Buckingham Journal of Education 2023 Vol 4 No 2 pp 23–32, DOI: 10.5750/tbje.v4i2.2203

POST GENERAL ELECTION SCHOOLS CHALLENGES

David Laws[*]
Executive Chairman, Education Policy Institute, Schools Minister 2012–2015, London, United Kingdom

A UK General Election must take place by 28 January 2025 and is widely expected in the Autumn of 2024.

School policy has not been a big focus of political debate over the last few years, as other national and international problems have taken centre stage, including the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, the dramatic rise in NHS waiting times and the cost of living "crisis". The relatively low prioritisation given to "Education" in opinion polls may even appear to be a positive – compared with other issues, the public does not seem to see this as a "problem area".

However, as the salience of other issues (hopefully) diminishes over time, education is likely to rise up the priority list of the next government. Good education outcomes are an important part of meeting the productivity challenge facing the UK economy. They are also a key part of the agenda of extending opportunities to all young people and improving social mobility.

Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour Party Leader, has already indicated that improved education will be one of his five "missions", should he become the UK's next Prime Minister. And in late November, PM Rishi Sunak set out five long-term economic priorities, one of which was "delivering world-class education". For the Liberal Democrats, education has also long been a political priority. One of the party's most well-known policies was the former commitment to raise the basic rate of tax by 1p, to fund improved education, and they were instrumental in 2010 in introducing a £2.5 billion Pupil Premium.

It is therefore likely that school policy will have a greater salience in the 2024–2029 Parliament than it has had during the 2019–2024 period.

It is, however, worth noting that although education may be due an increased political salience, it is no longer an area where there are large differences in policies between the political parties. Indeed, only one education policy seems likely to be highly divisive in the 2024 election – the question of whether to extend VAT to the fees charged by independent schools. This policy is advocated by the Labour Party but is strongly opposed both by the Conservatives and also by the Liberal Democrats (who appear to favour

[*]Corresponding author: e-mail: David.laws@epi.org.uk

enhanced social obligations on independent schools in exchange for the continuation of the existing VAT-free status).

Over the past 25 years, the most divisive education policy issues have tended to be around the "mass academisation" of the school system and university tuition fees (which Labour introduced, but proposed to scrap in their 2019 manifesto). However, both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party have now adopted a more pragmatic attitude to the arguments about academisation and the local authority's role in education. And under Sir Keir Starmer, Labour appears to have decided to back away from any significant pledge to cut university tuition fees.

The differences between the parties on education policy are therefore likely to be more subtle than in some past elections, but they are important nonetheless.

I consider the policy issues in the rest of this paper, under a number of headings: School Funding; Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Deployment; School Organisation and Improvement; Accountability; Qualifications and Curriculum and The "Future School".

Given that we are still in all likelihood many months away from a General Election, it would not be sensible to base our forward look on just one scenario in the next House of Commons. However, the present opinion polls point strongly to the following possible outcomes, in order of probability: Labour majority government; Labour minority or coalition government and Conservative government. I have therefore taken these probabilities into account in deciding how much attention to give to various of the party proposals.

ENGLISH EDUCATION IN 2023

Before covering the detailed policy areas, it is worth stepping back to consider the current attainment-related education outcomes in England, which inform the parties thinking about major challenges in the next Parliament.

England has some of the highest-attaining pupils in the world, at the top end of its attainment distribution. High-performing English schools and universities are regarded as some of the best education institutions in the world, and many students from overseas come to England to study.

However, at the bottom end of the English attainment distribution are large numbers of children whose attainment is poor. These children will leave school and college with low-level qualifications. They will often go into jobs with low pay, poor productivity and bad long-term prospects. Many of these children come from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or have special educational needs. The problem of this tail of low attainment has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, though it was initially partially "masked" by 2 years in which exam grades were awarded by teachers and schools, rather than through the regulated exam boards. "Teacher assessed" or "Centre assessed" grades led to "grade inflation" which means that exam grades for 2020 and 2021 were not

comparable with pre-pandemic grading. In 2022, there was a return to exam-board marking, but the grades awarded were still on average higher than pre-pandemic, as the exams regulator (OFQUAL) sought to move back to pre-pandemic "standards" by 2023.

There are many ways of quantifying the challenge that we face at the bottom end of the attainment distribution. One is to consider how many children in England fail to secure what is widely regarded as a "pass grade" in both maths and English in their GCSEs (a level 4 – the old grade C). Even the (inflated) exam data of 2022 show that a quarter of children in London, and around one-third in the North of England, failed to achieve at or above this modest level. Indeed, in 2023, there were 541 state-funded mainstream secondary schools where over half of the pupils failed to achieve the C/4 grade threshold in both English and Maths. That is almost one in six secondary schools.

