

well-established educational brand-names, which, make no mistake about it, are very keen to advertise on billboards, newspaper, radio and television. So: how does anyone know whether they can trust the local entrepreneur who has set up school? Because he or she is a franchisee for an established educational brand-name whose quality control procedures are known and respected throughout the country. What the brand name conveys to parents is that the school is conveying something of meaning and value to their children, and at a reasonable price, and that is why they are happy to send their children there.

New Labour in the UK has taken its critics by surprise. Treading on toes on which even Lady Thatcher feared to tread, they have brought in a reform that has the potential to transform the educational scene. Just as Thatcher's privatization program has spread worldwide, the policy of Education Action Zones may well spread further afield if successful. But critics are worried, in particular because they fear that this unleashes the spectre of the profit motive in education. I have pointed to arguments here that suggest that this should not be feared. If the Education Action Zones really are a step toward privatization, then this would not necessarily be undesirable. Of course business has imperfections. But to ignore the imperfections of governments is odd. Citizens of developing countries are less sanguine; if someone is needed to get education right, the lesser of two evils is usually not government, but business. I am not convinced that the same sentiment should not apply in the UK. And why not in Canada too?

Endnotes

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James Tooley is Professor of Education Policy, University of Newcastle.

by Robert Skidelsky

THE FAILURE OF CENTRALISM: WHY BRITISH STATE SCHOOLS SHOULD BE MORE INDEPENDENT

Au Royaume-Uni, les gouvernements conservateurs ont centralisé l'éducation, s'arrogeant de pouvoirs sans précédent pour en refondre le contenu et la structures. Le New Labour de Tony Blair affirme que l'éducation est la grande priorité. La solution qu'il propose au problème des écoles qui ne répondent pas à leur mission est la « zone d'action sur l'éducation » — un concept qui, en théorie, laisse la porte ouverte à la possibilité de privatiser la gestion des écoles. L'auteur esquisse ce qu'il estime être les principales lacunes de ce modèle et indique quels changements seraient nécessaires si l'on décidait de remplacer l'approche dirigiste par une formule basée sur le choix et la diversité.

There is one theme in British education which has survived every change in intellectual fashion and ideology, from the rise and fall of academic selection and the corruption of the comprehensive ideal, to the fierce debates over teaching methods and the content of the national curriculum. It is, quite simply, that the men in Whitehall know best how to run the state school system.

Since the focus in British education policy shifted away from social integration and back to raising standards more than 10 years ago, central government has attempted to bring about change by imposing uniform practices from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

Successive Conservative governments introduced a national curriculum, standardized assessments, school performance league tables and a new inspection regime. The Labour government has followed in their wake with the "naming and shaming" of failing schools, hit squads and framework agreements for local authorities.

In other words, the new education consensus under the New Labour government has the same essential element as its predecessors — relentless pressure from the centre works.

Most parents might instinctively agree. After all, it is the duty of politicians to act to improve standards in our schools. Prime Minister Tony Blair captured the public mood very well when he announced that the three priorities of a Labour government would be "education, education and education." But what if parents, and the politicians who seek their votes, are wrong? What if the common denominator in the failure of educational reform since the war has been precisely that it has relied too much on political action, not too little?

Certainly, Britain's state education system is in trouble. Standardized tests — themselves hardly arduous — show that fewer than 50 percent of 11 year-olds are at or ahead of expected levels of English and Maths, and many are as much as four years behind. Every year, 40,000 16 year-olds leave full-time education without a single qualification and around 280,000 children are attending English schools classed by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) as "failing."

Britain's Chief Inspector of schools, Christopher Woodhead, calls our education system "a lottery" where some children have access to "wonderful state education" while others "through an accident of geography" do not. So what can we do about it? Before we can attempt to answer this question, we must first examine where we went wrong.

The character of Britain's educational system can most readily be understood by who controls it. Twenty years ago it was relatively straightforward. There were five main players: local authorities, teachers' unions, colleges of education, examination boards and central government. Local authorities were clearly the predominant partner. They were the "owners" of the institutions in which the majority of Britain's children were educated and were responsible for ensuring an adequate supply of places, allocating budgets and planning overall education provision in their geographical "areas." Teachers' unions largely determined the salary structure and conditions of teachers nationally. Colleges of education, whose job it was to train and accredit teachers, determined how pupils were taught, and the university-based examination boards determined what they were taught.

Central government exercised ultimate power by holding the purse strings of most education spending through a block grant to the local authorities. Although this power was used with devastating effect in the 1960s to force the reorganization of secondary schools along comprehensive, that is, non-selective lines, most of the time government paid up without asking too many questions.

Two decades later, the landscape has been profoundly altered. The main change has involved a vast increase in the powers and activism of central government. The tentacles of the DfEE and its numerous quangos now reach into every corner of education. The joint powers of the purse and of legislation have been aggressively used to subordinate all educational institutions, except the private, fee-paying schools, to the national "needs" as defined by the Secretary of State. Local authorities, trade unions, colleges of education, examination boards, even the universities, have been turned into agents of the government's will.

But why did successive Conservative governments, committed in general and in principle to privatisation and deregulation "nationalize" so thoroughly public education? The paradox can be easily explained. Conservatives believed that the education of the young had fallen into the hands of their political enemies and needed to be recaptured. Historically, the impulse for educational reform has come from the Left of British politics which has typically seen education as a crucial mechanism for achieving greater social equality. Conservative governments have been prepared to legislate reform when national efficiency demanded it, but improvement in State education has never been a natural Conservative passion.

