

Can Free Schools deliver a fairer society?

By Toby Young

In 2010, the percentage of privately educated children getting three A*s at A-level was three times higher than the percentage of state school pupils getting three A*s. Given that the new A* grade was introduced to help top universities identify the most able applicants, that's a terrible indictment of Labour's 13-year record on education.

Nic Dakin, Labour MP for Scunthorpe and a member of the House of Commons Education Select Committee, claims these results illustrate the folly of cancelling the Building Schools for the Future programme. He believes the only way to narrow the gap between the state and private sector is to spend more money on school buildings. "It's about investing in state education, not scrapping Building Schools for the Future, so that our state system can have the state-of-the-art accommodation our young people deserve," he told The Observer.

In fact, the ever widening gap between the two sectors points to precisely the opposite conclusion, namely, that the £30 billion increase in education spending presided over by the last government, much of it on "state-of-the-art accommodation", has not produced any improvement in learning outcomes. Yes, the number of state school pupils achieving five GCSEs at grade C or above including maths and English has increased, but that's due to the grade inflation that has taken place across the board – precisely the reason the new A* grade has been introduced.

In the new PISA international league tables published in December, Britain is now ranked 16th in the world for science, 25th for reading and 28th for maths. That compares with a 2000 PISA ranking of 4th for science, 7th for reading and 8th for maths. This is conclusive proof that Labour's claim to have "improved" Britain's schools during its period in office is nonsense. Between 2000 and 2009, British schoolchildren plummeted in the international league tables and are now ranked behind those of Poland, Estonia and Slovenia.

Some Conservatives will see this as yet more evidence that decimating the number of grammar schools and abolishing direct grant schools was a mistake – and I have some sympathy with that view. If you bear in mind that England's best-performing state schools were forced to become comprehensives in the name of increasing equality, that policy now seems like a colossal error of judgment. It has had precisely the opposite effect. As Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard pointed out in *A Class Act*, their excellent book on education: "The tragic irony is that for all the good intentions, the destruction of the grammar schools – in the name of equality of opportunity – only had the effect of reinforcing class divisions."

However, in the absence of reintroducing selective education, the Coalition's massive extension of the Academies programme – including allowing parents and teachers to set up Free Schools – is our best hope of narrowing the attainment gap between rich and poor. What's needed is thousands of high performing, taxpayer funded schools that all children have access to, regardless of their parents' income.

Some sceptics, such as Chris Woodhead, believe that because these new schools will be non-selective they'll be no different from bog-standard comprehensives. In fact, there are plenty of comprehensives, such as Thomas Telford School and Mossbourne Academy, that achieve exemplary results in spite of being non-selective. The challenge for people setting up Free Schools – or running outstanding secondary schools that are taking up Michael Gove's invitation to apply for Academy

status – will be to take advantage of their freedom from Local Authority control to achieve comparable results.

For the past year, I've been leading the campaign of a group of parents and teachers to set up a Free School in Hammersmith and Fulham and we intend to duplicate some of the things that these outstanding comprehensives have been doing. That includes high expectations of all pupils, no matter what their backgrounds, strong discipline, rigorous setting and a competitive atmosphere. The emphasis at our school will be firmly on academic attainment and there will be no BTECH's in Hair and Beauty for those children who prefer an easy life. We want every child to take at least eight GCSEs or IGCSEs, including English Language, English Literature, Mathematics, History, one or more Science subjects and an Ancient or Modern Foreign Language. Some children will struggle with such a challenging curriculum, but we intend to put tried-and-tested systems in place to make sure that it's accessible to children of all abilities.

When I launched this campaign I said I wanted to start a “comprehensive grammar” – that is, a school with a grammar school curriculum but a comprehensive intake – and I've been ridiculed by the left for being so ambitious. Roy Hattersley said it was “a contradiction in terms” and Kevin Courtney, the Deputy General Secretary of the NUT, told me it was like trying to set up a “vegetarian butchers”.

In fact, this is exactly what the architects of comprehensive education had in mind. During the 1964 general election campaign, Harold Wilson described comprehensives as “grammar schools for all” and that's exactly what we want the West London Free School to be. Yet it's ambitious but, as Max Weber said, it's only by reaching for the impossible that we discover what's possible. Making a rigorously academic education available to all children, regardless of income, has got to be fairer than what the educational apartheid we have at present.

To find out more about the West London Free School, go to www.westlondonfreeschool.co.uk