

THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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BREAKTHROUGH BRITAIN: EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

850 words

31 policy recommendations

Plans for a new wave of “Pioneer Schools” set up and run by parents and charities and funded by the taxpayer at an average level of around £5500 per pupil are proposed today by the Social Justice Policy Group.

The schools would be initially created in inner cities and would cater for primary and secondary pupils. They would concentrate on raising standards among the poorest and most disadvantaged children in the country.

A raft of other measures designed to boost parental involvement in inner city schools, improve discipline and recruit and retain high quality head teachers would go hand in hand with the advent of pioneer schools.

“We want to build a new launch pad for our nation’s disadvantaged children and place a premium on their education,” declares a report from the Education Failure Sub-Group of the SJPG, containing 32 policy recommendations.

Pioneer schools would be free of local authority control and have charitable status. They would have the power to recruit their own teaching staff and set their own pay levels.

The trigger for the creation of the new schools could be the 600 state schools currently officially branded as failing and in dire need of improvement.

The report recommends that Ministers offer to transfer the ownership and management of existing failing schools to groups made up of parents and charities.

Funding would follow the pupil but the precise amount would vary from area to area depending on need.

If a school initially attracted 250 pupils, it would start with a budget of around £1.375 million with which to employ teachers and pay for equipment and overheads. Capital costs would be met by the Government and the new schools could use their charitable status to attract grants from individuals and organisations committed to tackling educational disadvantage.

Parents would also be free to transfer their child to another state school if they were dissatisfied with the standard of education at their existing school.

However, all pupils in disadvantaged schools would be eligible for education credits of £500 per head to be spent on extra lessons in academic subjects, sport or music. In return, parents would have to agree to play an active part in their child's education.

The report says that the existing system has led to educational segregation and is fuelling intergenerational poverty.

Wealthier parents are either bussing their children to good schools or moving to live in the catchment area of good schools because of the shortcomings of the existing system. Alternatively, they are buying places at private schools. The overall effect is to entrench classroom failure and poverty.

"If you are a disadvantaged parent you have less power and your child is much more likely to be compelled to attend a local school which performs poorly," the report says.

"We need to give these parents the data and the resources to exercise more power. Our proposals for Home school charters and credits will help parents make more informed decisions and put more money in their hands to leverage their children's educational opportunities.

"We must also create better local schools in deprived areas. Our policy proposals concerning school leadership and a culture of learning will go a long way to achieving this."

"Our report recommends reform which genuinely puts the education of disadvantaged children at the top of the political agenda."

The report also warns that the failure of many inner city pupils to secure the skills and qualifications to equip them for a job is having a corrosive effect on their lives and the social fabric and economic prospects of the country.

Under the slogan "Every Parent Matters", the report calls for a new approach centred on Responsibility, Involvement, Support and Empowerment. Christened "RISE", emphasis would be placed on a partnership between home and school featuring compulsory home-school charters, lessons for parents on how to get the best out of the education system for their child, and home-school support champions in disadvantaged primary schools.

The report quotes the SJPG poll which shows that 79 per cent of people believe that parents are primarily responsible for ensuring their children work hard, behave well and attend school.

Heads would be spared "initiative overload" and given more freedom over their schools. Primary school heads in inner cities would be paid bonuses for raising standards and would be able to access the £228 million spent each year on pupil referral units to improve discipline.

They would be able to commission voluntary groups to work with disruptive pupils and get them back into the classroom. Money would be made available for inner city primaries to employ bursars to deal with administration and finance in order to allow Head to get on with leading and teaching.

The report gives qualified backing to the 47 city academies set up by the Labour government.

But it warns that the procedure for setting up an academy is too bureaucratic and long-winded and that too much money is spent on buildings. It calls for a review of the programme by a future Conservative government and suggests tax incentives for businesses to invest in, and provide support for schools.

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(This is the second and final report from the Educational Failure working group of the Social Justice Policy Group. Our first report published in December 2006 highlighted the fact that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are five times more likely to fail academically than their peers and that white working class boys do worse than all other comparable ethnic groups. The EFWG was chaired by Ryan Robson and held over 200 hearings and took evidence from 800 individuals and organisations.)

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Ten key policy recommendations

- * Set up pioneer schools funded by the taxpayer at an average level of £5500 per child. (See Section 4.1.5 of Volume 3 (Educational Failure) of Breakthrough Britain)
- * Introduce compulsory home-school charters to underline parental responsibilities. (Section 4.1.2)
- * Develop “Be a credit to your child” courses to boost parental involvement in school. (Section 4.1.3)
- * Employ home school support champions in disadvantaged primary schools. (Section 4.1.4)
- * Introduce £500 education credits for disadvantaged children. (Section 4.1.5)
- * Tax breaks for businesses to get involved in investing in schools. (Section 4.3.4)
- * Give heads more powers to run their schools and spare them more centrally determined initiatives. (Section 4.2.2)
- * Set up a special fund to pay higher salaries and bursarial support to heads in disadvantaged primary schools. (Section 4.2.2)
- * Introduce family literacy classes. (Section 4.3.1)
- * Put heads and teachers back in charge of discipline. (Section 4.2.2)

Key YouGov Polling Findings:

There was significant support for our education policy proposals: 74% of people think that educational failure is a 'severe problem' and over 57% of people believe that educational failure is not seen as a high enough priority by politicians.

Every Parent Matters

- 79% of people regard that parents are primarily responsible for ensuring children "work hard, behave well and attend school" with just 7% of people saying the responsibility lies with head teachers or teachers.
- 74% agree that "a lot of problems with truancy and disruptive behaviour at school are due to children's home lives, and could be helped if more support was available to parents."
- 79% of people consider that "schools need to do more to identify and deal with the emotional and behavioural problems of pupils."
- 65% believe that "parents have a vital role to play in children's education and parenting classes would help them understand their responsibility."
- 69% judge that "placing a member of staff who is not a teacher or social worker in schools to liaise with parents and make home visits to families" is a "good idea."

Leadership in Schools

- 69% think that teacher training should prioritise spending time in difficult schools to prepare them for the challenges of teaching.
- 64% agree that "teachers and head teachers should be given performance bonuses if they dramatically improve results for children."
- 72% of people believe that "teacher training should prioritise leadership skills and managing a class room."
- 63% consider that "teacher training should prioritise helping teachers deal with children who have emotional and behavioural problems."

Culture of Learning

- 79% of people think that "many children who are not academically gifted would be better off doing vocational training, rather than being forced to study academic subjects."
- 66% of people believe that "vocational courses are a meaningful alternative to academic qualifications for all pupils and should be made part of the curriculum from the age of 11."
- 79% of people consider that "poor discipline and disruptive pupils prevent other children from learning and head teachers should be given the power to permanently exclude disruptive pupils for the sake of other children."
- 58% of people agree that "disruptive pupils should be kept within the school, but taught in separate social and educational programme within the school until they are ready to return to their classroom."
- 79% of people believe that "allowing local businesses and community groups to organise extra- curricular activities would help build good relations between schools and the local community."

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