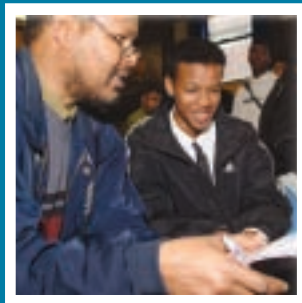




Higher Standards, Better Schools For All

More choice for parents and pupils





HM Government

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More choice for parents and pupils

Presented to Parliament by
the Secretary of State for Education and Skills
by Command of Her Majesty

October 2005

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Foreword by the Prime Minister

Meeting the challenge of education reform....

We are at an historic turning point: we now have an education system that is largely good, after eight years of investment and reform, which has overcome many of the chronic inherited problems of the past. Now, with the best teaching force and the best school leadership ever, we are poised to become world class if we have the courage and vision to reform and invest further and put the parent and pupil at the centre of the system.



Our reforms must build on the freedoms that schools have increasingly received, but extend them radically. We must put parents in the driving seat for change in all-ability schools that retain the comprehensive principle of non-selection, but operate very differently from the traditional comprehensive. And to underpin this change, the local authority must move from being a provider of education to being its local commissioner and the champion of parent choice.

The history since 1944...

Since the introduction of universal, free secondary education in the 1944 Education Act, education in England has experienced several important waves of reform. That Act created a system of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools, which gave everyone access to a free secondary education for the first time.

But the system had two main weaknesses: grammar schools catered for the brightest students, but 80% of children had to go to secondary moderns which failed to challenge them and where many achieved few if any qualifications. Moreover, technical schools never really played a major part in the new system, denying opportunities for a vocational education.

Pressure, initially from middle class parents angry with standards in secondary moderns, led to comprehensive schools and the conversion of grammars and secondary moderns in the 1960s and 1970s. But, their introduction was often accompanied by all-ability classes, which made setting by subject ability too rare. Many retained their old secondary modern intake, and failed to improve. There were simply not enough pressures in the system to raise standards.

Lord Callaghan recognised this as Prime Minister in 1976 when he urged a National Curriculum. When it was introduced in the late eighties, it was accompanied by greater accountability through national testing and regular independent inspection. Schools

were also encouraged to apply for grant-maintained status, where they had more freedom over their assets and staffing, though critics complained that they were unfairly funded compared with other schools, and that their admissions were unfair.

...a process of reform that has accelerated since 1997

After 1997, this government extended such accountability, with literacy and numeracy reforms in primary schools, and targets to encourage improvements in all schools. Failing schools were expected to improve quickly. Under-performing schools were challenged.

Grant-maintained schools kept their key freedoms as Foundation schools, but all schools were given the chance to have greater financial independence with greater financial delegation and new dedicated building grants sent direct to schools. All schools were expected to operate a fair admissions policy.

The government sought to re-energise comprehensive education, by encouraging every secondary school to aim for specialist status, a process that has meant their setting challenging targets for improvement and developing a clear mission. Academies were introduced in the areas of greatest challenge. More flexibility was introduced in the curriculum, allowing tens of thousands of pupils to go on vocational courses or gain practical work experience.

These reforms have been supported by an unprecedented level of investment in better teachers' pay; more support staff; new computers; new facilities; and new buildings. Teachers' pay is 20% higher in real terms, and schools employ an extra 32,000 teachers and 130,000 support staff. Schools have access to twice as many computers, as well as new interactive whiteboards and broadband technology, enabling ICT to become an increasingly integral part of the teaching and learning process. Investment in school buildings has risen seven-fold.

...with real progress made in schools...

Real improvements have followed. The quality of teaching has been transformed, through the literacy and numeracy programmes in the government's first term and the Key Stage 3 strategy for 11-14 year-olds in its second term. Ofsted reports the proportion of good or excellent teaching in primary schools rising from 45% in 1997 to 74% in 2004/05, and from 59% to 78% in secondary schools. The proportion of badly-taught lessons has been halved.

As a result of these reforms, 96,000 more children start secondary school able to do basic maths well and 84,000 have done well in English. Since the Key Stage 3 strategies were introduced in 2001, 50,000 more 14 year olds reach the expected standards in English and in Maths.

There have been big improvements at GCSE, with 50% more young people gaining five good grades in inner London, and faster than average improvements in specialist schools and areas benefiting from Excellence in Cities and London Challenge. School workforces have been radically changed to help teachers deliver more effective lessons

and teaching assistants to offer more individual support. Minimum standards have been set and achieved by most schools and education authorities. There are now 131 secondary schools where fewer than a quarter of pupils gain five good GCSEs. In 1997, there were 616. By contrast, there are more than 400 non-selective schools where 70% or more pupils gain five good GCSEs; in 1997, there were only 83.