This "detachment" left Conservative governments almost completely dependent on the educational blueprints of the Left, and particularly on the Left's social-class explanation of educational failure. This is why the Conservatives, from a mixture of inattention and sheer remoteness from state education, nodded through the destruction of Britain's selective grammar school system. In the critical period, they failed to either develop or articulate any alternative to the Left's model of universal comprehensive education as the solution to class division and social inequality. It is well worth noting that Margaret Thatcher, as Secretary of State for Education in the mid-1970s and then as Prime Minister, closed more grammar schools than any of her Labour counterparts.

In the end, the comprehensive-school revolution proved to be one revolution too many. Ever since, consciously or unconsciously, the thrust of Conservative education policy has been to undo its consequences. And the platform for the Party's counter-attack rapidly became the national concern over falling educational standards.

By the 1980s a consensus position had emerged: British educational standards were disgracefully low, particularly for the "long-tail" of working class under-

achievers, and when compared with other countries. The final end of imperial delusions of grandeur and inflationary demand-management had brought about the rather belated realization that Britain's future depended entirely on the skills of its workforce.

No matter that the Conservatives had adopted the Left's strategies in the absence of any of their own: for the first time, the Conservatives were in a position to turn around the charge that it was privilege for the few which explained the low standards of the many. Labour's education policy had been "in power" for more than 20 years and it had "failed the nation."

But the Conservatives answer to rapidly falling standards was not to decentralize or deregulate education, as might have been expected, but to centralize it even further. The Education Act of 1988 gave central government the right to impose its will and its authority on state education as never before. The Act established a national system for Britain's state primary and comprehensive schools, complete with production plans — the National Curriculum — output targets described as "levels of attainment," and testing and inspection systems. Additionally, the Government took in hand the training of teachers. This approach, modelled on Soviet planning, was devised and adopted with a straight face by a Conservative government that claimed to be committed to variety and choice.

It would be unfair to say that this was the whole story. The legislative reforms of the last 10 years have created two other minor players: schools and parents, mainly by allowing all local authority schools to opt, on parental ballot, for grant-maintained status which gave schools more control over budgets. But Conservative governments never really made up their minds whether the object of these structural reforms was to restore selection by the back door, clip the wings of local education authorities or lever up standards by inserting an element of market competition into the system.

Their successors seem equally confused, mixing heavy-handed intervention from the Education Department with a potentially radical scheme for decentralizing power through Education Action Zones.

These Action Zones are an admission of the limits to moral suasion and bureaucratic intervention, and that there are some areas of the country where these methods have so obviously failed to raise standards that the Government is prepared to invite bids from the private and voluntary sectors to manage groups of local schools in deprived areas.

This is significant. As late as last year Labour was criticizing the then Conservative government for failing to divorce issues of ownership and management from the need to raise school standards. Since then, a battle has been raging within the Education Department over how to develop the Action Zones idea.

Reformers have succeeded in making Zones independent of local education authority areas — in principle anyone can apply to run one of up to 25 clusters of schools anywhere in the country. In practice, the tradi-

tionists have won important concessions. They have already thwarted efforts to allow individual schools to be taken over. They have also ensured that local authorities have a privileged position in the bidding process, because they hold most of the information on local schools' performance. This has ensured that all bids so far received involve the very LEAs who presided over failure in the first place.

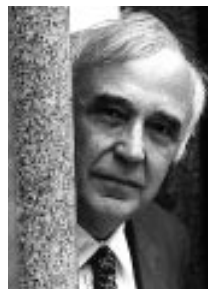
All of this is scarcely surprising. Britain's centralized system of state education has promoted a range of vested interests who have come to dominate policy making. They include Education Department officials, professional educationalists, local authorities and the teaching unions. Parents and pupils — the most important people of all — have barely had a look-in unless they have been able to opt-out of the state sector altogether in favour of private education.

Properly deployed, Action Zones threaten this *status quo* more fundamentally than any other education reform of the post-War era. Imagine a national education service in which private and charitable bodies were allowed to hire and fire teaching staff independently, use a variety of teaching methods appropriate to their intake, and to deliver only those parts of the National Curriculum essential to improving the employability of their pupils.

National teaching unions would lose their function of lobbying centrally for changes in pay and conditions. Teaching methods would be determined by their effectiveness, rather the prevailing intellectual fashion of the institutes and university departments. LEAs would be reduced to a support role or cease to be relevant altogether. The Education Department would become an arms length regulator of standards and, perhaps, the disburser of government funding.

That is some way in the distance, if it ever happens at all. But the ultimate potential of Action Zones goes a long way to explain the depth of opposition in some quarters to them. Those opposed to the policy are trying to turn it into a glorified "city challenge" scheme for failing schools, where LEAs receive additional funds from central government on the basis of the private partnerships they can create.

It is a feature of all centralized systems that as much energy will be spent on subverting plans as is expended on carrying them out. If the battle over the implementation of Action Zones demonstrates anything, it is why they are necessary in the first place.



Robert Skidelsky is Chairman of the Social Market Foundation, the London-based independent think tank, and Professor of Political Economy at Warwick University, England.