

National Strategies for Educational Reform: Lessons from the British Experience Since 1988

MICHAEL BARBER

Institute of Education, University of London

This chapter takes the British case as an example of how national and local policies affect educational reform. Factors affecting school performance and reviewed strategies for improvement are considered in terms of a policy framework that combines elements of pressure and support. The roles of both individual and local governments are outlined with a view to establishing combined strategies for educational reform.

INTRODUCTION

There have been moments in the last decade when it has seemed as if central government has dictated the entire agenda in the United Kingdom. A series of Acts of Parliament between 1986 and 1993 altered for good the education landscape in England and Wales, or so it seemed. In Scotland, with its own separate education system, legislation of similar extent if not intensity followed. Yet in classrooms, in the millions of micro-learning events which taken together make up young people's experience of education, how much has really changed?

This question reveals the limits to the power of apparently all-powerful governments such as that in the United Kingdom. Other national governments, such as those in the United States, Canada and Australia which unlike that in the UK, have to operate in the context of either a separation of powers or a federal constitution or both, are in an even weaker position to change education at the classroom level.

Given this context, this chapter examines the potential of central and local government to change radically what happens in schools and classrooms and, simultaneously considers the limits on that potential. It draws predominantly on the British experience but refers from time to time to international experience. Its generalisable principles ought to be universally relevant, even if they will not always be practical politically.

STANDARDS

The first and perhaps most important point concerns the government's treatment of 'standards'. The revised National Targets for Education and Training will

include one suggesting that 85 per cent of young people in England and Wales should achieve five grades A-C at GCSE (or the equivalent) by the year 2000. In Scotland there is a different target appropriate to its different examination system. The young people who will take GCSE, an examination normally taken at 16+, in that year started secondary school in September 1995. The challenge of meeting this target is therefore immediate. To many in the education service the target seems ludicrously unrealistic, yet it is pitched at the kind of level needed if the UK is to keep up with the international competition. In Japan, for example, roughly 80 per cent of an age cohort achieve the equivalent of two British "A levels" compared to a figure of about 40 per cent in the UK. In both Germany and Japan the apparently ambitious targets set for the UK have already been surpassed (Dearing, 1996, p. 3).

Raising standards, however, is not just a matter of international competition. It is also necessary to take account of the rapidly changing job market.

By the year 2000, 70 per cent of all jobs in Europe will require cerebral rather than manual skills. Some experts suggest that as many as 50 per cent of these jobs will require the equivalent of higher education or a professional qualification.

(Evans, 1994, p. 15)

Nor is the case for higher standards purely a matter of economics. It is also an issue fundamentally related to the success of a democratic society in the 21st century. The social consequences of extensive under achievement will become increasingly dire. Already we have evidence of a clear, if indirect, link between educational failure and crime. We also know that a high degree of education and self-confidence are requirements for full participation in a democratic society. The fruits of a successful education system are therefore much more than purely economic.

Even this is not the full extent of the case for higher standards. The fact is that the range of threats to the future existence of the planet, from global warming to the pressure of population growth, will increasingly focus minds. We will require more ingenuity, knowledge, and understanding than ever before to solve these immense challenges early in the next century.

It is this wide range of demands for higher standards that explains why governments across the Western world are giving such attention to improved educational performance. Passages from the speeches of Bill Clinton, John Major, Tony Blair and Paul Keating are often interchangeable. All of them gaze in awe at the economic and educational achievements of Pacific Rim countries and await with some anxiety the arrival of the Asian century.

Although standards, measured in these terms, are clearly too low in the UK, it is important to recognise that for many young people they are rising and have been rising for a number of years. Indeed if the available indicators are to be believed there has never been a time when standards have risen as much as they have in the last decade. In 1994 over 53 per cent of those entered achieved five grades A – C at GCSE compared to fewer than 30 per cent in 1987. The average

improvement at GCSE is, therefore, around 3 per cent per annum since 1988. There has been a similarly steady improvement at A level over the same period. Meanwhile staying on rates at both 16 plus and 18 plus have soared. By 1994 over 70 per cent of the age group remain in education after the age of 16 compared to only 35 per cent 15 years earlier, while participation in higher education has more than doubled since the mid-1980s. Over 30 per cent of young people now enter higher education. Thus for a significant proportion of young people, indeed perhaps for the majority, standards appear to have risen.

However there is simultaneous and disturbing evidence that for other young people standards are at best static, and perhaps falling. The evidence from both OFSTED, the inspection agency, and elsewhere suggests that reading standards in primary schools may have fallen in the early 1990s. As many as 30 per cent of lessons in junior schools were considered inadequate in the 1995 report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (OFSTED 1995). It is not uncommon, these days, for secondary heads, normally in private, to explain that they are admitting ever more pupils at age 11 with reading ages of 9 or less. Indeed a significant number of secondary schools are now employing reading tests at the beginning of the year 7 in order to set a base line for examining their own value added impact. In one of the more successful inner London boroughs, the average reading age of pupils in the first year of secondary schools is nine years and nine months. This kind of disadvantage at the start of secondary school is all too likely to prevent pupils from making the most of the crucial years between 11 and 16. Evidence published by the Secondary Heads Association in 1995 and OFSTED again in 1996 confirmed these fears (OFSTED, 1996). At the other end of the schooling system the evidence is disturbing too. The Basic Skills Agency has discovered that as many as 15 per cent of 21 year olds have limited literacy competence and 20 per cent have limited competence in Mathematics.