... progress that has been driven by new freedoms and flexibilities...

What have we learnt from the reform process? We have seen how specialist schools – with external sponsors, strong leadership and a clear sense of mission, driven by their acquisition and retention of specialist status – have improved faster than other comprehensives. We have seen that Academies – still relatively new independent state schools – improving this year at more than three times the national average in areas of the greatest challenge and disadvantage.

What is important to these schools is their ethos, their sense of purpose, the strength of their leaders, teachers and support staff, the motivation of their parents and pupils. And much of that comes from the can-do attitude of their principals and staff, and the drive that their business and educational sponsors bring to their development – backed by their willingness to innovate and use their freedoms imaginatively.

The best state schools – and there are five times as many as in 1997 – share these characteristics. But many would also like to go further: to develop new freedoms and strong relationships with sponsors.

We have already made it easy to become a Foundation school: a simple vote of the governing body is all that is required. All schools that meet the standard will be able to acquire specialist status by 2007 – the best acquiring additional specialisms, and all sharing their expertise with the wider community. There are now 27 Academies, with plans for at least 200 by 2010. Our 14-19 reforms will ensure a high-standard vocational system through new specialised diplomas.

...but there is still too little choice and standards are not yet high enough....

We have made good progress. But our reform programme needs to go further if it is to be sustained within schools. We want to create a spectrum along which schools have the freedom to develop further: if they want to control their assets and staffing, they will be free to do so by acquiring a Trust; if they want to build strong links with external partners, they should be able to do so; for others, Academies will be the best option.

Parent choice can be a powerful driver of improved standards. Performance tables and inspections have given many parents the information that has enabled them to make objective judgements about a school's performance and effectiveness. This has been an important pressure on weaker schools to improve.

Many other countries have successful experience with school choice. There is increasing international evidence that school choice systems can maintain high levels of equity and improve standards. Swedish parents can choose an alternative school to their local one, including a diverse range of state-funded independent schools. Studies have found that schools in areas where there is more choice have improved most rapidly. In Florida, parents can choose an alternative school if their school has 'failed' in two of the last four years. Again, studies showed test scores improved fastest where schools knew children were free to go elsewhere.

International experiences with school choice suggest that fair funding which follows the pupil, good information and support for parents, fair admissions, and rapid intervention where schools are failing are all important in delivering choice. In designing our reforms we have learnt from these experiences.

While parents can express a choice of school, there are not yet enough good schools in urban areas; such restrictions are greatest for poor and middle class families who cannot afford to opt for private education or to live next to a good school, if they are dissatisfied with what the state offers.

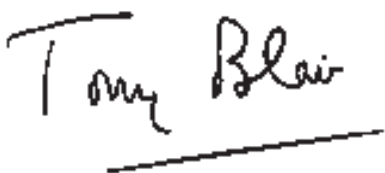
We believe parents should have greater power to drive the new system: it should be easier for them to replace the leadership or set up new schools where they are dissatisfied with existing schools.

...which is why the reforms in this paper are so important....

These are the principles which underpin the reforms set out in this White Paper. In the new system, we are determined to ensure that improvements become self-sustaining within individual schools, with changes owned and driven by schools and parents.

Our aim is the creation of a system of independent non-fee paying state schools. It will be for schools to decide whether they wish to acquire a Trust – similar to those that support Academies – or become a self-governing foundation school. But it will be easy for them to do so, without unnecessary bureaucratic interference. And they will do so in a system of fair admissions, fair funding and clear accountability.

Taken together these proposals are not only the next vital stage in one of the most radical and successful school reform programmes in the developed world; they will also ensure irreversible change for the better in schools.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Blair". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a solid black horizontal line.

Tony Blair
Prime Minister

Foreword by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills

There is nothing more important than educating our children. Doing the best for their child is what every parent strives to do. And we must make sure that our school system is one that helps them to do that. So this White Paper sets out our vision for the future of the education system.



We have achieved a great deal already in our schools, creating a firm base from which to go forward. But there is more to do. Building on the platform of higher standards and fewer failing schools we have established since 1997, we must now take another major step forward in the transformation of our education system. Central to these reforms are three great challenges. We must:

- tailor education around the needs of each individual child – so that no child falls behind and no child is held back from achieving their potential;
- put parents at the centre of our thinking – giving them greater choice and active engagement in their child’s learning and how schools are run; and
- empower schools and teachers to respond to local and parental demands, injecting dynamism and innovation into our schools.

In all of these areas we must deliver for all children, but particularly for those whose family background is most challenging. Education is one of the keys to social mobility, and so we must make sure that a good education is available to every child in every community.

