary teachers continued, throughout both the 1970s and the 1980s, to operate in a fairly tradi-

tional style, albeit much less examination oriented than in the past, and with a general reluctance to measure children formally and compare them with any national or external yardstick. In some schools and districts, however, there was a genuine and enthusiastic commitment to "exploratory" or informal methods; the teaching of formal spelling or times tables was effectively (though not legally) abandoned in favor of having children explore writing and number bonds for themselves, and any form of whole-class didactic teaching became anathema. Significantly for the future, many of the most committed of these schools were in inner London, home not only to politicians but also to England's enormously influential national press and broadcasting. One particularly high-profile case, in 1976, pitted working-class parents against "progressive" and highly politicized teachers at William Tyndale School in London (Aldrich, 2002). The school was a primary school in a fairly poor area of London, where the head and the majority of teachers were highly committed to a more or less totally unstructured regime, underpinned by left-wing politics that were seen as implying such an approach and as something they wanted to pass on to the children. The parents, however, felt that their children were not being taught anything. The LEA was in conflict with the school governors (who had appointed and supported the head); there was almost a year of protests, demonstrations, and strikes before the head left and the school staff was (in large part) reconstituted.

The Tyndale case was the immediate pretext for a seminal speech by the Labour prime minister of the time, James Callaghan. Foreshadowing change to come, he stated that "during my travels around the country in recent months, I have had many discussions that show concern" (1976, p. 333) about the state of education and educational standards. In the advice showered on him in anticipation of what was a much-heralded speech, he noted, it was

almost as though some people would wish that the subject matter and purpose of education should not have public attention focused on it; nor that profane hands should touch it. I cannot believe that this is a considered reaction. . . . Public interest is strong and legitimate and will be satisfied. . . . I have been very impressed in the schools I have visited by the enthusiasm and dedication of the teaching profession, by

the variety of courses that are offered. . . . But I am concerned on my journeys to find complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required. . . . On another aspect there is the unease felt by parents and others about the new informal methods of teaching which seem to produce excellent results when they are in well-qualified hands but are much more dubious when they are not. . . . There is now widespread recognition of the need to cater for a child's personality, to let it flower in the fullest possible way. The balance was wrong in the past. [But] we have a responsibility now to see that we do not get it wrong in the other direction. There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. (1976, p. 333)

The sentiments and concerns expressed in that speech would be applauded by key figures in every single government that has followed, even though the actual policies used in response to the problems Callaghan perceived have been modified and changed continuously. However, major changes to the education system were delayed by economic crises—of which the United Kingdom experienced plenty in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Callaghan's government had to grapple with a "winter of discontent," when major public sector strikes led to power cuts that forced the country onto a three-day week, rubbish lay uncollected, hospitals could not function properly, unemployment soared, and the International Monetary Fund forced humiliating economic and fiscal changes on the government.

None of this altered the public's perception of educational failure. On the contrary, in the quest for explanations of the country's then-evident economic failure, education became a favored candidate for blame, with some influential commentators citing a long-standing tradition of classical and humanistic education and antipathy to science, technology, and commerce and others emphasizing the superiority of current European (especially German and French) education (Barnett, 1986; Prais, 1995; Sanderson, 1999). These arguments had a major influence on politicians, civil servants, and the media; the results of international comparative surveys received widespread coverage and were seen as confirming the negative effects of "progressive" education. For example, those run by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement showed English children performing badly on, in particular, tradi-

tional mathematics and computational questions. Then and now, England's performance in science tended to be rather good, but this finding never received comparable coverage. The widespread belief that educational standards were low and falling received added impetus from the conviction—not peculiar to England—that education was the key to economic success in the modern world (Wolf, 2002a).

During the 1970s and 1980s concern about educational standards focused on the primary schools. More recently, political reformers have been increasingly concerned with secondary education. This is partly because it has taken time for the mixed effects of the move to comprehensive schools to become clear and for responses to crystallize among politicians and commentators. In the suburbs, small towns, and countryside, the system bedded down with no great problems. In the cities, however, the result was as much to strengthen as to overcome class-linked barriers to opportunity.

Throughout the world, cities exhibit extremes of wealth and poverty, and the refusal of their middle classes to use large, nonselective secondary schools is far from a purely English phenomenon. However, the effect of comprehensive education on city education, and its impact on the relative academic performance of state and independent sectors, was especially rapid and visible in England because of its educational history. The grammar schools of the post-1945 selective system included many state-operated institutions but also included a number of ancient and independent institutions that opted into the state system as "direct grant" schools, accepting all or most of their students on the basis of the 11-plus examinations, with their fees paid by the state.⁴ When required to be nonselective, almost all of these schools opted to become independent and fee paying once again and, so, largely the preserve of an urban middle class that was increasingly preoccupied with its children's educational future. As direct grant schools, they had also been largely middle class—but with a significant proportion of high-achieving working-class students. Meanwhile, the cities' other "state" grammar schools, along with the secondary moderns, became comprehensive schools. However, many of them (because of their geographical location) recruited overwhelmingly from low-income areas and lacked any significant middle-class enrollment.

