England: Restructuring Education and the Demise of the LEA

Mel West

Abstract This chapter focuses on developments over the past 25 years in England, where almost 85 % of the population lives. The review goes back to 1988, when there were 107 Local Education Authorities in England. The number of local authorities has increased to 152 today, as the result of various local government reforms, yet the local authorities' powers and responsibilities have diminished. The chapter illustrates such a continuing process of reform by three distinct but unequal phases, which largely followed the changes of the essentially two-party political system. The chapter describes the reform conceived and implemented by each government and analyzes their assumptions underpinning the reform and the evidenced-based impact. Finally, it delineates external factors that have contributed to development of education standards in England and potential lessons for replication.

Keywords Educational reform in England, the 1988 Education Act • New Labour education policy • Creating an education marketplace • Education and social disadvantage • Education intervention strategies • Checks and balances in public education systems

The United Kingdom embraces four jurisdictions. The UK national government sets education policy for England, but Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland each have their own National Assemblies that develop and oversee education policy. Of course, there are many similarities; Wales in particular closely follows the policies established in England, while Scotland too follows many of these, although typically some time later and with modifications. The position in Northern Ireland is again different, with the complexity of two parallel school systems—one Catholic, one Protestant—that need to be coordinated.

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This chapter focuses on developments of public education in England, where almost 85 % of the population lives. There is also a private education sector, but currently this accounts for only about 6 % of school-age children; the overwhelming majority in England attend state schools.

This review goes back to 1988, when there were 107 Local Education Authorities in England, each of them responsible for providing and then overseeing the provision of education within their local area. The number of local authorities has increased to 152 today, as the result of various local government reforms, which seems to suggest an increase in local democratic influence, In fact, however, quite the reverse is true, as these authorities have very few remaining powers and greatly limited responsibilities regarding education.

Education reform in England has been a continuing process over the past 25 years. This time span, however, is divided into three distinct but unequal phases, because the essentially two-party political system means changes from time to time in the government party, and when governments change, policies change too. Thus, the first period of significant change in education can be seen to date from the then Conservative government's Great Reform Act in 1988, the second from the election of the Labour government in 1997, and the third from the Conservative-dominated coalition government that was formed after the 2010 elections.

Before these reforms commenced, although both the education system and educational entitlement were national, and largely funded by the national government, there were significant local differences in education provision. These conflicts arose partly because the responsibility for organising and managing the system locally was distributed among more than 100 Local Education Authorities, and partly because determining and overseeing the content and conduct of the curriculum was the responsibility of each school's individual governing body. However, despite increases in the numbers of children participating, in the average number of years of schooling received, and in the resources devoted to education during the previous 40 years, the Thatcher government of the 1980s thought that the system was in need of a major overhaul, with less emphasis placed on the processes of schooling and much greater emphasis placed on the outcomes. The resulting 1988 Education Act precipitated fundamental changes in the educational landscape, bringing the education system under direct national influence and thus beginning the major erosion of local authority powers that has continued to this day.

1 Conservative Government Reforms 1988–1997: The Creation of an Education Marketplace

Essentially, the 1988 Education Act had four key components (West and Ainscow 1991). The first was *prescription*, introducing a National Curriculum, accompanied by national testing, that all schools must follow. The second was *devolution*, transferring many of the management functions previously carried out by Local Authorities to schools, and thereby significantly changing the role of the headteacher.

The third related to *competition*, altering the basis on which schools were funded. Essentially, this changed the basis on which schools had been funded, away from the numbers of teachers employed to the number of pupils the school attracted, allowing popular schools to grow at the expense of less popular neighbouring schools and creating a local education marketplace. It also embraced the creation of a new category of schools directly funded by the government, *grant-maintained schools*. The fourth was *privatisation*, breaking the Local Authorities' monopoly on the supply of services to schools within their areas and opening these up to competition from private companies.

1.1 Development of the Policy Reform

The driving force for these reforms, rooted in the White Paper "Better Schools" (DfES 1985), which had identified the need to provide a better return on investment in education through increasing standards of attainment at all levels of ability as the overriding priority for education policy, was the notion that replacing the supposedly 'cosy' Local Authority environment with simulated marketplace conditions would lead to improvements in standards. Although this notion was popular with right-wing politicians, who saw public ownership as the enemy of enterprise and efficiency, it was an ideological rather than an evidenced proposition. Opponents pointed out that free market systems often lead to quite as much duplication and inefficient resource use as centrally planned ones. But the primacy of the market is deeply engrained in Conservative philosophy, and objections from schools and teacher associations were portrayed as self-serving rather than serving the interests of pupils and were swept aside.

Certainly a case could be made for ensuring that there were common components prescribed within every child's educational experience; too many children had, for example, been able to opt out of science subjects or modern languages at a relatively early stage of schooling. Nevertheless it was questionable from the outset whether a single curriculum model could be expected to meet the needs of all pupils, regardless of aptitudes, interests, or ability levels. Critics argued that a core curriculum, identifying perhaps a half-dozen key subjects and accounting for about 70 % of the time children spent at school, could achieve the objectives of a national curriculum but still allow some flexibility to tailor the curriculum towards individual needs. But the government insisted on a rigid 100 % model, prescribing both the subjects—ten in all—and the balance of time to be allocated to those subjects from age 5 to 16, although it was clearly impossible from the outset that this single, heavily traditional, and academic curriculum model could have equal utility value to all pupils.

There were similar doubts about the wisdom of unbridled competition between schools. Studies were beginning to demonstrate that in England the poverty gap was increasing, and with it the gap in attainment between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds was widening, with children from the poorest families falling ever further behind national average attainment levels. It was evident that

competition between schools would further favour children from middle-class backgrounds, whose parents were much more likely to shop around for the ‘best’ schools, leaving already disadvantaged schools even more disadvantaged as numbers fell and the social mix of the pupils became even more heavily weighted towards the poorest groups in the community. The newly established—some would say liberated—grant-maintained schools were a particularly important stimulus to competition. Under the provisions of the 1988 Act, schools could ‘opt out’ of the local authority altogether. Such schools would receive their funding directly from government, which was a significant incentive, as this would mean budgets were not ‘top-sliced’ to fund local authority services to schools before distribution. Thus those schools that responded to the government’s invitation to switch to grant-maintained (GM) status enjoyed the competitive advantage of increased resources levels that, in turn, would make it easier to attract pupils who brought with them even more resources. At the same time, as the government made a corresponding reduction in the education support grant paid to the local authority to fund schools, the provision of high-quality local services that might persuade a school not to apply for GM status became more difficult.

