

Briefing Note on the Launch of The 5 Year Strategy for Children and Learners

12.7.04

The strategy is long on words and strong on rhetoric but without the detail required to assess its impact in local communities, schools and LEAs.

Much of the document sets out the government's achievements in education setting out current projects and programmes. There are few details on the relatively small number of new initiatives. The government intends to develop details to the proposals over coming months in partnership with stakeholders.

The Strategy covers the full range of education and children's services, [a bit light on Every Child Matters] the most significant and controversial aspects are those relating to secondary schools and school funding arrangements.

5 Principles of Reform:

1. Greater personalisation and choice
2. Greater diversity of provision and providers
3. Improvements in the quality of the leadership and the skills and commitment of the workforce
4. Freedom and autonomy to the front line
5. Effective partnerships

8 Key Reforms:

1. Guaranteed three-year budgets for every school by 2006, geared to pupil numbers, with every school guaranteed a minimum per pupils increase each year. [See John Barnard's note about implications]
2. Universal specialist schools – and better specialist schools
3. Freedom for all secondary schools to own their land and buildings, manage their assets, employ their staff, improve their governing bodies, and forge partnerships with outside sponsors and educational foundations.

4. More places in popular schools [Transport would be a problem with this in Devon]
5. A “new relationship” with schools to cut the red tape involved in accountability, without cutting schools adrift.
6. 200 academies by 2010 [lots of concern amongst delegates about this; pay and conditions for staff, maverick heads, no LEA influence and allegedly increased permanent exclusions for City Academies. N.b “City” has now been dropped to reflect Academies in rural areas!]
7. Every secondary school to be re-furbished or re-built to a modern standard over the next 10 – 15 years.
8. “Foundation partnerships” to enable schools to group together to take on wider responsibilities.

The most radical part of the introduction is:

“the development of independent specialist schools in place of the traditional comprehensives...within a framework of fair admissions, full accountability and strong partnerships...”

Early Years;

This chapter builds on the existing very positive early years initiatives already in place. It introduces the concept of “Educare”, drawing heavily on Every Child Matters and the Children Bill.

Primary Schools:

There will be less pressure on successful schools but more on those that are failing. It’s difficult to know how the LEA will gather intelligence about schools at risk as the new School Improvement Partners are to mainly come from peer head teachers rather than from traditional inspection and advisory services.

The focus in primaries continues to be achieving national targets and levelling up all schools to the standards of the best. Foundation status is not promised for primary schools but “earned autonomy” and promotion of

participation in Extended Schools, Federations, Full Service Schools etc. Primary schools are expected to link with sponsors, the wider community, the voluntary sector and Children's Trusts as part of an agenda for change and improvement.

Independent Specialist Schools:

The 8 reforms in the section re-define the LEA role as champions of pupils and parents.

This modernising of the LEA role in education does not take account of the integrated children's services thrust of the Children's Trust but talks about a radical reform of education finance to "end the long standing confused responsibility between central and local government for setting the level of school funding..." There is to be consultation in the Autumn to include transitional protection for authorities who have spent more than their formula allocation in the past. "No Authority will receive less funding for education than it's current level of spending, and we will seek to ensure there are no adverse effects for the rest of local government" [That is reassuring!] Funding will be channelled through Local Authorities but must be used for the stated purpose.

The promise of freedom for all secondary schools to own their own land etc is controversial. There is no increased freedom on admissions and not right select by ability.

The "new relationship" with schools isn't really new. This section does however contain a significant statement about the LEA's school improvement function:

"There will be a single annual review with the school on its performance, improvement priorities and support needs, stripping out bureaucracy both from local Authorities and from this Department. The existing relationship between the school and its LESA link adviser – which too often lacks sharpness and professional credibility – will now be conducted by a School Improvement Partner appointed and managed by the LEA within a system of national training and guidance...Most school improvement partners will be serving heads from leading schools"

Foundation Partnerships [like Federations] can take responsibility for school improvement, SEN, 14-19 and excluded pupils across an area. They could also take over the functions of a failing LEA.

There are then chapters on Personalisation and Choice in secondary, 14-19 Education and training, Adult Skills, Higher Education, Managing the transition and a brief conclusion.

Issues and Challenges raised during the day:

Providing and distributing both capital and revenue resources fairly during a period of radical change.

Holding schools, particularly secondaries, to account under the new arrangements,

Delivering the Every Child Matters agenda and integrated children's services to children in an increasingly autonomous and diverse school system.

Ensuring that primary and secondary schools are treated equitably.

Managing the supply of school places and admissions procedures to ensure that no child suffers from the potential turbulence in the system.

Sustaining the role of the community and maintaining the democratic legitimacy of the Local Authority.

Ensuring that excellence has a real synergy with equality

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