The problems of working-class concentration in the comprehensive schools were, and continue to be, compounded by enormous social changes. In the last decades of the twentieth century England experienced unprecedented levels of immigration (so that its foreign-born population is now at close to U.S. levels and, in London, higher than in New York). Immigrants concentrate in the big cities, and soaring rates of family breakdown and births to single young mothers increase the pressures this creates. Although many city schools manage, nonetheless, to provide reasonable or indeed good education, a significant number became institutions to which no caring parent would willingly send a child with any academic bent or ambition. Of course, this had been true of a good many of the older secondary moderns too, but it was (and is) a far cry from the original promise of equal educational opportunity within the comprehensive system. This promise of equality was articulated by Michael Stewart, the first minister of education in the 1964 Labour government: "No child will be put in a position of being sent to a school which is accepted from the start as not possessing as good facilities as some other schools for advanced academic education" (Kogan, 1971, p. 7).

The cities' increasing educational polarization fed through into the increasing academic dominance of the independent sector, as the grammar schools' success in, for example, sending pupils to Oxbridge faded into history. Nothing in the last fifteen years of frenetic reform has had any impact here: The proportion of state-educated students entering Oxford and Cambridge was around two-thirds throughout the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., 64 percent in 1978) without there being any overt policies to encourage this. By 2000 the proportion was remaining stubbornly below 50 percent, despite active "outreach" programs by the universities and tongue-lashings from government. Those who do enter from state schools are overwhelmingly from suburbs and university towns and are middle class themselves. The picture is the same in other top-ranked universities. Recent data indicating declines in social mobility since the 1970s reflect this development (Blanden et al., in press).

Different parts of the political and media establishments might vary in how much they worried about the education system's supposed economic failings, as compared with its failure to promote equal op-

portunity or its failure to preserve high standards and culture. Overall, however, by the time Thatcher became prime minister, dissatisfaction was widespread, and blame was frequently directed toward the teaching profession and the LEAs. By contrast, both then and throughout the period I am about to describe, most parents have tended to express general satisfaction with their children's own teachers. They have also become ever more concerned about their children's educational success and prospects. As noted earlier, there has been a sustained and enormous expansion of university education in Britain, and a degree has become a prerequisite for an increasing proportion of middle-class occupations. The ever-greater importance of education in determining life chances (Wolf, 2002a), allied to the competitive nature of upper secondary school examinations and university entrance, ensures that education remains a high profile concern, whichever party is in power. Moreover, the fact that school funding comes almost entirely from central government taxes makes the cost and efficiency of education of direct and abiding interest to the Treasury, itself by far the most important and powerful of the departments of state.

THE CENTRALIZATION SOLUTION

Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979. A sustained period of relative economic decline for the United Kingdom had come to a head with the "winter of discontent," during which the (Labour) government appeared to have lost all authority over public sector unions. The self-confidence of much of the British elite had never been lower, with talk not of a positive future but simply of "managing decline." How much the events of the Thatcher years are a cause for celebration or exorciation and how much they were her personal achievement are matters on which there is no consensus at all within the United Kingdom, for Thatcher divided public opinion in a way unequalled by any other twentieth-century prime minister. On one thing, however, observers are agreed. Hers was the most centralizing government in several hundred years, and education was one of the prime objects of its zeal. What is also clear is that, as with many other aspects of the Thatcher legacy,

her successor governments—Conservative and Labour—have chosen to consolidate, rather than reverse, her approach.

In 1979 most of the important operational decisions about both primary and secondary schools were made by the LEAs. Today, these bodies, though they still exist, have virtually no independent authority, and in a few cases private contractors appointed by central government run them directly. In 1979 there was no national curriculum; today, all children from five to sixteen in state-funded schools follow a highly prescriptive, uniform curriculum that covers the full timetable. In 1979 the first formal and publicly reported testing experienced by most state-educated children (and for many the first formal testing of any sort) came at age sixteen, when they took examinations marking the end of compulsory schooling.⁵ Today, English children are among the most tested in the world, with external tests, developed by public bodies, used at ages five, seven, eleven, fourteen, sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen—and sometimes in between as well.

This happened partly because, as we have seen, politicians and opinion makers had become convinced that education was in a perilous state and partly because British society had become so politically polarized. Education had been a local function since the coming of compulsory schooling. Over the years there had been a gradual move away from independently elected local school boards and distinct funding streams for education (including substantial amounts of locally raised revenue) toward relatively few large local authorities, whose funding for education came largely through a general grant from central government for local services, in which education was just one of a number of functions. Localities also experienced the progressive reduction of their power to supplement central funding during the postwar years in the cause of expenditure equalization. Thus, in most areas, the LEA was coterminous with the other local authorities, namely, the borough or county councils responsible for other local government services, and run by elected councils. Consequently, they were seen as very much a department of those councils.

However, the substantive powers of LEAs were enormous in the postwar decades. Although the central ministry (then known as the Department for Education and Science) distributed the vast bulk of the funds for state education, the ministry did not employ any teach-

ers or run any schools and had no direct control over either the curriculum or the examinations taken by students leaving school for the job market or higher education. Harold Wilson, a Labour prime minister of the 1960s, regarded the department as “little more than a post-box” between the LEAs and the powerful teachers’ unions, which conducted their national pay bargaining directly with the employer representatives—that is, the LEAs (Sharp, 2002, p. 105).