Controversy over these issues continued into the 1990s, by which time there was a new prime minister, but not a new party in government. Initially, it was hoped that this change might see a softening in the hostility towards local authorities and teacher associations, but instead this hardened. Post-16 (years of age) education provision was removed from local authority control and placed under a newly formed national funding council, further diluting local influence on education provision. New legislation was passed giving the Secretary of State (minister) for Education extended powers in relationship to teachers’ pay and conditions of service, and, least popular of all, the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) was established. OfSTED is an agency set up by the government to oversee the inspection of all maintained schools on a regular 4-year cycle and was central to the government’s determination to increase the accountability of schools for the performance of their pupils. Inspection reports would be published and, along with the ‘league tables’ of school performance now emerging as the first cohort of National Curriculum pupils reached assessment points, would stimulate debate within the local community about the quality of schooling provided. The government’s assumption—substantially correct—was that parents would see raw scores attained by pupils as an indicator of school quality, rather than, as was and is more often the case in developed countries, a reflection of the socioeconomic status and social capital of parents. Thus, new forces to increase competition between schools and for school places were unleashed at a local level.

Following an election that again returned the Conservative party to power, the government produced a new White Paper: “Choice and Diversity: A New Framework for Schools” (DFE 1992). This document, in arguing that the needs of all children were not the same, and that schools must pay more attention to individual interests and aptitudes, set out a formula for relaxing the National Curriculum and its punishing testing regime without acknowledging that its introduction had been a mistake. Instead, it proposed to introduce *specialist schools*, whose curricula would be skewed

in favour of particular subjects. Thus, there would be designated Science schools, Performing Arts schools, Modern Language schools, and so on. The issue of how these schools might recruit children whose interests or abilities coincided with these 'specialisms', or indeed how children might access schools whose specialisations matched their interests, was largely overlooked, although such schools were permitted to admit a small proportion (5 %) of their intake on the basis of established interest in the area of specialisation.

A further loosening of the National Curriculum came in 1993, when the government-commissioned review, "The National Curriculum and Its Assessment" (DfES 1985), was published. This paper concluded that the curriculum as legislated was impractical: a national curriculum required national staffing in the proportions the curriculum implied, and this was not available. Further, it warned that assessment had become the main focus in the classroom, distorting and reducing the quality of teaching and learning activities. This seemed to be a voice of reason, asserting itself in the face of reforms driven by political dogma rather than educational wisdom, and a number of the report's proposals were adopted. Among these were the scaling back of the National Curriculum to an 80 % model, restoring schools' discretion regarding how best to fill the remaining time; reductions in the amount of content prescribed for and the time allocated to testing; and greater flexibility in the 14+ curriculum, allowing some traditional academic subjects to be dropped in favour of more vocationally orientated programmes.

However, although these policy shifts were generally welcomed by the education community, the government pushed further ahead with its accountability measures. OfSTED became increasingly intrusive, designating some schools as 'failing' and requiring their closure, spreading alarm everywhere it went and severely damaging teacher morale. The publication of school performance tables became an annual ritual, with schools increasingly fearful of slipping down the league. OfSTED reports and league table positions became marketing tools for the strong, threats to the weak. Competition between schools was thoroughly established. But a change was also taking place among school headteachers. The generation of 1988, who had found themselves thrust, largely unprepared, into the role of school managers were gradually being replaced by a new and altogether more pragmatic generation, who accepted competition and indeed thrived on it. In 1988 very many headteachers had been reluctant to take on this new role, especially aspects associated with managing the school's budget. Ten years later, by the time the Conservatives were swept from power in the 1997 election, very many would be reluctant to give it up.

1.2 Assumptions Underpinning Conservative Government Reforms

One starting point for the reforms undertaken during this period was a belief that there are areas of knowledge and basic skills that all children should acquire through schooling. Once that concept is accepted, some national curriculum guidelines seem

inevitable; surely, if we agree that all children should be offered access to a common core of experiences, we must agree that all schools should be required to make these available. Indeed, it may seem strange to many countries that England did not introduce national curriculum guidelines before 1988.

A second assumption was that competition is the best way to organise the provision of goods and services within society. The increasing size of the public sector had long been a concern to right-wing politicians and voters. It seemed that key public sector services—such as education and health—had insatiable appetites for resources, yet showed little by way of increased productivity. This feeling made these sectors irresistible targets for reform; obviously schools and hospitals cannot be closed, as no elected government could expect to be returned after taking such action. But if these services could be forced to operate in the 'real world', where survival depends on performance and providing value for money, that is likely to play well with voters. Thus, competition between schools through the simulation of market conditions is seen as a force that will induce schools to improve quality and efficiency. Further, establishing an education market transforms parents—the effective 'consumers' of education in that they make the consumption decisions on behalf of their children—into customers, empowering them in the education marketplace. This notion also plays well with voters.

A third assumption was that public sector management was less effective than its counterpart in the private sector. Public sector management was represented as overly large and bureaucratic, slow to react to changes in demand, inefficient in its use of resources, and ineffective in achieving its goals. Decision making in education was ineffective because decisions were being made in local town halls, remote from the schools and by people who were not fully aware of the real problems and priorities. Surely, the transfer of decision making into the school, moving it closer to the point of implementation, would improve the quality of decisions made?

1.3 What Evidence Is There Regarding the Impact of These Reforms?

There is no doubt that this reform programme brought about a sea-change in the English education system. In a single decade the carefully calibrated checks and balances provided by local education authorities that had previously moderated direct political influence over schools were removed and a new relationship between central government and schools established. In fact, it is probably relationships within the system that changed most during this era of reform. The close relationship between schools and local authorities was broken, and schools were increasingly contracting services—from the provision of school meals to provision of in-service training—from alternative providers, thus creating new markets for educational services. Relationships between schools, especially large secondary schools, and

government changed, as direct funding was accompanied by direct dialogue, and a select band of headteachers who supported government reforms found themselves brought into the policy-making circle, further distancing local authorities from the point at which education policy decisions were made. At the same time, relationships in schools began to change. Schools, rather than local authorities, were now the teachers' employer; the headteacher had become chief executive of 'The School Ltd', with a broader role and much wider powers. Relationships between parents and schools changed, as parents were increasingly seen as customers who needed to be attracted, as was evidenced by the huge increase in school-level marketing activities, and the transformation of the 'school brochure' from a collection of stapled, photocopied sheets into a glossy advertisement for the school.

Of course such changes were uneven, spreading at different rates in different areas. Generally, the fragmentation of local authorities as schools opted out was more evident in the south of England, traditionally the location of Conservative Party strongholds, than in the north, where local political control was more often in the hands of the Labour Party. And the changes, especially 'opting out' and the imposition of the OfSTED Inspection regime, alienated many teachers, eroding morale and reducing job satisfaction levels (Scanlon 2001). Demographic change exacerbated the situation as school rolls fell during the 1990s, placing even more pressure on those already squeezed by competition. But closing schools is not easy, so that unpopular schools tended to remain open, with extra places, unhappy staff, and high costs, thus undermining the government's drive to increase efficiency.

