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Schools

What is the legacy of the Education Act, 70 years on?

The Guardian Roy Blatchford

Tue 22 Apr 2014 08.25 CEST

In March 1943, Rab Butler, the young president of the Board of Education, went to Chequers to see Winston Churchill. After a weekend of playing bagatelle, dining and watching films of Tsarist Russia, Butler found a moment alone with him. The meeting with Churchill – leaning back on his pillows in a four-poster bed, night-cap on and with a large cat at his feet – was an unlikely beginning for the most fundamental reform of the English education system, but that night the prime minister signed off on what became the 1944 Education Act.

Conceived during the Blitz and the Normandy landings, it is remarkable to think that civil servants and ministers were focused on post-war reconstruction in order to build, as they saw it, the new Jerusalem. Churchill, in one of his inimitable radio broadcasts to the nation, described the Act as "the greatest scheme of improved education that has ever been attempted by a responsible government".

Seventy years on, the legacy of the Education Act is still widely felt. Michael Barber, historian of the Act, who as head of Tony Blair's delivery unit introduced strategies and targets to the nation's classrooms, says Butler's seminal 1944 reforms would be hard to implement now. "It's very hard to do today what Butler did in the 1940s, to build a consensus and then make the change, simply because of the nature of the modern world," he says. "If you try to build a consensus now, the world moves before you've had time to do the reform."

Today we accept free primary and secondary education as a national birth-right. But pre-war, things were very different. Most pupils left school at 14. Butler's Act introduced compulsory education to 15, with a clause to raise it to 16; any fee-paying at state schools was forbidden; and church schools were brought into the national system.

So the 1944 Education Act provided real chances of social mobility, something educationalists ever since have tried to build on.

But passing the 11-plus didn't necessarily guarantee working-class pupils would take up their place at grammar school. Baroness Shirley Williams, who was education secretary between 1976 and 1979, says: "I had several friends whose parents couldn't afford the uniform," she says. "They never went to grammar school at all. Others didn't go because they were expected to stay until at least 15 and their parents wanted them to come out as quickly as possible to get jobs."

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Butler's legacy remained relatively unscathed until Kenneth Baker's 1988 Education Reform Act, which dismantled much of what he had created, with directives from Whitehall about curriculum and testing, the birth of GCSEs and the advent of local management of schools, which challenged the historic role of local authorities. Now headteachers and governors had control of their budgets, and teachers naturally

became nervous of pay and conditions being worked out by individual schools rather than through national agreements.

But if Baker was controlling, Blair and Blunkett were even more centrist and interventionist when they delivered the "Education, education, education" mantra in 1997. Where the Butler Act was localist, New Labour actively challenged schools' autonomy through targets, strategies and league tables, which overwhelmed the profession. Relations with the teaching unions hit a nadir, with ballots and strikes in the late 1990s. Blunkett is unapologetic: "If you're going to bring about change, you're going to break eggs, and the grump in the staffroom was always going to have one foot in the grave," he says.

Today, Michael Gove seems just as happy to incur the wrath of teachers. Sir David Bell, permanent secretary at the Department for Education under both Labour and coalition governments, tells the programme: "There was clearly a quite significant attempt by the coalition government to reset the relationship with the trade unions."

Despite all the criticisms of academies, free schools and excessive testing of pupils, schools are unquestionably better places to be than in 1944. There is now investment in state education which Butler and Churchill could only have dreamed about. And while social-mobility challenges persist, university participation has risen in a way the reformers in 1944 could not have imagined.

What will the education system look like in 70 years' time? Blunkett, who has been reviewing education policy for Labour, is clear about his party's next steps. "I think the changes are irreversible," he says, "although we'll want to build on them and we'll want to reintroduce the glue." So he is rejecting the idea of thousands of schools working alone, preferring a rejuvenation in counties or regions of ambitious and inspiring political and headteacher leaders: "Academies are here to stay, but we need something like the Cleggs of West Yorkshire rather than the Cleggs of the modern era."

National politicians since 1944 have been unable to resist tinkering with and sometimes meddling in the nation's classrooms. Greater autonomy has often felt like it has come with conditions attached – you are free to run your own schools as long as you do it the way we want you to. At times, teachers have responded naively and crudely – Gove is certainly not the first education secretary to bring them out of the classroom on to the street in protest.

The story since 1944 has been one of conflict and consensus, with varying degrees of intensity. What is needed is mutual trust in education: between central government and teachers, and between local and national politicians. The successful future of our schools is one in which governments meddle less, and trust more. And teachers demonstrate an altogether new professionalism.

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We urge you, alongside our sister union the NAHT, to step down from serving as Ofsted inspectors.

Beyond Ofsted

Beyond Ofsted, has set up an inquiry into the future of school inspections in England. Beyond Ofsted is chaired by Jim Knight, the Rt Hon Lord Knight of Weymouth and former schools' minister.

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Document 3

Private school students in England twice as likely to earn top A-level grades as state pupils **This year's results show attainment gap is widening, despite Tory pledges to close it**

Toby Helm *Political Editor*

The Guardian Sun 20 Aug 2023 06.00 CEST

Pupils in private schools are more than twice as likely to achieve A or A* grades as those in the state sector, according to official figures that expose a widening attainment gap in education in England after more than 13 years of Conservative government.

The statistics, released by the regulator Ofqual, follow last week's A-level results and come despite repeated pledges by ministers to close the divide by driving up standards in non-fee paying schools.

The latest A-level results, which saw thousands of students miss out on top marks as the government enforced a reversal of post-pandemic grade inflation, highlight the continuing advantages in terms of grades enjoyed by pupils at private schools.

While 47.4% of pupils in private schools achieved at least one A or A* grade, only 22% did so in secondary comprehensives, 25.4% in academies and just 14.2% in state further education institutions.

Although the government insists that academies have driven up standards, the gap between the percentage of pupils achieving the top grades in private and state schools has widened since 2019. In that year, 44.8% of pupils in private schools received a top grade against 24% in academies.

Ahead of a week when the government plans to focus on schools policy, the shadow education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, accused ministers of being “more interested in protecting tax breaks for private schools than raising standards in state schools”.

Calling on the education secretary Gillian Keegan to “stop toadying to private schools and start delivering for working-class children”, Phillipson said: “The best way she can do that is by adopting Labour’s plan to recruit thousands more teachers, paid for by ending tax breaks for private schools.

“Labour will drive high and rising standards in state schools to ensure that background is no barrier to children getting on in life.”

Labour has proposed a package of policies to remove tax exemptions from private schools, which includes levying VAT on fees. The revenue raised would then be used to increase state school spending and would be targeted at pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated that levying VAT on fees would raise about £1.6bn a year. The report found that average school fees across the UK were £15,200 in today’s prices (net of bursaries and scholarships). This was £7,200 higher than state school spending per pupil, which was £8,000 in 2022–23 (including day-to-day and capital spending). The IFS said the gap between private school fees and state school spending per pupil had more than doubled since 2010, when the gap was about 40% or £3,500.