The LEAs of the early Thatcher years included some run by ideologically committed left-wing councils, reflecting the polarized politics of the period.⁶ These councils were a prime target of a central government whose campaign platform had included curbing their powers (including their tax-raising powers). The major way in which councils could raise additional funds for local initiatives, including educational ones, was “rates,” a form of property tax. In the mid-1980s the government moved to cap the degree to which councils could increase rates. Thatcher’s views on property taxes were clear: “I had always disliked the rates intensely. Any property tax is essentially a tax on improving one’s own home. It was manifestly unfair and un-Conservative” (1993, p. 644). Curbing councils’ powers meant that education spending levels became, in effect, something decided entirely by central government, which remains the case, even though there has been a series of further changes to local tax mechanisms.

In the specifically educational context, numerous LEAs, along with the teachers’ unions (some of them also, at this time, dominated by left-wing caucuses), were perceived by the government as aiding and abetting a decline in education standards, denying children a proper education, and undermining national prosperity in pursuit of misguided “progressive” ideals. Although opposition to Thatcher was at all times strong and vocal, local authorities also found rather few passionate defenders of their educational powers. As noted earlier, the conviction that there was something seriously wrong with England’s schools, especially in the teaching of basic elementary-level skills, was widely shared across the political spectrum. The fact that London teachers were particularly militant over pay and conditions (partly on ideological grounds and partly because of the sheer cost of living in the capital) fueled the determination of a London-based government to seize power for itself.

The policies that demolished LEA powers also included, as the next section will discuss, far greater independence for schools themselves, but the most dramatic and visible educational changes of the Thatcher years were those that enlarged the powers of central government and of the secretary of state for education. In the past, LEAs had been free to undertake major curriculum innovation; the Inner London Education Authority, for example, developed a distinctive and entirely individualized secondary mathematics program, which was used throughout its schools and nowhere else in the country. The County of Kent (covering London suburbs, Dover, Canterbury, and the southern Thames estuary) was another LEA with its own secondary mathematics scheme, again quite distinct from that used in most of the rest of the country. LEAs ran their own large inspection services, which had a major influence on teaching content and pedagogy in their schools. Of course, what schools taught was not completely random: Most offered the "normal" collections of mathematics and science, languages, social sciences, and vocational options. In the upper secondary years, the need for sixteen- and eighteen-year-old pupils to pass the externally set public examinations, each with its own syllabus, structured teaching tightly. Nonetheless, the not-for-profit examining bodies that ran these exams offered a wide range of syllabus options, and LEAs with their own curriculum initiatives could arrange to have them examined specially.⁷ All this was to change with the introduction of a compulsory national curriculum.

It was James Callaghan, the Labour prime minister, who first signaled central control over the curriculum, in the 1976 Ruskin College speech quoted earlier, which expressed disquiet over "progressive" methods and indicated that a mandated core curriculum might be a necessary way of ensuring a basic equality in provision (and standards) in all schools. Like Callaghan, however, the early Thatcher governments were largely preoccupied with the economy, and the major curriculum reform of those years was, in fact, one generally welcomed by the education establishment. As already noted, the important public examinations that English (and, indeed, all British) pupils take at sixteen or eighteen play a central role in both labor market entry and university selection. The introduction of the GCSE in the 1980s meant that there was now a single set of public examinations

offered at age sixteen, where previously there had been two, one less academic (and so less respected or valuable) than the other.

Other actions, however, signaled an increasingly interventionist approach to the curriculum. Two new centrally appointed bodies were established—one to advise on curriculum and one, on examinations. In an attempt to counteract what was seen as a deeply embedded prejudice against technical skills and against business, money was poured into a "Technical and Vocational Education Initiative" and into "Enterprise" activities that encouraged pupils to carry out small-scale business ventures. In both cases, money went directly into participating schools, bypassing the LEAs, a practice that has continued ever since, with schools receiving ever-increasing portions of their funding through special, centrally run, and often short-lived "initiatives."

Then, in 1987, a full-blown national curriculum was launched. In the space of a year English schools moved from a situation where there was less governmental control of the curriculum than anywhere else in Europe to having one of the most tightly and minutely defined curricula on the Continent. Callaghan, and, indeed, Thatcher herself, had been concerned largely to ensure that the core subjects—English, mathematics, and science—were taught to guaranteed standards throughout the primary and secondary years. Offered a taste of power, the civil servants and political advisers of the central ministry and the new government advisory bodies staged a complete takeover of the curriculum, urged on by then-Secretary of State Kenneth Baker.

Alongside the three original foundation subjects (mathematics, English, science) came seven other compulsory ones: history, geography, technology, music, art, physical education, and a foreign language. In every single one of these, for the years of compulsory education (ages five to sixteen), the government prescribed detailed "attainment targets," specifying exactly what must be achieved by each pupil through ten levels of attainment and doing so at a level of detail that encompassed content as well as skills. The result effectively absorbed the entire school timetable, and options pretty much vanished. The 1988 Education Reform Act, which enacted this into law for all state (though not for independent) schools, also established a National Curriculum Council, with the authority to oversee implementation and revise the curriculum as and when requested to do so

by central government, and a School Examinations and Assessment Council, to ensure that the new curriculum was adequately assessed and examined. The latter requirement produced an explosion in the amount of testing within schools.