In terms of schooling outcomes, although test results increased modestly over the period, there was no dramatic leap forward, as gains in one school were largely offset by disappointing performance in another. Indeed, many argued that the gains recorded in the most successful schools were a consequence of the reallocation of pupils across the stock of schools, rather than the dramatic increases in performance that were trumpeted (Gorard 2005). Meanwhile, important questions about the curriculum and assessment systems continued to be asked. Did the curriculum reflect the needs of an increasingly global employment market, or did vocational education need to be improved? Was the national examination 'fit for purpose'? What could be done to reduce non attendance? In many inner-city areas there were schools where as many as 10 % of the pupils were missing on any given day, at least in part, it was argued, because the curriculum on offer did not seem relevant to their lives.

For these reasons it seems fair to conclude that the major impact of reforms in this period were structural, altering (irreversibly) the architecture of the education system in England and changing relationships within it, but having relatively little overall impact on either the efficiency or the effectiveness of the system. By 1997, the Conservative government had reduced the influence of local authorities and teacher associations, and had established an education marketplace that would require its political opponents to rethink their own position and policies, but it had also begun to run out of ideas and lose public confidence.

2 Labour Government Reforms 1997–2010: Tackling Social Disadvantage Through Educational Intervention

2.1 Development of the Policy Reform

Few were surprised when Tony Blair famously described New Labour's key priorities as 'Education, education, education' in the run-up to the 1997 election. After almost 10 years of sweeping reforms from a Conservative government that had dramatically altered the balance of powers within the education system, many (especially teacher associations) assumed this signalled that local influence would be restored. However, they were soon to be disabused of this notion, as the new government embarked on a series of policy initiatives that were in many respects even more prescriptive than those of their predecessors, and set in place mechanisms for 'micro-management' of almost every aspect of schooling. The new government publicly endorsed the key role of headteachers as the 'transformational leaders' who would ready the nation's school system for the twenty-first century, while simultaneously indulging in unprecedented levels of prescription about what should be taught, how it should be taught, how it would be assessed, and even how heads should manage their schools. Indeed, specific ideas about how to ensure educational quality became the very last thing headteachers needed to worry about. Knowing how to organise the school to satisfy the measures, targets, and inspection criteria imposed were much more useful attributes, as it became clear that this was a government that believed the best way to raise standards was to intervene directly in the ways schools went about their business. The overriding policy goal during this period, and the primary focus of intervention policies, was to increase standards while reducing the 'gap' between the highest and lowest attaining pupils. International studies such as PISA had indicated that while overall education performance remained relatively strong, other countries were catching up, with some pulling ahead. At the same time, these studies also suggested that the impact of socioeconomic factors on attainment levels was higher in England than almost any other country (Machin 2006).

The White Paper "Excellence in Schools" (DfEE 1997) set out the initial policy objectives. All schools would set targets to raise standards. School performance league tables would provide more detail, showing not only the attainment levels pupils had achieved but also their rates of progress over time. Secondary schools would be encouraged to become 'Specialist' schools, favouring a particular curriculum area; in return they would be given limited control over pupil admissions. Primary school class sizes would be reduced, and all primary school children would spend at least 1 hour each day learning English and 1 hour each day learning maths (National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies). *Education Action Zones* (EAZs) would be established in areas of high social deprivation, with targeted strategies, resources, and support. Other forms of disadvantage, for example, ethnic minority status or special educational needs, would also receive additional resources. In schools, setting children by ability—anathema to a generation raised on the ideals of comprehensive schooling—would be encouraged. All headteachers would be trained in

school leadership. This agenda was enlarged upon in the subsequent White Paper "Achieving Success" (DfES 2011), which reduced still further the now modest funding level and influence of local authorities over the schools in their area, loosened further the constraints of the National Curriculum, actively promoted the involvement of groups and organisations, both public and private, in the governance of schools, and targeted disadvantage even more closely. The Children's Act of 2004 was perhaps the most ambitious piece of legislation during this period. An attempt to bring coherence to the separate activities of the different services involved in child health, welfare, and education, it sought to integrate these more strongly, portraying schools as natural centres where service delivery might be coordinated. The act was accompanied by a powerful statement setting out the government's beliefs about the entitlement of children and young people, "Every Child Matters" (DFEE 2004).

2.2 Four Types of Interventions

In addressing these goals, government actions became focused around the identification of targets for every school, the measuring of school performance against these, and the imposition of 'solutions' to improve the school if targets were unmet. In fact, the government was so convinced by the efficacy of its 'solutions' that these were quickly spread out across schools in the most extensive programme of interventions ever seen in the English education system. Promoted under the slogan 'raising the bar, narrowing the gap', the government had a view on how all aspects of schooling should be conducted. The preoccupation with setting and hitting targets meant that the scope and pace of interventions to 'improve' schools accelerated rapidly, sometimes moving further in directions already signalled by the previous government, sometimes identifying new aspects of schooling that would benefit from central direction and control. This unprecedented array of interventions can be grouped into four basic types: general interventions, targeted interventions, within-school interventions, and structural interventions (Kerr and West 2011).

2.2.1 General Interventions

These interventions aimed to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of all schools, particularly in relationship to the strengthening of leadership and teaching quality. The underlying assumption was that (at least part of) the reason for differences in educational attainment levels lies in the limited effectiveness of some schools. Improving schools generally can therefore be seen as a way of improving the outcomes of those serving disadvantaged pupils, leading in turn to an improvement in their life chances. This type of intervention was particularly popular during the early period of the New Labour government in the late 1990s, for example, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. Subsequently, these were incorporated into the National Strategies, a set of system-wide improvement approaches commissioned by

government from a private sector education service provider, supported by teams of 'consultants' employed nationally, regionally, and within each local authority, to ensure their implementation. Soon, the really quite modest improvements in test and examination scores occurring in those years levelled off, and these 'one-size-fits-all' approaches were phased out. Officially, they had done their job and were no longer needed, although many would say that in truth they were expensive but relatively ineffective strategies and that funding such interventions could no longer be justified.

2.2.2 Targeted Interventions

These initiatives were aimed directly at improving the performance of schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. The underlying premise was that in such areas, ineffective schools 'fail' pupils who are already disadvantaged by personal or family circumstances, and so merely perpetuate existing inequities. As a first consequence, such schools were often identified by OfSTED as unsatisfactory and became subject to direct interventions and regular monitoring, coordinated by the local authority but dictated by central government. In some areas, groups of schools were targeted simultaneously in more sweeping interventions. This process began with the identification of *Education Action Zones*. It was continued into the Excellence in Cities (EiC) programme, which required groups of secondary schools in deprived inner-city areas to work together for the benefit of all the pupils in all their schools. Such collaborative arrangements which was exactly the sort of function previously coordinated by the now-disempowered local authorities continued to develop under a variety of names throughout the period. As they developed, interventions began to focus on collaboration beyond the school, for example, between schools, parents, and community groups. Arguably the most significant example of this approach was the London Challenge, which, during the 7 years from 2003 on, focused particularly on raising the attainment levels of disadvantaged learners in Greater London, while at the same time improving the overall performance of all schools and pupils in the area. The perceived success of this intervention led to its extension to the City Challenges established in the Black Country and in Greater Manchester, and finally the 'National Challenge'. This intervention targeted more than 600 'low-performing' secondary schools located across the country in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. Unfortunately, this caused the government some embarrassment, as many of these schools had previously been praised by OfSTED for the quality of their provision.