This White Paper sets out how we will meet these challenges and build the school system we all want for our children. More than anything it is a White Paper about aspiration. We must have the highest aspirations for every child whatever their talents and ability. And we must have a schools system that can respond to those aspirations. Working together with our many partners in schools and communities, we can achieve our aim of a world class education system, with every school a good school, and every pupil achieving.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ruth Kelly'.

Ruth Kelly MP

Secretary of State for Education and Skills

Executive Summary



Our aim is to transform our school system so that every child receives an excellent education – whatever their background and wherever they live. Because of the progress we have made since 1997 we can now take the next, vital steps.

In 1997, a third of children left primary schools without having mastered the basics in English and maths. Now three-quarters achieve in maths and even more in English. Our secondary schools have substantially improved too. There are dramatically fewer failing secondary schools. And there have been sustained and substantial improvements in achievement at 14, 16 and 18. There are more resources and more teachers in our schools.

These achievements are important. But they are not yet good enough. Standards must keep rising in the globalised world in which we now live. High standards must be universal to every child in every school in every community. The attainment gap between high and low achieving schools is too great. And a child's educational achievements are still too strongly linked to their parents' social and economic background – a key barrier to social mobility.

This White Paper sets out our plans radically to improve the system by putting parents and the needs of their children at the heart of our school system, freeing up schools to innovate and succeed, bringing in new dynamism and new providers, ensuring that coasting – let alone failure – is not an option for any school. In this way we will ensure that every school delivers an excellent education, that every child achieves to their potential and that the system as a whole is increasingly driven by parents and by choice. To make that happen we need an education system that is designed around the needs

of the individual – with education tailored to the needs of each child and parents having a real say in how schools are run. And to achieve that, we need to reform schools so that they have the freedoms and flexibilities to deliver that tailored, choice-driven education.

...so we are developing a radical new school system...

In this new system, improvements will become embedded and self-sustaining within schools, because the changes will be owned and driven by schools and parents:

- every school will be able to acquire a self-governing Trust similar to those supporting Academies, which will give them the freedom to work with new partners to help develop their ethos and raise standards;
- Academies will remain at the heart of the programme, with continued and new opportunities to develop them in schools and areas of real and historical underperformance and underachievement;
- independent schools will find it easier to enter the new system; and
- a national Schools Commissioner will drive change, matching schools and new partners, promoting the benefits of choice, access and diversity, and taking action where parental choices are being frustrated.

This will create a system of independent non-fee paying state schools, where schools can decide whether they wish to acquire a self-governing Trust or become a self-governing Foundation school. They will do so without unnecessary bureaucratic interference, in a system of fair admissions, fair funding and clear accountability.

...supported by improved choice and access for all...

School improvement has been helped not only by the reforms introduced since 1997, but also by published data and inspection reports, and the ability of many parents to vote with their feet by finding a better state school. There are those who argue that there is no demand for choice; but this ignores the reality that the vast majority of parents want a real choice of excellent schools.

The affluent can buy choice. We will ensure that choice is more widely available to all within an increasingly specialist system, not just to those who can pay for it. Key to choice is the provision of more good places and more good schools. This will be supported by:

- introducing better information for all parents when their child enters primary and secondary school, and dedicated choice advisers to help the least well-off parents to exercise their choices;

- extending the rights to free school transport to children from poorer families to their three nearest secondary schools within a six mile radius (when they are outside walking distance) and piloting transport to support such choices for all parents, which will help the environment as well as school choice; and
- making it easier for schools to introduce banding into their admissions policies, so that they can keep a proportion of places for students who live outside traditional school catchment areas within a genuinely comprehensive intake. Some specialist schools and Academies already successfully use this approach.

...with parents and pupils fully engaged in improving standards...

But parental engagement should not stop just with the choice of school. It should continue throughout a child's education. The education system has benefited enormously from the greater availability of pupil-level data, enabling teachers to see how much their pupils have improved and assessing their potential for further improvement in partnership with parents. Every parent should be able to access that information, so that they can work with teachers to enable their child to achieve their full potential.

We will ensure that:

- parents receive regular, meaningful reports during the school year about how their child is doing, with opportunities to discuss their child's progress with their teachers;
- parents have the chance to form Parent Councils to influence school decisions on issues such as school meals, uniform and discipline (such Councils will be required in Trust schools);
- parents have better local complaints procedures and access to a new national complaints service from Ofsted where local procedures have been exhausted;
- parents have access to more and clearer information about local schools, how to get involved and how to lever change; and
- parents are able to set up new schools supported by a dedicated capital pot.

...and education tailored to the individual...