National Curriculum and Testing

The introduction of a national curriculum was not without supporters in the education world, though there were few enthusiasts for anything as detailed and prescriptive as the final product, which arrived accompanied by (literally) truckloads of "guidance," instruction, and regulation. For the accompanying testing regime, it was hard to find anyone within the schools who had a single kind word. This was not something that bothered the government, for the purpose of the new testing regime was assuredly not to please schools and teachers—quite the contrary. On the one hand (as the next section discusses), it was intended to empower parents and establish a sort of market-driven virtuous circle leading to higher standards everywhere. On the other—and this was the aspect that has become increasingly dominant—it was meant to assert central control over the whole school system and to identify failing and backsliding schools that could then be targeted for improvement.

The new national curriculum divided the years of compulsory schooling into four "Key Stages": Stage 1 (ages five to seven), Stage 2 (ages seven to eleven—that is, through the end of primary school), Stage 3 (ages eleven to fourteen), and Stage 4 (ages fourteen to sixteen). There were to be new tests at the end of Key Stages 1, 2, and 3; Key Stage 4, covering the final two years of compulsory school, changed the least because it was already structured and driven by the demands of the subject-based public examinations, the GCSE, which is now taken by virtually all English sixteen-year-olds. Although GCSEs were and are extremely high stakes for the individual pupil taking them, the new Key Stage tests had far more to do with holding schools and teachers accountable. These tests were not intended to select or sort children in any formal sense. Rather, the results were for the use of parents, so that they could judge their children's progress, and they were also to be collated and, along with the results of the

GCSE examinations, published, on a school-by-school and LEA-by-LEA basis. The resulting "league tables" showed the relative attainment of every state school's pupils across the land; the press also compiles comparable tables showing independent schools' GCSE and A-level performance. Fifteen years on, the league tables are firmly established, unpopular with schools, and as controversial as ever.

The first years of the reform were deeply unhappy ones for the primary schools, and there is some convincing evidence to suggest that standards actually declined rather than rose at this time, as teachers struggled to master and implement the new requirements (see, e.g., Phillips & Furlong, 2001). The testing regime, especially for seven-year-olds, hovered between tragedy and farce. The Department of Education gave the early contracts for test development to university-led consortia, which were determined that the tests should be "authentic," that is, they should reflect the full curriculum, provide rich information on individual children's development that could be used by teachers to inform their teaching, and be nonthreatening to the children concerned. The result was completely unmanageable. Test administration stretched over a full six-week period; while the class teacher was observing and recording one or two children's interpretations of why a piece of wood did or did not float in a basin of water, the other twenty-eight or so seven-year-olds in the class were either more or less unsupervised (and, one hopes, still inside the classroom) or in the care of the resentful and overburdened teachers of the six- or eight-year-olds' classes. Only a credible national threat to boycott the next round of tests, supported not just by the teachers' unions but also by the full administrative hierarchy of the LEAs, secured change. Tests became, instead, the short, conventional, pencil-and-paper operations that were what Prime Minister Thatcher had envisaged in the first place.

In this form, the tests continue, and they function well enough from a narrow administrative perspective. Tests for eleven-year-olds are the most high profile, and those for fourteen-year-olds, the least; both cover mathematics, English, and science. The two separate curriculum and assessment authorities established in 1988 (and placed in different parts of the country) soon merged into a single, large London-based agency, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. This

body, supposedly at arm's length from government but in fact its operational arm, devises and administers the seven-, eleven-, and fourteen-year-olds' tests—sometimes in-house, sometimes through contractors. The test results indicate which level of the ten-level national curriculum an individual child has reached in each of the subjects taken. Children take them, under formal test conditions, on a given date; the papers are collected and marked externally but returned to the schools for checking and for use in the classroom. The Department of Education collates and publishes the results (electronically and alphabetically) on an LEA-by-LEA basis, and the national press immediately publishes in hard copy the list of school results in rank order by LEA.

Although the tests now roll out quite smoothly year by year, they remain highly controversial. (The independent sector, which has voluntarily adopted most of the substance of the national curriculum, has shown no enthusiasm whatsoever for the seven-, eleven-, and fourteen-year-olds' testing regime. The vast majority of its schools do not enter pupils for any of them.) The most generally unpopular tests are those for seven-year-olds, for parents tend to share with teachers an unease over anything that labels children at this young an age and are very aware that children's early learning, particularly in reading and writing, progresses at very different speeds. Moreover, as the tests have become regular, well known, and in some ways routine, so they have also become a greater source of strain for children. Although their most important function is to judge school performance, children are nonetheless increasingly aware that the exam at age seven is the first of many times when they will be assessed and appraised and that performance in these areas matters for their futures.

In spite of the opposition, successive ministers have been convinced of the need to retain a centrally imposed requirement, one that, they believe, ensures that children who are slipping badly behind their peers—and schools that are failing them—are identified early on. This perspective reflects the origins of the reform movement in worries over the teaching of basic skills at the elementary level. One concession was made, in 2003, to allow schools to select their own date for testing seven-year-olds, rather than giving the test on set dates systemwide. It is not yet evident how this local selection can be recon-

ciled with the need to keep papers (and answers) secure, for the Key Stage tests (as with all of England's public examination papers) are intentionally made available after the event, and children's results are fed back to schools, to provide formative input into teaching and to make the standards and content of the various levels explicit and clear.