2.2.3 Within-School Interventions

Although the first two types of intervention focus on improvement at the whole-school level, this third type was aimed at improving outcomes for underachieving groups within schools. These approaches are therefore rooted in the view that pupil outcomes show significant within-school variation. This differential attainment of different pupil groups implies that many schools do not work equally well for all

their pupils. In national policy documents these approaches were usually referred to as being about 'narrowing (or closing) the gap' between high- and low-performing groups. So, for example, there have been interventions that have specifically focused on the underachievement of boys, particularly those from white working-class backgrounds; on learners from certain minority ethnic backgrounds; on bilingual learners; on children in local authority care; on traveller children; on gifted and talented children; and on children with special educational needs. Specific attention was also given to improving access to university education amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds through the Aim Higher initiative. This plan involved universities working closely with local schools to help raise both awareness and aspirations and to open up pathways for young people from communities that have no established tradition of university education.

2.2.4 Structural Interventions

The final years of the Labour government saw the introduction of a number of new categories of schools. A particularly important 'new' category of school, City Academies, was introduced in 2000. These schools, modelled on the Charter Schools operating in inner-city areas in the USA, were proclaimed as a radical new approach to the problems of education in deprived urban environments. The creation of new categories of school typically involved changes in school governance arrangements such as Academies, Federations, Trusts, and All-through Schools. Increased freedom from the already severely diminished influence of the local authority became a key feature of such schools' governance, with 'sponsors' replacing traditional school governing bodies as the ultimate decision-making body for the school. In particular, 'Faith Groups' were encouraged to come forward to act as sponsors. Sometimes such schools were established as a result of local ambitions, and sometimes as a result of central government's dissatisfaction with existing local arrangements. These interventions seemed to operate from the assumption that a partnership of strong schools and strong government is all that is needed to improve schooling outcomes. Curiously, a feature of the 'new' schools created by these policies is the relative freedom granted to these schools in relationship to the curriculum. Although government has never conceded officially that one factor generally holding back attainment among disadvantaged groups may be an inappropriate National Curriculum, which meets neither the needs nor the interests of many pupils, it is interesting that greater freedom to abandon National Curriculum prescriptions is typically available within the new categories of schools.

2.3 Assumptions Underpinning Labour Government Reforms

As already noted, all these interventions see the school as the primary focus for national improvement efforts. They also imply a central role for the school in

improving equity within education systems. This view resulted in a strong emphasis on the accountability of individual schools for the performance of their pupils, leading to what some have seen as unreasonable pressure on schools to solve the wider problem of social disadvantage (Muijs and Chapman 2009). Emphasis was also placed on support for schools through the involvement of 'expert' advisers and consultants, professional development opportunities, targeted financial support, and support in terms of human resources. Different interventions varied with respect to how much they emphasised support as opposed to expectations, and can be located along a continuum, from those that were mainly supportive (e.g., improving school programmes) to others which were substantially punitive (e.g., various forms of school reconstitution and closure), but all underlined school-level accountability.

Interventions also differed in terms of the degree of prescriptiveness. Some, such as those provided through the National Strategies, came with detailed guidelines and training regarding how they were to be implemented. Others allowed rather more local discretion and encouraged schools to innovate, resulting in strategies such as 'lending' one another teachers, as happened under the Leadership Incentive Grant initiative (West 2010). Indeed, an important strand within these intervention policies was an emphasis on school-to-school collaboration. On the surface this may seem strange within a policy context in which competition between schools remained the key strategy for 'driving up standards'. But there was increasing research evidence that collaboration between schools has enormous potential for fostering system-wide improvement, particularly in challenging contexts (Ainscow and West 2007), by both transferring existing knowledge and, more importantly, generating new knowledge that is context specific.

Further, this period saw increasing recognition of the need to link school improvement efforts to wider social action. This argument positions schools as hubs of such action—a 'universal service'—through their collaboration with other agencies that work with children. In addition, schools have been encouraged to take on a more extended role within their communities and with the involvement of community partners (Dyson 2011) through the creation of new structures such as trusts and academies.

Reflecting on all this, the interventions reported here seem to be driven by two key underlying assumptions: first, the traditional governance arrangements do not enable schools to overcome the disadvantages that children in areas of economic and social deprivation bring into school with them; and second, boosting academic attainment levels among these children will increase their life chances, and thus help reduce inequities within society.

The notion that increased attainment is itself life changing is perhaps overly simplistic. In reality, examination success is at best a proxy for educational quality, and there is ample evidence that improving the 16-plus qualifications of young people by a few percentage points hardly influences either post-school choices or opportunities. Equally, it can be argued that the attainment gains themselves are not attributable to the new forms of governance, but rather to the substantial additional resources that have accompanied such interventions. Had the schools that have been closed down and replaced enjoyed the facilities and resources available to the new Academies, who

can say they would not have achieved as much, if not more? However, few can question that additional resources are justified: these schools tend to be located in areas of high deprivation, with a much greater proportion of pupils qualifying for free school meals, having special needs, or with English as a second language.

However, as already noted, the notion that at least part of the reason for the differential achievement of different student groups lies in the quality of the school provision they experience is a general assumption driving the educational reform process during this period. There is some evidence to support this, but there is also evidence that points to its limitations. There is strong evidence that the school effect on attainment is significant and is similar in effect size to that of pupil social background (Muijs 2006). However, this school effect must not be overstated, as it has sometimes been by national policy makers. According to studies in the UK, typically between 10 % and 20 % of the variance in attainment outcomes between pupils can be explained at the school level, although this does not mean all that variance is the result of school factors (see, for example, Sammons 2007; Muijs 2006; Teddlie and Reynolds 2000). However, it is a mistake to assume that the remaining variance, at the student level, is all associated with social background. In fact, whenever researchers use actual measures of social background, such as mothers' education level (the measure that best predicts outcomes among measures of social background), parental income, or job classification, the variance explained is typically less than 10 %. Rather, the research suggests that the largest factors associated with learner outcomes relate to measures of general ability and prior learning. Of course, both social factors and school-related factors contribute to these factors too, so separating out the effect size of individual variables is an impossibly complex process. Additionally, it must also be noted that the poor quality of many of the measures used in education means that a fair proportion of the variance is simple measurement error.

Some research evidence suggests that the impact the school has on students from disadvantaged backgrounds is greater than on all students generally, the 'school effect' being up to three times greater on the attainment levels of those students (Muijs and Reynolds 2003). This suggestion implies that interventions to improve school effectiveness will bring greater proportional benefits to these students, thereby improving educational equity too. However, there is also some evidence that schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage face greater operational problems, for example, in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers (Maguire et al. 2006), which may further disadvantage students in these schools. This is one of the reasons put forward to explain why various national school improvement interventions have used relatively prescriptive approaches in an attempt to develop teacher competence and to ensure there are tight management arrangements for consistent implementation and monitoring.