A second way to look at the challenge we face is to consider the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils (in receipt of the pupil premium) and their non-disadvantaged peers. EPI publishes an "Annual Report" which quantifies the attainment gap on school entry, end of primary and end of key stages 4 and 5. We then convert this gap into "months of learning", to make it easier to understand. Prior to the pandemic, the gap at the age of 16 years stood at around 18 months, and it was even greater – almost 2 years – for the most persistently disadvantaged pupils (those who are in poverty for 80% or more of their time in education). The disadvantaged gaps had been closing for a decade or more up until 2017. However, since then, the gap closure first stalled and then went sharply into reverse during and after the pandemic. Indeed, at EPI, we have calculated that around a decade of progress in gap narrowing was lost over the COVID-19 pandemic, as the effects of school closure and education disruption hit disadvantaged children, and schools in disadvantaged areas, more heavily. We should also note that even before the pandemic, during the period of gap closure, the most persistently disadvantaged pupils made no progress at all in catching up with other pupils. This is a warning about how challenging it is for the school system to compensate for the difficult lives that some children have outside their schools.

Another adverse trend apparently triggered by the pandemic has been the decline in school attendance. The overall absence rate was 4.9% in the last term before the pandemic hit. This rose to 7.5% by Autumn 2022. Persistent absence (missing 10% or more of possible sessions) has also risen sharply, from 13.1% of all pupils to 24.2% over this period. Absence data are the worst since 2006/07, and persistent absence is particularly high amongst the poorest children. There is also a poor understanding of children missing from formal education, and there is no reliable monitoring of "home educated" children.

These issues – low attainment amongst the "tail", a large gap between the poor and non-poor and high persistent absence – should be very high priorities for the next government.

SCHOOL FUNDING AND DISTRIBUTION

Research demonstrates that increases in school funding have a positive effect on pupil attainment. The positive effects of higher spending are felt more strongly in schools serving disadvantaged communities and those with low prior attainment.

In 2023/24, total funding for schools and high needs was around £54 billion, including a £2.9 billion "Pupil Premium", which targets disadvantaged pupils.

Schools and 16–18 colleges have experienced a particularly challenging funding environment since 2010. "School" spending was frozen in real terms during the Coalition government and fell in per pupil terms after the Coalition ended. However, 16–18 funding was not "protected" after 2010, and wider non-school education funding was also cut in real terms. In the decade up to 2020, spending per pupil therefore declined by around 9% in real terms. By the 2017 General Election, school budget cuts had begun to be a political issue of some salience. Recent increases in school funding mean that real per pupil funding is planned to return to the 2009/10 level in 2024/25, after accounting for school-specific cost pressures. However, a 15-year period with static real spending per pupil is highly unusual.

The challenging funding environment in schools has been exacerbated in many institutions by the effects of the new National Funding Formula (NFF) for schools, which was introduced in 2018. The effects of the NFF, and the subsequent policy of "levelling up" funding for schools, have not been felt equally across schools. Additional funding has been disproportionately targeted towards schools that had historically lower levels of funding, and these schools have generally had less disadvantaged intakes.

Schools with high levels of free school meal eligibility have typically seen their funding via the "schools block" increase by about 4% in real terms from 2017/18 to 2023/24. However, schools with the lowest levels of FSM eligibility have seen over double this rise – at around 8.5%.

Additional funding to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds has not kept pace with inflation, and the value of the Pupil Premium alone is over 11% lower in real terms in 2023/24, compared with 2014/15. This is troubling given that one study for outcomes at the end of Key Stage 2 estimated that attainment effects of funding for pupils eligible for free school meals are around one-third higher than for other pupils.

Funding for pupils with SEND and EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans) has also apparently not kept pace with demand pressures. In January 2022, there were over 355,000 pupils with an EHCP, an increase of almost 50% in the preceding 5 years.

As mentioned, the funding squeeze in 16–18 education has also been very marked. Cuts in real terms have been twice as large as in other school phases.

The public spending environment in the next Parliament could remain challenging under a government of any political colour. The current government has only fixed departmental plans up until 2024/25, but there is currently a post-2025 planning assumption of real current spending across all government departments rising at 1% per year. This is a modest figure given pressures in the NHS budget, social care budget, defence budget and spending on debt interest payments. There has been a large recent rise in public sector debt and the tax burden, and the next government will have to manage public spending carefully.

Nevertheless, given Labour's listing of Education as one of its five "Missions" and the prioritisation of education spending under the last Labour government, it seems likely that the funding environment could generally be better post-2024 than it has been since 2010 if a Labour government is elected.

It seems likely that a Labour government would wish to see a modest rise over time in per pupil funding, with possibly larger uplifts for 16–18 funding and SEND.