The tests for eleven-year-olds are, if anything, even more unpopular with teachers—but not with parents. In understanding the persistence of the testing and league table regime beyond the Thatcher years, it is important to remember that both the unease over standards expressed by (Labour's) Callaghan and the commitment to reform of the Thatcher governments found ready echoes in the voting public at large. People might express positive sentiments about their own children's teachers and schools, but they shared the politicians' and media's fears about falling standards and were also (rightly) convinced of the growing importance of education for their children's futures. The eleven-year-olds' tests provide parents with a clear measure of how well their children are progressing, and opinion polls consistently show that this is welcomed. Between the general disappearance of the 11-plus and the advent of Key Stage testing, many (possibly most) parents received no such nationally benchmarked feedback until their children took GCSE examinations at sixteen—by which time it was too late to take any major remedial action.

For teachers and schools, however, the eleven-year-olds' tests are threatening and high stakes because it is on these test results that high-profile league tables are based. Children worry about them, of course, but once they are taken, they move on quickly to secondary schools that actually make little direct use of the results, preferring, in almost every case, to retest incoming pupils using their own measures. Their teachers, however, stay behind.

League tables, for primary and also for secondary schools, have become a battleground between those who regard them as reflecting, for the most part, nothing but the social origins of the student body and those who see them as a necessary part of a successful program of school improvement. For many decades English schools have been subject to regular inspections by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools. Another component of the recent school reform drive has involved the enhancement of inspectors' powers, along with a new

government bureaucracy, the Office for Standards in Education, which is empowered to identify "failing schools" that need to be put under "special measures." One of the indicators used to judge and grade schools is, inevitably, their performance on the Key Stage tests. Critics of the tests, and of the league tables, point to the fact that a very high proportion of the primary schools that fail inspections do indeed have poor Key Stage 2 test results but also score very highly on indexes of social disadvantage and of numbers of children for whom English is a second language. To a large extent, therefore, poor results simply reflect the school's socioeconomic situation. The only fair way to measure school performance, the critics continue, is on a value-added measure, which looks at whether a school performs better or worse than one would predict given the characteristics of its student body and other resources. Measuring, judging, and reporting performance on the basis of "raw" test scores is misleading and unjust to the schools.⁸

The response from governmental agencies and their supporters is that good numbers of schools with disadvantaged students perform very well and that, for too long, social disadvantage has served as an alibi for poor-quality schooling. The critics have now won the intellectual argument, to the extent that recent governments have made efforts to find robust and simple ways of measuring value-added—and have been largely defeated in the attempt. The testing and the league tables, meanwhile, continue as before and became even more important when Labour took over from the Conservatives in 1997. One of the retained policies was that of setting numerical targets for public sector agencies and the country as a whole (e.g., 50 percent participation in higher education, mentioned earlier). Under Labour, a precise numerical target was added, to the effect that at least 80 percent of eleven-year-olds should, by 2004, reach a particular level of attainment in mathematics and English.⁹ Moreover, to help ensure this, the government intervened yet more directly in the classroom. The Thatcher reforms had set a national curriculum and defined levels and objectives through externally set tests. To this, Labour added the "numeracy hour" and the "literacy hour," which set out, for primary teachers, exactly how they should teach, from the nature of the materials to the percentage of time to be spent on whole-class direct ex-

position as compared with other methods. Though never legally compulsory, it was only a very brave and confident head teacher who could hold out against implementation; and while novelists and writers railed against the mechanistic view of language teaching this implied, politicians could, again, point to general public support for reforms that emphasized getting the "basics" right for everyone. At the secondary level, meanwhile, the compulsory Key Stage 3 tests have retained a fairly low profile, with attention, and teacher anxiety, centered on the league tables that rank schools by pupil success in the GCSE examinations.

These reforms have certainly revolutionized the governance of English education and the orientation and practice of the classroom teacher, but have they done anything for the quality of children's learning? There has been clearly rising performance on some tests (but also a lot of teaching to the test), similarly rising performance in international surveys, and more time in primary schools spent on basic skills, but there is also evidence from some regional/local data of far more modest improvements than the government tests imply and sometimes no change at all. My own judgment is that there has been some genuine improvement in eleven year olds' reading and math skills, though less than the official statistics imply and with some real costs. The effects are clearest in the primary schools, where there are now no traces left of old-style "progressivism" and where the final years, in particular, are almost entirely directed toward preparing for the Key Stage 2 tests taken in year six. Teachers study the content of past papers obsessively and drill children on particular types of questions. When the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority announced that it had developed national curriculum-calibrated tests applicable in years three, four, and five (i.e., the years between the two formal testing years), almost every school in the country requested a set. Key Stage 2 results show an enormous increase in the proportion of children achieving a given level. Some of this improvement is probably genuine—but much of it almost certainly reflects the familiar, well-known syndrome of teaching to the test. Old-style "progressivism" has vanished.