Some researchers draw attention to the built-in limitations of improvement efforts that focus solely on within-school factors. Some argue that schools reflect the massive inequalities that exist within British society, an analysis that offers little encouragement to school improvement as a means of breaking the link between home background, educational outcomes, and life chances. Others take a more optimistic line, suggesting that efforts to improve individual schools are needed but that these must be linked to wider actions to break down the additional barriers faced by disadvantaged groups.

2.4 What Evidence Is There Regarding the Impact of These Reforms?

The Labour government came to power at a time when the Conservative reforms of the previous decade had altered the landscape in which schools operate but had then run out of steam. As noted earlier, many educational commentators thought that the changes achieved reflected the ideological beliefs of the political right more than they improved schooling. In this context, the Labour government had both public expectations and the goodwill of the education professions on its side when it took office. Unfortunately, this was an opportunity they largely squandered. Mortimore, summing up their period in office, wrote:

> Much needed to be done when this government came into office in 1997. And many teachers wanted to help improve schools and make our society more equal. But instead of the formulation of a long-term improvement plan based on the two big questions-what sort of education system is suitable for a modern society, and how can excellence and equity be made to work together-schools got top-down diktat. Successive ministers, and especially their advisers thought they knew 'what works'. They cherry-picked research, suppressed evaluations that gave them answers they did not want, and compounded the mess…. (Mortimore 2009)

This is perhaps an overly bleak view. The Labour government itself asked to be judged on its capacity to deliver the targets it set, for the most part, targets involving the percentages of children reaching given levels in the various national tests and public examinations. In the event, some of these were met, others were not, but there was increasing scepticism about the relevance of these targets to either improving schooling generally or enhancing life chances for learners, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Predictably, government statements point to improvements in test and examination scores, arguing that the impact has been significant. Within the research community, however, there is a variety of views, including some who argue that there has been very little real impact, particularly on learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that even the apparent improvements in measured performance are not always supported by a detailed analysis of national data (Gorrard 2005). Concern has also been expressed that such improvements that have been achieved in test and examination scores may have been achieved by the use of dubious tactics, such as orchestrated changes in school populations, the exclusion of some students, the careful selection of which courses students follow, and the growth in so-called equivalent qualifications that may inflate reported attainment levels. Another problem is that where strategies do work, they may well work just as well for advantaged students, so that overall improvements may even widen the 'gap'. There is also a proposition that improvements in measured performance do not necessarily result in increased access to higher education, particularly to more competitive universities, or in improved employment opportunities. Such views cast doubts on both the authenticity of improvement claims and the value of continued investment in such initiatives.

These realizations underline that the evidence for impact of these interventions is, at best, mixed, not least because of the limited extent to which reliable evidence

has been systematically collected and analyzed. Where systematic quantitative evaluations have been carried out, what is often found is that impact is patchy, with evidence of progress in some schools, but little overall improvement in learner outcomes, particularly learners from disadvantaged groups, that has been sustained (Tikley et al. 2006). At the same time, there is an accumulating volume of qualitative accounts, from both individuals and networks of schools in socially disadvantaged areas, which report significant progress in improving student performance.

The positive examples reinforce the importance of factors that are now well established within the school effectiveness research base, such as raised expectations, the strengthening of teaching practices, the systematic use of data to guide classroom-level strategies, and the way change is managed at school level. These examples also suggest the need to develop strategies that relate to the immediate contexts, both inside and outside the school. In the case of schools that are relatively low performing, for example, initial emphases on strengthening systems and procedures through the tightening of management arrangements and the standardizing of classroom practices seem most effective. Here, the partnering of schools where a relatively stronger school provides support to a weaker school has also been found to be a useful approach. But for schools that are performing more effectively, further standardization seems less helpful: engagement with specific data about aspects of school performance, investigating within-school differences in performance, and encouraging experimentation in the classroom seem to be more successful approaches.

Turning to specific initiatives, there has been little in the way of systematic, rigorous evaluation of the impact of targeted interventions. However, such evidence as exists suggests limited success, in terms of both outcomes for children and increased understanding of the key process and management factors that influence the impact of interventions. Perhaps the strongest evidence emerges from interventions that were targeted at preschool and early years education. The evaluation of the impact of a parenting programme on children aged 3 to 5 years showing conduct disorder (Hutchings et al. 2007), for example, showed significant improvements in most measures of parenting. Another study of early intervention (Evangelou et al. 2005) considered a project supporting a range of approaches trialled by voluntary organisations across the country. Some of these offered curriculum variations, whereas others focused on guidance for practitioners. The key findings were that the initiative developed both skills and understandings among practitioners. Similarly, the national evaluation of the Sure Start programme (Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues 2008), which supported the transition to school of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds, reported improved child behaviour, increased self-esteem among parents, improvements in health, and a reduction in levels of Social Services involvement with targeted families. The official evaluations (DfES 2004, 2006) of the Children's Fund initiative reinforce many of these findings. It reported that local initiatives had often been able to respond to previously unmet needs of children and their families. However, sustaining parental involvement and breaking down barriers to social inclusion in the wider community proved more problematic.

However, as already noted, findings are often contradictory, as is the case with evaluations of the early years' numeracy and literacy strategies. Here some studies show positive results, indicating improvements in teacher effectiveness and pupil outcomes, whereas others are sharply critical of the limitations of these strategies, seeing them as encouraging impoverishing teaching, being based on poor and limited evidence of what constitutes effective classroom practice, and leading to even greater divergence between low- and high-achieving students (Smith and Hardman 2000; Wyse 2003; Earl et al. 2003; Millett et al. 2004). A problem here for the researcher is the variation in approaches used in the different interventions, which makes it difficult to identify those factors to which learning gains might be attributed.

Consequently, specific evidence of the impact such interventions have on breaking the link between poverty and achievement is scarce, and the scant evidence that is available is not always encouraging. Looking at new models, in the case of Federations, an analysis of national student and school level datasets found little difference between student attainment levels in Federated schools and comparable non-Federation schools. The new arrangements, however, have a second major implication for schools: they brought the opportunity to incorporate the wider children's services agenda Every Child Matters into school-level planning and practices. This point may be significant, because structures and processes can be developed that may bring local communities into schools. Trust schools also have the potential to bring in partners involved in the wider children's services agenda, although as yet there has been little research into their potential to do so.

The government maintained that Academies were more successful than traditionally governed schools in improving attainment standards in socially deprived communities. Again, however, this is not always supported by research findings, with some studies finding that Academies do not perform any better than other schools in the area. Even where there are clear increases in attainment levels, it may be that this is related to factors other than improvements in teaching quality. For example, in Academies up to 10 % of the student intake can be 'selected' (although not formally on ability); some Academies have deliberately 'widened' their intake of students to include 'a more diverse pupil profile', while others attract a wider profile of students because of initial success or increased parental confidence, so it is hard to make true comparisons without looking at overall system performance. Indeed, some argue that improved outcomes may be attributed as much to a fall in the proportion of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) as to any improvements in teaching and learning. However, the impact of this factor is hard to gauge, as student numbers in Academies typically increase, which is not surprising because they have typically replaced failing schools. Although the numbers qualifying for FSM also increase, the increase is not proportional, making it hard to refute even this claim. There is undoubtedly considerable variation in student populations among Academies. For example, one of the first opened started with 51 % of its students eligible for FSM, and this has decreased to 12 %. In contrast, a later Academy opened with 9 % of students eligible for FSM, and this has subsequently increased to 41 %. This finding indicates that the social mix in Academies may change both

rapidly and dramatically, not in itself a bad thing, but a confounding variable, nonetheless, when trying to evaluate impact on children from particular socioeconomic backgrounds.