EPI and others have also suggested that an incoming government should review the current levels and distribution of disadvantaged funding. There is a strong case for extending the Pupil Premium to the 16–18 phase and at the very least restoring its previous real value. There could also be a case for targeting additional funding for the most persistently disadvantaged pupils. These pupils are twice as far behind in their learning at age 16 (around 24 months) than the least persistently poor children (around 12 months). Persistent poverty amongst children is not spread equally as a proportion of all poor pupils, which means that a persistent poverty premium would better target those schools and regions with particularly high levels of this poverty, which we know is particularly corrosive in relation to educational outcomes.

TEACHER RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND DEPLOYMENT

One area where additional money may be needed is teacher pay. An adequate supply of effective teachers is crucial in delivering high-quality education outcomes, but the quality, stability and availability of the workforce have been a long-running concern. This is particularly the case in disadvantaged schools. Schools are currently struggling to attract and retain teachers, particularly in shortage subjects such as maths and sciences.

Since 2010, there have been real terms falls in teacher salaries. Salaries for more experienced and senior teachers have fallen by 13% in real terms over this period. Starting salaries have fallen 5% in real terms.

The situation is even worse in FE colleges where real pay has declined 18% since 2010. Median school teacher pay is now around £41,500, versus £34,500 for a college teacher.

Shortages of teachers have become worse in recent years, not least in STEM subjects, where teacher pay is typically well below the levels in competitor occupations. Teacher training targets are being missed by large margins – in 2022/23, the postgraduate initial teacher training target was missed by a particularly large margin in secondary schools, and only 59% of the target was met.

School staff vacancies have risen sharply since 2020/21, and this is a particular issue in special schools/PRUs and alternative provisions.

As well as the acute difficulties in recruiting teachers in subjects such as computing, physics and technology, these challenges are even greater in schools in disadvantaged areas – particularly outside London.

Teacher retention is also slipping, and this is also a worse problem in further education colleges. Around 25% of college teachers left the profession in 2019 after just 1 year, compared with 15% of school teachers. Almost half of college teachers left the profession after 5 years, compared with a quarter of school teachers.

Teacher workload is also an area of concern, and teachers in England work longer hours compared to teachers in other high-performing OECD countries.

The next government will need to give a high priority to teacher recruitment and retention and should ensure that there are strong incentives and support available for teachers who work in highly disadvantaged schools.

Teacher pay needs to be competitive with other graduate destinations, including for shortage subjects. The government may want to consider extending the "levelling up" pay premium to existing teachers and not just early career teachers. The next government also needs to consider issues that impact retention, including issues relating to teacher well-being, and flexible working (in an age where home working is becoming more common in competing occupations).

Given the positive impacts of high-quality CPD, the next government also needs to seek to improve professional development, through evidence-backed programmes.

A Labour government, with close links to the teacher unions, is likely to prioritise these issues. However, this will only be possible if the government sets its education budgets at an adequate level.

SCHOOL ORGANISATION AND IMPROVEMENT

The past 20 years of school policy has seen a considerable emphasis on "structural reform". In particular, the role of local authorities in education (particularly delivery) has been reduced and we have seen hundreds of new "Free Schools" and the mass "academisation" of existing local authority schools.

These changes had their origins in the pre-1997 Conservative governments, but reform accelerated when Tony Blair was PM. In particular, around 200

secondary schools with very poor outcomes (many in very poor areas) were "academized". This means they no longer came under local authority "control". Typically, they received new leadership and governance, additional funding for both capital and revenue spending and very high prioritisation for improvement. Research demonstrates that this programme was effective in improving GCSE outcomes and university access, compared with a control group of similar non-academised schools.

The Coalition government accelerated the academisation programme dramatically but without the same clear impact on outcomes. Indeed, by 2015, the DFE considered that around one-third of open academies were in some kind of category of concern, usually associated with low progress, attainment or OFSTED rating.

The lesson was almost certainly that schools can be improved when significant resources are brought to bear on a limited number of institutions. However, such a programme is almost by definition not fully scalable across an entire school system, and "liberation from local authority control" alone proved not to be a panacea.

Research by DFE, EPI and others shows that some of the best- and worst-performing school groups are academy chains and that the same is true of local authority school groups. Political parties seem gradually to have come to terms with this reality, and there is much less discussion than previously about either 100% forced academisation or about a full return to local authority "control" of schools. Under a Conservative government, the direction of travel on academisation seems set to continue, but with more attention to what makes a good school group, and how best practice might be spread across all school groups.

Labour has not set out a detailed picture of its plans for future school organisation, but it seems likely that it will take a pragmatic approach. This might mean accepting the current "mixed model" and encouraging more schools to join school groups. Labour could set out a more "strategic" commissioning and oversight role for local authorities, relating to all schools. Labour also seems likely to encourage OFSTED to inspect schools at a group level, as well as at an institutional level.