At the secondary school level, the effects have been less dramatic but possibly more insidious, in the sense that particular groups of students have been adversely affected. The importance, for English

pupils, of public examinations at ages sixteen and eighteen predates by decades the school reforms discussed here. There has been a steady and continuing upsurge, throughout the past half century, in the number of entries and certificates obtained by young people, but this has happened everywhere. It can be accounted for easily enough by the expansion of universities and the growing importance of education in the labor market, with no need to invoke the government's centralizing drive for school reform.

What is true, however, is that the publicity afforded to a school's examination performance puts a low-performing school in a spotlight that can make it extraordinarily difficult for the school to attract a balanced intake of pupils and very easy for it to spiral even further downward. Parents may fully understand that a school's performance is not in any obvious way its "fault," but they are also quite clear that they want their own children to attend high-achieving schools that are relatively trouble free. Some schools can and do reverse an apparent downward trend, but many are unable to, and their staff become increasingly demoralized. In recent years influential voices in central government have argued that any school can succeed and that it is simply a matter of "leadership." This belief led to a policy of parachuting "super-heads" into "failing" schools, a policy that demonstrably, and sometimes dramatically, failed on virtually every occasion it was tried.

Another more general problem attaches to the way in which league table statistics are calculated. Labour, a party addicted to numerical targets in every area of public policy, has placed special emphasis on increasing the number of pupils obtaining at least five GCSE passes at grades A–C. (Although a GCSE pass grade runs from A through F, the labor market and universities—and indeed pupils themselves—draw a clear distinction between A–C and D–E.) The result has been to focus school attention on pupils for whom this is a viable goal (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). The proportion of the cohort attaining at least five A–C grades has increased (and is now around 50 percent), and the proportion attaining only three or four A–C passes has decreased. Conversely and significantly, the proportion of pupils who attain only very low grades (Ds and Es) has not shrunk at all, indicating the lack of incentive for schools to concentrate efforts on this group. The same

pressures have encouraged schools to enter pupils for syllabi that are relatively easy; hence, the most academic mathematics syllabus has seen its numbers of entrants reduced by half in favor of an easier option, which precludes an A grade but offers a B or C and so meets the league table requirements (Tikly & Wolf, 2000).

If one interrogates senior policy makers—whether politicians, advisers, commentators, or senior officials—many will, today, express a belief that centralization, targets, and league tables have run their course as a means to improvement and that more independence must be restored to schools. However, there is no sign, to date, of any genuine relaxation of central control over the content of the curriculum or its assessment. Instead, central government continues to pronounce on the smallest details of curriculum and examining while still embracing the principles of school autonomy and parental choice, to which we now turn.

Parental Choice, School Autonomy, and Competition in the Context of Centralization

One of the most intriguing and curious aspects of English school reform over the last fifteen years is that it has combined an enormous faith in the ability of central government to safeguard and raise education standards with a very different approach to improving quality: parental choice, school autonomy, and competition. Whereas both major political parties have been equally enthusiastic about the centralization of the curriculum and the use of targets and testing for accountability, this second strand of reform is more associated with the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the Labour governments that followed have not reversed these reforms to any significant degree and, indeed, recently have become increasingly sympathetic toward their underlying premise.

The themes of "markets" and "choice," notably in the privatization of public utilities, were characteristic of much of the Conservative public sector policy in the Thatcher years. The ideology was then generalized to education, though with some specific additions. Most members of the Conservative Party had never been convinced that the grammar schools should be abolished and, as we have seen,

viewed much of local government as irresponsible, extremist, determined to undermine economic recovery, and an obstacle to raising standards in education. A variant of the privatization being implemented in other public sector activities could, they concluded, bypass LEAs and improve standards across the whole system. If parents could choose their schools and if funds followed the pupils, then good schools would reap rewards, but there also would be immediate pressure brought to bear on less well-performing schools to raise their standards. The very worst might close, but overall a virtuous circle would be established. As long as local authorities controlled school entry, however, and told parents where they might send their children, there was no incentive for standards to rise. On the contrary, tax money was maintaining a classic wasteful monopoly, as evidenced by the perilous state of pupils' performance.

English schools have always been relatively autonomous by European (and indeed global) standards, in that most major administrative decisions lie with the head teacher and the school's "governing body," which operates rather like a company board or university council. However, by the 1970s governing bodies were dominated increasingly by members nominated by, and answerable to, local councils and the local authority bureaucracy. The first moves to reverse this came, as with so much of the reform movement, during the Callaghan (Labour) government of the mid-1970s. It commissioned a report (the Taylor Report) that suggested that governing bodies should in future give equal weight to representatives of the LEA, parents, staff, and the local community, a recommendation that was welcome to none of the local authorities or local government party caucuses. Labour offered a watered-down version of the proposals, lost office before they could be enacted, and was succeeded by the first Thatcher government, which duly and quickly moved to reorganize governing bodies on Taylor Report lines (Sharp, 2002).

The change was very popular with schools themselves; even more so were the changes that followed, which devolved ever-increasing parts of the education budget directly to schools. Devolved budgets have also been accepted, and indeed taken yet further, by recent Labour ministers, so that English schools now control more of their budgets directly than those of almost any other developed country.

This part of the reforms has remained popular and appears to be successful. In spite of fears to the contrary, schools manage their finances with very few serious problems.