The new structural arrangements can perhaps be configured to meet the needs of the communities they serve and the challenges confronted more effectively than the schools they replaced. A number of case studies reported on the DCSF Standards site offered good examples of local practice developing to meet local problems, for example, drawing in support for smaller schools in rural environments, or pooling staff and other resources in urban areas, or building a more positive local image.

Despite these examples, the apparent lack of overall impact from so many initiatives is somewhat surprising, particularly if the contention that schools make a difference is true. There are, however, a number of possible explanations for this, some of which relate to methodological matters. For example, many of the evaluations carried out to date are based on relatively short-term output data, perhaps completed too soon for any effect to show. Among policymakers there is often an expectation that interventions will have an immediate impact. However, most of the school improvement research suggests that at least 3 to 5 years are needed for an intervention to lead to measurable changes in output at the school level.

This is a further example of the point made earlier: the methodologies used in evaluations are often weak when it comes to detecting impacts and attributing these to particular interventions. Only rarely is there any attempt at random assignment, or is there effective use of comparators, making it very hard to discern the impact of particular interventions. The impact of individual schools on students also differs, depending on which outcomes are studied. They tend to have their strongest impact on cognitive development, and on social behaviours and dispositions. Impact on students' affective outcomes is more limited, however, with even a factor such as 'attitude to school' being substantially determined by non-school factors.

Ironically, even where the intention is to reduce disadvantage, the differential capacity of schools to implement interventions effectively can lead to increased differences in performance between schools, compounding equity problems. This disparity underlines an important limitation of the single school focus approach adopted by the Labour government for many of its interventions, which is that too often improvements in one school in an area of widespread social disadvantage are achieved at a cost to surrounding schools. Research provides examples of how, as a school improves, it will tend to attract a greater number of students from families more committed to education. Sometimes, too, a school that becomes oversubscribed may also decide to become more selective. As a result, other schools in the area are left with less-motivated students from less ambitious backgrounds, locking them into a spiral of decline. Unfortunately, this phenomenon seems to have been an unintended consequence of Labour policies. Thus, in the end, despite their undoubted commitment to improve standards in schools and reduce the impact of social disadvantage on attainment levels, there is no compelling evidence that Labour government reforms made much difference to either. The lasting impression of this period is the unprecedented level of interference by

politicians in the detail of schooling, fuelled by an inability to grasp that teachers have a fairly good idea of how to improve schools, if only you trust them enough and let them get on with it.

3 Coalition Government Reforms Since 2010: The Pendulum Swings Back?

The outcome of the 2010 election was close, so close that for the first time since wartime a coalition was needed to form a government. Once again, the Conservatives were the largest group in Parliament, but to achieve the majority necessary to govern, an alliance with the much smaller group of Liberal Democrats was necessary. This need meant that conservative policy objectives, including education, would need to be tempered to ensure Liberal Democrat support.

The Conservatives had outlined priorities for education in the run-up to the election. These ideas seemed to imply even greater 'freedom' for schools: having freed them from local government influence in their previous term of office yet with increasing central government control, this time central direction would also be loosened. Academies, the self-determining schools established initially against considerable public resistance by the Labour government, would not be scrapped; in fact, all secondary schools would be encouraged to apply for Academy status. Further, so-called Free Schools would be established. Free Schools are schools funded by the government, but established in response to local demand from parents, charities, or indeed businesses that are unhappy with the quality of schools already available within the local area. This schooling is free of charge and not academically selective (although priority in admissions may be given to the children of those groups that set up the school). Before the election the Conservatives proposed that several hundred free schools would be opened in the first year of office, although in fact only 24 materialised, and in the second year, only about 50 more are expected. However, the main significance of the acceleration of the Academies programme and the introduction of Free Schools lies in the final elimination of local authorities' influence on schooling.

Inevitably, this has been a contentious issue, and one that was difficult for the Coalition partners to sign up to, because before the election they had been calling for a restoration of local authority coordination of and control over schooling. A key issue here is the impact of self-determining schools on the prospects of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. If schools find their performance is measured and their activities are resourced according to the attainment levels of their pupils, and are given a degree of freedom to 'select' which children attend and to exclude children who cause difficulty, one might expect to find that there are pupils that no school is keen to accept. Thus, the argument goes, new 'freedoms' associated with current government policies are likely to make it even more difficult for children already suffering from social and economic disadvantage to access quality schools, because they would be the most difficult and least cost effective for whom to provide.

To secure agreement for this policy, the Conservatives had to offer their Liberal Democrat partners something in return: this something was the pupil premium. The pupil premium is an additional payment made to schools that admit children from disadvantaged homes, meaning that schools will get additional resources for every such child on roll, as funding follows pupils.

The White Paper "The Importance of Teaching" (DFE 2010) sets out the government's policy agenda for this parliament. This agenda is somewhat curtailed by current economic policies. As in most European economies, public debt reduction is the overriding priority. Consequently, this is not a time for plans that require significant resources; indeed education budgets have seen dramatic cuts, particularly to the ambitious school building programme of the last government. Several policy shifts are signalled, including further slimming down of the National Curriculum, and an end to the prescription of teaching methods, tougher criteria for entering teacher training, and a sharpening of accountability. Further light has been shed on accountability measures, with the publication of a new Framework for School Inspection (DFE 2010), which details changes in the OfSTED regime. Schools that are considered 'outstanding' by OfSTED can apply to become 'Teaching Schools', which will allow them to sell services to other schools, further squeezing the residual local authority role, and under the new 'Schools Direct' arrangements, schools can take a much more significant role in the recruitment and training of new entrants into teaching.

Perhaps the most contentious reform signalled was the introduction of a new examination system to replace GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education), the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). In truth, the need to reform GCSE has been discussed for some years. Many have doubts about the 'improvements' in attainment standards GCSEs seem to indicate, and instead point out that the examinations have become easier, that multiple attempts to improve grades are now possible, that 'coursework' completed outside examination conditions has artificially inflated grades, and so on. In addressing these concerns, the government proposed that from 2015 the EBacc will substantially replace GCSEs by providing a new 'core curriculum' of five subjects, English, mathematics, science, a modern language, and either history or geography, together with a new examination system that is 'more rigorous', that will exclude marks awarded for assessed coursework in most subjects, and require instead terminal examinations taken simultaneously in a single sitting.