The existing government had previously seen forced academisation as a key part of its school improvement strategy, with Regional Directors providing local oversight and intervention. However, academisation is not a silver bullet, when academies are seen also to fail and when perhaps there is insufficient high-quality national capacity for school groups to take on all weak schools. Labour is therefore likely to review its approach to school intervention and improvement, but this is unlikely to be an area where easy solutions are possible. Under the next government, structural change is less likely to be seen as providing a simple pathway to school improvement. There could also be a review of the UTC model, as these institutions have generally not performed well, and a large number have closed.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND INSPECTION

The English school system places a high priority on school accountability and inspection, and as a consequence, both are seen as "high stakes" for those who lead our schools.

Key Stage 2 tests are designed to provide a degree of accountability for primary schools and a credible means of measuring the extent to which children have mastered core subjects such as maths and English. At Key Stage 4, there are measures such as Attainment 8 and Progress 8, which are intended both to steer pupils towards certain subjects and which allow for accountability around school performance.

Progress 8 and Attainment 8 are generally seen as improvements on the old "5 good GCSEs including English and Maths" measure, which was used by the last Labour government. The progress measure, in particular, is fairer to schools than a restricted focus just on attainment and provides incentives to improve outcomes for all children. A new government is therefore more likely to evolve these measures than to end them. However, a Labour government is likely to downplay or scrap the EBacc measure of performance, which overlaps with A8/P8 and which is only really important if the view is taken that most pupils should be studying a modern language until at least the age of 16 years.

Measures of performance at age 18 are also important, but lower visibility than those at the age of 16 years.

Where change is more likely is around school inspection. Ofsted has long been unpopular with many teachers, and there have been issues around the effectiveness, fairness and reliability of its grading system for schools. Labour has already indicated that it is likely to move away from a single "overall" grade for schools but will instead move to separate grading of different aspects of overall school performance, possibly with a distinct and different approach to assessing safeguarding compliance. Labour (see above) is more likely to encourage OFSTED to inspect at both school and school group levels.

Over recent years, Ofsted has changed its focus away from school attainment data and focused more on a broad and balanced curriculum. It is too early to say how this will now evolve, but it seems likely that under a new government and new Chief Inspector, there could again be more focus on the performance of disadvantaged pupils and closing of the gap.

A Labour government also seems more likely to be interested in considering how Ofsted inspection could be combined with additional support for school improvement.

It seems likely that any government would want to continue to rely on Ofsted to identify those schools with very serious weaknesses that need high levels of support or intervention. Arguably, Ofsted is the only body with the independence, credibility and remit to undertake this key role.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM

Since 2010, the Coalition and subsequent Conservative-only administrations have followed a somewhat "traditional" approach to the curriculum and qualifications. There has been a strong focus on academic qualifications, at least up to the age of 16 years, and the Attainment 8 and Progress 8 measures particularly incentivise subjects such as maths, English, English literature, and the sciences. The Wolf Review, of vocational qualifications, effectively swept away a range of qualifications that were considered to be of limited value, and where there were concerns that schools and colleges might push students towards less valuable qualifications, but ones that might score well in accountability measures.

Over time, some subjects such as art, music and D and T have seen lower take-up. A case has been made that this is due to accountability measures, but funding pressures may be at least as significant, if not more so.

England has a narrow post-16 curriculum in comparison with other developed countries, and many students drop so-called "core" subjects such as maths and English at an earlier age than in other nations. PM Sunak has proposed to reform the post-16 curriculum, to improve breadth. This might mean replacing A Levels and T Levels with a new Baccalaureate qualification, which might involve more maths of some kind for all students. Reform in this area will not be easy, given the limited supply of maths teachers and relative under-funding of the 16–18 phase.

Labour has pledged a Curriculum Review, and this is highly likely to consider the place and status of subjects ranging from art, music and sport to financial education and career advice. Labour is also committed to considering a broader post-16 curriculum and is likely to want to raise the status and options around technical and vocational education.

Reform in this area seems highly likely but needs to proceed in a measured and evidence-based way. There are many complex issues to consider and many workforce constraints. Governments in England also have a poor record of seeking to reform technical and vocational qualifications, and it is notable that the new T Level has barely been introduced before the new changes are being floated.

THE FUTURE SCHOOL

Finally, the next government needs to consider a number of important issues around what the future school will look like. How will the Metaverse and similar initiatives impact teaching and learning opportunities? What are the risks? What are the present and future risks and opportunities around AI? Will future schools make greater provision of well-being and mental health support, given the prevalence of these issues and their impact on children? In

general, a Labour government seems likely to be more open to change in such areas.

CONCLUSION

Education has assumed a lower political and public profile over recent years, but this may change after the next election, given the education challenges and opportunities that we face. A radical change in school and college policy seems unlikely, but a new government will likely mean important changes of approach in a number of key policy areas.