We have dramatically expanded our knowledge about how different young people acquire knowledge and skills. Coupled with increased resources in our schools, a reformed school workforce and the greater availability of ICT, this gives teachers the opportunity to tailor lessons and support in schools to the individual needs of each pupil. So there will be:

- targeted one-to-one tuition in English and maths in the schools with the most underperforming pupils, to help those falling behind to catch up with their peers;

- more stretching lessons and opportunities for gifted and talented pupils;
- extended schools, offering many new opportunities to learn and develop beyond the formal school day;
- more grouping and setting by subject ability; and
- a national training programme to enable each school to have one leading professional to help develop tailored lessons.

We need strong measures to tackle failure and underperformance...

We have also learnt, from the action we have taken on failing and underperforming schools, that some schools need extra help to improve. So, we will introduce much tougher rules for failing schools:

- schools in Special Measures will be more quickly turned around; and where no progress is made after a year, a competition for new providers will be held. Schools that receive a notice to improve from Ofsted will enter Special Measures within a year, if progress is not made;
- competitions will be required for new schools and the replacement of failing schools, for the first time providing a straightforward route to bring new providers into the system. All new schools will be self-governing Foundation, voluntary aided, Trust schools or Academies; and
- parents will be able to urge Ofsted action or request new providers, and where there is strong demand or dissatisfaction with existing choices, local authorities will have to respond to their concerns.

...with a lighter touch for good schools...

We have also recognised that good schools should have greater freedoms, and that includes a lighter touch from inspectors and other agencies. Our New Relationship with Schools has already seen shorter, sharper Ofsted inspections; School Improvement Partners, usually other headteachers rather than local authority officers, offering external challenge; dedicated schools budgets; and teachers freed from bureaucracy to focus on teaching.

In the new system, we want:

- good schools to be able to expand or federate more easily with other schools to increase the supply of good places, improving choices for parents;
- the best specialist schools able to acquire extra specialisms and be funded for new responsibilities such as teacher training; and

- Ofsted to consult on an even lighter touch inspection system for high-performing schools.

...and better discipline to enable teachers to teach and pupils to learn...

Schools have increased access to learning mentors and on-site units to help them deal with disruptive pupils. There are more places, for longer hours, in off-site Pupil Referral Units. But many schools still face real discipline challenges because there is too little consistency in dealing with poor behaviour, particularly the low-level disruption to lessons that makes teaching and learning more difficult.

Moreover, some parents do not take their responsibilities seriously enough; and even question the teacher's right to discipline their child. Although attendance overall has improved, truancy still remains too high.

The Steer Group on School Behaviour and Discipline – a group of experienced headteachers and senior teachers – have examined these issues in detail. And we will implement their recommendations by:

- introducing a clear and unambiguous legal right for teachers to discipline pupils, backed by an expectation that every school has a clear set of rules and sanctions;
- extending parenting contracts and orders, so that schools can use them to force parents to take responsibility for their children's bad behaviour in school;
- requiring parents to take responsibility for excluded pupils in their first five days of a suspension (by ensuring they are properly supervised doing schoolwork at home) with fines for parents if excluded pupils are found unsupervised during school hours; and
- expecting headteachers to use their newly-devolved powers and funding collectively to develop on or off-site provision for suspensions longer than five days (instead of fifteen days at present) and insisting that all exclusions are properly recorded.

...and underpinned by a new role for local authorities.

To support all these reforms, the role of the local authority will change from provider to commissioner:

- as a part of their wider responsibilities for children and young people, local authorities will be expected to become the champions of pupils and parents, commissioning rather than providing education. They will have a new duty to promote choice, diversity and fair access to school places and school transport and new powers to act decisively where schools are failing and underperforming;

- it will be easier for new schools to be established, where there is parental demand;
- the School Organisation Committee will be abolished and decisions made by local authorities; disputes will continue to be resolved by the Schools Adjudicator;
- local authorities will work with the newly-created Schools Commissioner to ensure more choice, greater diversity and better access for disadvantaged groups to good schools in every area; and
- local authorities and local Learning and Skills Councils will work more closely together to ensure real choice and higher standards in the provision of education for 14-19 year-olds in schools and colleges.

And capital investment, through Building Schools for the Future and the Targeted Capital Funds, will have a crucial role in supporting reform.

These reforms will create and sustain irreversible change for the better in schools...

We have pushed higher standards from the centre: for those standards to be maintained and built-upon, they must now become self-sustaining within schools, driven by teachers and parents.

No longer will it be possible for any school to hide its low or mediocre standards; or to argue that parents should not play a fundamental role in their child's education, having both rights and responsibilities to do so.

No longer will it be acceptable for young people to be denied the opportunity to achieve their full potential, whatever their abilities and talents; or for artificial barriers to prevent choice and diversity from playing its full part in delivering a good education for every child.