3.1 Assumptions Underpinning Current Policies

Current policies display the traditional scepticism Conservatives have about the public sector and their continuing belief in competition and choice as sources of improvement, influenced by what is perceived as 'successful' practice overseas. Similar to other parties on the political right, such as the Republicans in the USA and the Christian Democrats in Germany, conservatives are suspicious of 'big government' and favour markets over intervention. Their dislike of local authority influence is

long standing, and the fact that most of the lowest performing local school systems are in areas where the Labour Party has local political control does nothing to allay suspicions that local authorities have little to offer. Coupled with this is a desire to shrink the ‘nanny state’ and to encourage individual citizens to take more responsibility for their own lives and decisions, including what type of schooling they want for their children. The role of government is to ensure that parents have effective and efficient local schools from which to choose. Of course this is a principle that is easier to expound than deliver, but it lies at the core of Conservative government ideology. Indeed, in this context, the 2010 White Paper seems clearly underpinned by a belief that a privatised system of education would be most effective, and so any national system should try wherever possible to simulate privatisation.

And, as with most governments in the global village, educational standards are seen as a barometer of international competitiveness and a key to economic growth. Thus the measured outcomes of education must at least keep pace with improvements elsewhere, as reported in international comparisons. Hence governments change school systems in order to try and achieve ‘results’ that boost national performance and are very interested in finding out schools systems that appear to perform well in such comparisons. Recently, both Sweden and Finland have regularly scored highly. It is not surprising therefore to find Conservative education policies that are rooted in developments in these countries. Sweden has ‘free schools’ and Sweden is a relatively high performing system. Finland has placed great emphasis on the quality of teachers and Finland comes out best of all.

3.2 What Evidence is There Regarding the Impact of These Reforms?

It is of course too early to do more than report the early response to current policies. The transfer of schools to academy status has certainly accelerated, and the number of Academies created by the Labour Government between their inception in 2000 and the 2010 elections was around 200. Two years later, this number is approaching 2000. Introduced as alternative secondary schools in inner-city areas with a record of school failure, Academies can be considered an improvement over the schools they replaced, although the rates of improvement are certainly not dramatic and a number of Academies have failed, being placed in special measures following OfSTED inspections. However, the modest increases in exam results coupled with the opportunity to involve faith groups (Labour Party) and industrial and commercial organisations (Conservative) in the governance of schools has resulted in support from across the political spectrum. The Coalition government have opened up Academy status to primary and special schools as well as secondary, and have also put in places measures to compel failing schools to become Academies. They have also diluted the consultation process significantly, so that the ability of local communities and parents to resist this change in status has substantially evaporated, which many have criticised

as anti-democratic. Despite these criticisms the spread of Academies seems irresistible, and in some areas local authorities are actually pressing local schools to apply, possibly because they are finding it impossible to sustain any services to schools with so many already released from local influence and making no financial contribution to service provision.

The progress of Free Schools has been less impressive, although there was no established procedure here on which to build. Nevertheless, there has been less demand for Free Schools than the government would like, and quite a number of those that have been established are operating well below capacity. Inevitably, because they draw resources from the system as a whole, such schools increase inefficiency in education and reduce the resource levels to conventionally funded schools. Given that Free Schools are largely an aspiration of articulate middle-class parents whereas the children from the poorest families remain in the system, this could hardly be seen as a strategy likely to reduce the attainment gap. It is too early to offer any judgements on the pupil premium, although the suspicion is that its relevance is more symbolic than substantive.

The new OfSTED inspection framework sharpens judgements on school quality and puts more schools at risk of finding themselves in need of improvement that is at the mercy of government policy. But more worrying than the changes in criteria and process seems to be the tightening of standards applied: schools that were satisfactory in previous OfSTED inspections are at real risk of being found unsatisfactory under the harsher judgements that seem to have accompanied the new Framework.

As already noted, the proposal to reshape both curriculum and assessment regimes for 14–16 year-olds by introducing the EBacc met with great hostility, and there has been criticism from all sides. Those representing subjects included in the EBacc, even some science and maths teaching associations, have argued that the timescale is unrealistic, and that the proposals were hastily conceived and seriously flawed. Others criticised the lack of consultation, and saw the timescale as a cynical attempt by government to force through changes before the next election so that the reform cannot easily be unpicked should there be a change of government. Those representing creative and arts subjects were also very critical, arguing that an EBacc would marginalise such subjects, resulting in a less varied curriculum and creating more disaffection among students. The National Union of Teachers and the National Association of Headteachers, with the support of other teaching unions, called on the government to rethink its plans. The Examinations Boards questioned whether the imposition of the so-called EBC (the English Baccalaureate Certificate) infringed the regulations on competition defined in EU treaties, and even Ofqual (the national agency established to regulate and quality assure examinations, qualifications, and assessment in England) indicated that the scheme seemed impractical. In the end, the government bowed to this chorus of opposing views and duly announced that the EBacc would be scrapped. However, elements of the proposal relating to increasing the rigour of the examination system and developing broader, value-added measures for assessing school performance will be retained.

Despite this setback, the implications of the current reforms would seem to be a further and final dismantling of local authority influence, and an increase in competition

between schools and between categories of schools that would seem designed to invite private companies to enter the 'market' thus moving towards a publicly financed but privately managed education system, resulting in greater inequities in the quality of schooling available, in which the pupil premium becomes an irrelevance. At the same time, the hounding of those schools unfortunate enough to have pupil populations that cannot be manipulated to meet the 'floor targets' set by government will increase apace, leading to yet more closures and 'takeovers' accelerating this strategy of covert privatisation. Ideologically, this sits well with traditional Conservative party prejudices, but it seem likely that association with this policy will damage beyond repair the standing of their Coalition partners; the Liberal party may long regret this fleeting flirtation with the levers of power.

4 A Note on the Training of Teachers

As might be expected, in a period of such compulsive meddling with schools and schooling, the training of teachers has also attracted much government attention. In fact, the then Conservative government began to reel in the relative freedom available to teacher training providers who were previously able for the most part to determine the content and pattern of their training programmes themselves, in 1984, by introducing the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE). This Council drew up a set of competencies against which ITT (Initial Teacher Training) trainees could be assessed, which was initially voluntary, but became formalised through subsequent legislation that also established 'training partnerships'—significantly increasing the role and influence of schools in initial teacher preparation, and bringing the partnerships under purview of OfSTED, who were granted powers to inspect providers much as they inspected schools.

In 1994, CATE was replaced by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), which had broader powers to oversee and allocate places to providers and also formalised the competencies into National Standards in 1997. Standards were specified in four broad areas: subject knowledge, planning and teaching, monitoring and assessment and professional attitudes and attributes. These Standards were revised in 2002, by which time they had become the major criteria for both the direct assessment of trainees and the indirect assessment of teacher training provider quality.