The powers of LEAs have, commensurately, shrunk. By the late 1980s legislation made it clear that the governing body, and not the LEA, is the senior partner in relation to the individual school. The areas where LEAs retain major independent responsibilities have shrunk to dealing with "special needs" (including pupils excluded for disruptive behavior), major building works (including building new schools and, occasionally, closing failed ones), and a few cross-school programs such as library and music services. In the final days of the pre-1997 Conservative governments, individual schools were being strongly encouraged to opt out of LEA control altogether and become "grant maintained," with their funding coming directly from the center and bypassing LEAs altogether.¹⁰ The days when an LEA could develop a new syllabus and negotiate its public examination and certification are gone. The examination boards themselves are regulated and controlled by central agencies to an unprecedented degree and are allowed to offer only a limited number of options, all of which must comply with national curriculum requirements.

In addition to reducing the powers of the local authorities, successive governments have also taken repeated steps to break up the uniform nature of secondary education, reflecting the conviction that a (uniform) comprehensive model had failed. The first steps in this direction were taken in 1980, when the Thatcher government introduced the "Assisted Places" scheme to enable pupils to benefit from education in independent schools at state expense. The size of the scheme was limited mostly by the cash available and, to a limited degree, by the willingness of independent schools to receive state-educated pupils; but in essence, the idea was to make it possible for academically able children from poor families to attend selective, fee-charging secondary schools. The scheme was, not surprisingly, much disliked by state schools that lost high-achieving pupils and was loathed by much of the Labour Party. Evaluations of the scheme indicated that many of the beneficiaries were from rather well-educated backgrounds and, in a good number of cases, were the children of divorced parents who had managed to get the child's eligibility assessed

on the basis of one parental income only (Edwards, Fitz, & Whitty, 1989). The scheme was abolished by the incoming Labour government in 1997, but the Conservatives' underlying hostility to uniform standardized secondary provision was one that much of the Labour government now shares.

Another Conservative innovation that Labour retained was the City Technology Colleges (CTCs). Again, the idea was to create distinctive and highly desirable secondary schools, this time within the state sector. The CTCs, established with a national administrative office completely outside the LEA structure, could select their student body on the grounds of interest but not ability and were originally expected to attract large amounts of private business funding. In effect, most of their (preferential) funding came from the state, and their numbers remain small. But they are very oversubscribed, and their symbolic importance, as a clear break with the idea of the universal, neighborhood comprehensive, has been enormous (Walford, 2000). CTCs do appear to produce somewhat better academic results than other schools with students from similar backgrounds in terms of family income and prior attainment.

Although the Labour Party has officially opposed any form of academic selection, it not only shares the school reform movement's general antipathy to LEAs and belief in parental choice but also is increasingly determined to create greater diversity at the secondary level. To date, this has been accompanied by only very small changes in national curriculum requirements, which effectively dictate and standardize teaching content up to age sixteen. However, Labour has widened the general philosophy of CTCs by introducing the idea of "specialist schools," which again attract additional funding on the basis of a successful bid—of course, to central government—to specialize in a particular area such as languages, music, science, or technology. The purpose is to offer something more than what one former Labour minister, in a widely reported speech, dubbed the "bog-standard comprehensive."¹¹

All these changes were expected to improve education because of the virtuous circle of parental choice outlined earlier. Parents, it was emphasized again and again, were entitled to know about their children's schools and performance; they were entitled to choose a school that would suit their children; and by exerting that choice they would reward and encourage success. The proponents of this argument were

(for the most part) perfectly sincere, but they also displayed a remarkable reluctance to think through how this would actually operate in practice. Schools, after all, are made of expensive and inflexible bricks and mortar, with teaching forces, classes, and timetables that cannot expand and contract continually on a year-by-year basis. Right there, the analogy with most marketplace goods breaks down.

Parents have certainly availed themselves of the right to choose a school and, especially in urban areas, spend enormous amounts of time and energy considering their selection and worrying about what they will actually be offered. Although geographical proximity continues to play some role in school admissions, it is now quite tightly circumscribed; moreover, a sibling in the school does not guarantee admission. Schools are not allowed to select on ability, but they are allowed to use criteria related to interest and affinity to the school's culture (which can include religion). Many parents suspect that, in practice, a child's academic ability does play a role.

Because success breeds success, some schools are enormously oversubscribed, and others are shunned by parents—and, because funding is related to enrollment, schools with low enrollment find it ever harder to provide an adequate program or retain good staff. A very few "failing" schools have closed, but most limp on. Appeals against admissions decisions have soared. Many commentators predicted that school choice would enormously benefit the middle classes, that they would be the ones to avail themselves of it (at the expense of poorer and less educated families), and that social segregation in schools would increase as a result (see, e.g., Ball, 2003). The evidence suggests nothing quite so clear-cut. Although the right to choose is a national one, in a good many places it remains a hypothetical option; there is only one school within reach, particularly at the secondary level. Conversely, in urban areas, poorer and immigrant parents also take the choice of schools very seriously and refer to the league tables in doing so. The degree to which social segregation has actually increased is hotly debated, but on balance the evidence suggests that there has been some increase—but less than many predicted and not in all areas (see, e.g., Gorard, Fitz, & Taylor, 2001; Noden, 2000.) Whether choice has done anything for overall standards is anyone's guess, but in the present climate *choice* and *variety* seem likely to remain the watchwords of government education policy.

at least until the next ideological upheaval among the English policy-making classes.