In 2005, the TTA become the Teacher Development Agency (TDA), with a further expansion of its remit to include the training of all staff employed in schools, and also responsibility for overseeing the continuing professional development of teachers. This role was reinforced in 2007, when National Standards were again revised, and this time standards indicating competence levels expected of teachers at various points throughout a teaching career were added to sharpened standards for beginning teachers. In 2012, following a change of government, the National Standards were again revised, and tied closely to career development stages. The net result of these changes has been to produce unprecedented levels of central control of teacher preparation and development, with highly detailed descriptions of what teachers should know, be able to do, and even what they should believe. Inevitably critics and

the universities whose influence has been eroded as central control increased, are in the forefront have described the impact of these changes as reductionist and ultimately de-skilling. Some have warned that the changes have reduced teaching to a rational-technical process that stifles individual creativity and discourages initiative, while others see them as driven by political motives rather than research evidence.

Those worried about the direction of travel have not been reassured by more recent developments. In 2002, the government introduced the 'Teach First' scheme (modelled on 'Teach for America'). Overtly, this scheme seeks to attract into teaching for a short period (at least 2 years) particularly able young graduates in subject areas where it has proved difficult to attract sufficient numbers through conventional training routes, such as mathematics and physics. These recruits are then 'fast-tracked' into schools via a 6-week summer training school, which is supplemented by in-school support once they start teaching and a further summer school at the end of the first year. There is no doubt, although the numbers recruited via this route are relatively small, that some highly motivated and inspirational young people have been tempted into schools, some of whom choose to stay on in teaching. But the fact that after a few years the government decided that completing the Teach First training programmes would lead to the same accreditation as conventionally trained teachers, and the remarkable career progress made by some of those who remain in the profession, has led some to think this is devaluing the efforts of those who are trained and indeed those who train teachers through the conventional route.

Most recently, the government's proposal to designate some schools as 'Training Schools' that can then offer professional development to other schools on a commercial basis, and introduction of the 'Teach Direct' route into teaching, through which schools, or groups of schools working together, can recruit and train their own teachers, has done little to reduce anxieties among conventional teacher training providers. Many believe that, similar to the local education authorities, they too are being moved to the margins of teacher training activity, and will see activities that have traditionally been their own transfer to ever more powerful and autonomous schools, that are being encouraged—'bribed'—even by government to usurp their role.

Currently, the numbers of teachers recruited through these initiatives remain small, and it is questionable that conventional training can ever be wholly replaced by such school-based or school-centred provision. However, there is a clear pattern here, and we can see that this government, despite political differences with the previous one, shares the belief that a partnership of strong government and strong schools is the best recipe for educational improvement, and teacher trainers who may believe that their legitimate involvement in education provision is being displaced by this approach are unlikely to see any change in policy direction.

5 Conclusions

This review of education reforms during the past 25 years may seem to imply that the education standards in England are lower now than they were when the process started in 1988, but this is not the case. Apart from the impact of aforementioned

policies and interventions, there are other factors that have contributed to education development. There has been significant economic and social change, which has led to important changes in patterns of education and educational expectations. There has been a significant increase in the quality of teachers and teaching, the quality of resources available, and the role played by digital learning technologies. In 1988, only one third of 16-year-olds achieved the examination threshold set for further academic study; by 2010 this had increased to two thirds (although with girls outperforming boys by about 10 %). Several factors contributed to this improvement, including changes in the examination and testing systems, away from a normative system operating as a rationing device for higher education towards a normative system, in which all can succeed; movement away from a series of examinations squashed into a couple of weeks of memory-based tests towards a regime that included various forms of modular and continuous assessment; an increase in the numbers of young people wanting to stay on at school and then go on to university education; and more sharply focused and outcome-oriented teaching. But despite these factors and the increases they have brought about, this still appears to have been a time of both missed opportunities and misguided interference from governments that took an overly simplistic view of 'standards', and often good ideas were undermined by the way they implemented.

A national curriculum was clearly both sensible and desirable, but the unwieldy and over-prescriptive academic model drawn up and inflicted on schools was never going to serve the needs of all children. Similarly, some national monitoring of school performance is desirable, but the burden of the national testing regime that accompanied the National Curriculum was a major distraction: as the saying goes, 'no child ever grew faster for being measured.' Above all, the introduction of school performance tables was problematic. It is inevitable that such lists, once drawn up, will be seen by the public as representing the quality of schooling, although typically they tell us much more about the sort of pupils we will find in the school than they do about the quality of the teaching. But the very existence of these tables is a distraction: not only do they become a stimulus to competition and parents' choice of school, they also invite teacher behaviours that do little to improve either education or equity, such as teaching to the test rather than for understanding, and focusing on 'borderline' pupils who can improve the school's league table position rather than those most in need of support. Indeed, probably the most intelligent measure the government might now take is to ban the publication of these spurious tables that conceal more than they reveal.

Despite these criticisms, this brief analysis suggests a number of lessons can be drawn from the reform efforts of recent years, which might inform future policy and practice. These include the following:

1. Although it is clear that schools cannot by themselves overcome social disadvantage or eliminate the inequalities apparent in schooling outcomes, the evidence clearly suggests that they can make some impact and that school-focused actions remain an important part of wider solutions. However, education policy needs the

support of appropriate social and economic programmes if inequity is to be eradicated.

2. School improvement interventions must be designed carefully, based on the available evidence about what underpins effective schooling and also on what we know about how successful schools develop. This means being clearer about the outcomes expected and their value in the real world—and let us not continue to delude ourselves that any combination of examination results will ever be more than a proxy for effective schooling—while permitting greater latitude for appropriate ends and means to be determined at school level by those most acquainted with the needs and interests of their pupils.
3. Educational improvement efforts need to better reflect the local contexts within which schools work. As we have seen, initiatives that lead some schools to improve at the expense of others in their neighbourhood will not lead to overall improvements in equity, which implies that central government needs to allow greater space for locally determined action, based on a local analysis of challenges and opportunities. Thus, policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these have to be handled by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand, particular contexts and opportunities. All of this raises important questions regarding the need for effective local coordination: maybe we do not need to reinvent local authorities, but something more than the operation of market forces is needed to ensure that duplication and wasteful competition are avoided and that so-called sink schools, filled with the children none of the other schools want, do not become a by-product of covert selection procedures.
4. There is evidence that collaboration between differently performing schools can help to reduce the polarisation of the education system, to the particular benefit of pupils who are on the edges of the system and performing relatively poorly. Incentives need to be provided that will encourage such collaboration. More efforts should also be made to understand the conditions that are needed to make such approaches effective. It needs to be understood that collaboration is at least as important as competition in raising overall attainment levels.
5. We need to pay more attention to what we know does not work. In particular, there is a need to focus on those aspects of disadvantage and under-attainment that schools can influence and not attempt to make schools responsible for solving problems that evidence suggests they influence only marginally. Piling too many responsibilities on schools distracts them from concentrating on what they can do well.
6. The political desire for ‘quick fixes’ notwithstanding, there is a need to allow reform initiatives time to have an impact. The constant imposition of new initiatives is destabilising and also hinders development of the consistency in learning and teaching practices that research suggests best fosters positive outcomes for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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