CONCLUSION

In some respects, notably its concern with "choice," England's school reform movement reflects more general ideological trends apparent not just in the English-speaking world but more generally.¹² The major changes, however, have been associated less with parental choice than with wholesale and continuing centralization of powers. Because "school choice" reforms all imply decentralization, the two general reform strands might seem diametrically opposed to each other. There is, however, a common theme that unites the two: namely, the undermining of local authorities, and indeed of any formal institutions set between individual schools and parents on the one hand and central government on the other.

It is also worth emphasizing that reform has been driven far more by concerns over the country's economic performance than by recent social changes, even though these have been profound. All political parties are preoccupied with the contribution of education to the economy and the need for skills. It is in this context that a cross-party consensus developed to the effect that standards of education were poor and wide-scale reform was necessary. In recent years, emphasis has moved from all children in primary schools to lower-achieving students at the secondary level. But the basic concerns and, therefore, the forces underlying school reform remain intact. Indeed, the next target has been identified in the form of yet another wholesale change.¹³

NOTES

1. This chapter is about England and not about the United Kingdom. Scotland's education system has always been different from England's, and, since the first Blair government-enacted devolution and the first Scottish Parliament since the 1707 Act of Union was elected, it has been diverging even further. The education system of Northern Ireland has also, historically, been somewhat different from that of England. It has, until now, retained selection

at age eleven and in effect runs two parallel systems of state funded Catholic and state-funded Protestant schools. Finally, Wales, until recently, operated a system that was more or less identical to England's, with the exception that Welsh-medium or bilingual schooling is provided in Welsh-speaking areas of the country. Here, too, devolution is leading to a widening gap, which is as much about asserting national identity as it is about differences over school reform.

2. Before the war, a large proportion of pupils remained in upper elementary classes until they left school altogether at age fourteen, as opposed to moving to a separate secondary school. The system introduced in 1945 was in principle tripartite, with grammar, technical, and modern schools; but only a few technical schools were ever opened, and most of these had, by the 1960s, either closed or been absorbed into further education colleges and shed their classes for eleven- to sixteen-year-olds (Sanderson, 1994; Stanton & Richardson, 1997).

3. The exception is in elections to the new Scottish Parliament, which has a complex proportional representation plus "list" system (whereby some members of a party obtain seats on the basis of and in proportion to the total number of votes cast for that party by the whole electorate; these seats are allocated in the order in which candidates appear on the party's list).

4. A few state-operated institutions do still survive and are the focus of continued political controversy.

5. At this period, the examinations were O levels or Certificates in Secondary Education, the precursors of today's GCSEs.

6. As noted earlier, LEAs are now coterminous with general local authorities and under the authority of their elected councilors, though this was not always the case. One major exception, until its abolition by the Conservatives, was the Inner London Education Authority, which covered the whole area of the old London County Council, before the latter's replacement postwar with separate borough councils (e.g., Southwark, Westminster, Hackney). However, these boroughs did not run education, and a directly elected Inner London Education Authority remained; following its abolition, the boroughs became LEAs.

7. For a history of these distinctive organizations, see Petch (1953) and Wolf (2002b).

8. There is a considerable literature both on the intellectual case for "value added" and on the technical issues associated with it. The technical literature emphasizes that estimates of value added must be reported with standard errors, showing that the precise value lies within a range; once this is done, it becomes clear that, for many schools, the apparent differences do not in fact reach statistical significance. Within a school there also may be major differences among classes, teachers, and subjects in the amount of value added found. (The way in which a school's position in a league table

may fluctuate widely from year to year—especially those with quite small numbers of students per class—has made English schools increasingly aware, at a practical level, of some of the basic aspects of statistical sampling! These findings emphasize the need for individual pupil-level data (with attainment scores from at least two points in time). For an overview of the issues, both substantive and technical, a good starting point is the work of Harvey Goldstein; see, e.g., Goldstein & Sammons (1997), Goldstein & Spiegelhalter (1996), Goldstein & Thomas (1995, 1996), and Goldstein et al. (2000). See also Goldstein's home page for a regularly updated discussion of the issues (go to www.ioe.ac.uk and follow links).

9. The level of attainment is level 4 of the national curriculum, which was originally set as the average (median) attainment level for eleven-year-olds. The Key Stage tests are, as noted earlier, marked and reported in terms of attainment of a particular level, typically at age seven (Key Stage 1) and at age eleven (Key Stages 3, 4, or 5).

10. The number of schools that had actually opted out in this way was fairly small at the time that the incoming Labour government reversed the policy. It is unclear how many of those opting out did so out of a strong desire for yet more independence; there also were strong financial benefits to opting out. The policy created particular problems for LEAs with overcapacity because schools that felt that they might be merged, be closed down, or lose their sixth forms (sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds) were especially likely to start the process of obtaining "grant-maintained" status.

11. The speaker was Estelle Morris, in a 2002 speech that met with widespread criticism. She resigned from office later that year, for unrelated reasons.

12. Sweden, for example, has been strongly influenced by such arguments.

13. A major government inquiry under Mike Tomlinson is currently examining ways to move to a new system. For information, see the Department for Education and Skills Web site (<http://dfes.gov.uk>).

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