It is interesting to set this evidence on standards against the Keele University database of Pupil Attitudes to Secondary School, a database which includes the views of over 30,000 young people. This shows that somewhere between 20 and 30 per cent of secondary school pupils are bored or lacking in motivation. They are "the Disappointed". Another 10–15 percent are more actively hostile to school and likely to disrupt the education of others. They are "the Disaffected". As many as another 5 – 10 percent truant regularly and in some urban areas have unofficially left school altogether and become the "the Disappeared". In short it would seem that the attitudinal data confirms the data on standards. While half or slightly over half are doing reasonably well, concern over the rest remains justifiable (Barber, 1994, 1996).

If this is the overall national picture then it should be borne in mind that the gloomy parts of it are likely to be accentuated in Britain's urban areas. The groups which are under-achieving include a disproportionately high number of boys, working class students and students in deprived urban areas. The fact that a disproportionate number of those who under-achieve are in urban areas does not, in any sense, justify having lower expectations or setting lower standards for pupils there. It does mean acknowledging, given the social circumstances in many of

Britain's urban areas, that it takes more time, energy, commitment, skill and resources to enable pupils to reach those high standards. Government policies at either local or national level which fail to recognise these facts are unlikely to succeed.

Perhaps not surprisingly in these circumstances not all schools manage. Some become ground down by the weight of social pressures and the demands of a never-ending series of educational policy changes. The central issue for policymakers is to create a framework which increases the chances of success and reduces, and perhaps ultimately even eliminates, the chances of failure for all schools and especially urban schools. The starting point for such a policy must surely be the extensive knowledge we now have of what characterises effective schools and what can be done to help schools that are not yet effective to improve. This is the theme of the next section of this chapter.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

There is now an overwhelming consensus about the characteristics of effective schools. The last year or two has seen the publication of a series of reviews of the literature in this field. The conclusions of all them are similar. Following the most comprehensive review of the recent literature in this field Sammons, Thomas and Mortimore (1995) arrived at the following list of eleven characteristics.

Other recent research is demonstrating that even within an effective school there are significant variations in the effectiveness of different departments or aspects of the school and indeed that within a particular school the extent of effectiveness for different ability groups varies too (Sammons, Thomas, & Mortimore, 1995). These findings can help school managers to analyse and understand what is required to help their own schools improve.

Helpful though it is to be able to describe an effective school, doing so does not solve some important problems. Firstly, the evidence from major studies in school effectiveness in this country has limitations. There has, for example, been insufficient work on the study of historically ineffective schools and the evidence suggests that one cannot easily translate the characteristics of effectiveness determined through studies of effective schools and apply them, unthinking, to schools that are less than effective. In Britain work by a number of researchers is beginning to rectify this (Barber 1995, Myers 1995; Stoll, 1995; Reynolds, 1995). Secondly, the studies of school effectiveness have tended to focus on school and departmental level factors rather than on aspects of classroom practice. Surely one of the next frontiers for research is to examine what it is that characterises effective teaching and, adding to the complexity, to explore the relationships between the teachers' performance and the management context. Thirdly, there has until recently been insufficient overlap between the study of school effectiveness and the study and application of the processes of school improvement. Increasingly in this third area there is progress both in terms of research and practice. For example, the Institute

ELEVEN FACTORS FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

1	Professional leadership	Firm and purposeful A participative approach The leading professional
2	Shared vision and goals	Unity of purpose Consistency of practice Collegiality and collaboration
3	A learning environment	An orderly atmosphere an attractive working environment
4	Concentration on teaching and learning	Maximisation of learning time Academic emphasis Focus on achievement
5	Purposeful teaching	Efficient organisation Clarity of purpose Structured lessons Adaptive practice
6	High expectations	High expectations all round Communicating expectations Providing intellectual challenge
7	Positive reinforcement	Clear and fair discipline Feedback
8	Monitoring progress	Monitoring pupil performance Evaluating school performance
9	Pupil rights and responsibilities	Raising pupil self-esteem Positions of responsibility Control of work
10	Home-school partnership	Parenting involvement in their children's learning
11	A learning organisation	School-based staff development

of Education School Improvement Network at London University and the Keele University Centre for Successful Schools are both consciously designed to bridge the school effectiveness – school improvement divide.

The most significant problem, unaddressed in the school effectiveness research findings, is that being able to describe an effective school does not necessarily indicate what is needed to help an unsuccessful school to become successful. The steps required to help a school turn itself round are, from a policy point of view, more important to know yet significantly less researched. However there is a growing body of evidence about what works and it is important to summarise this as a prelude to determining a policy framework (see, for example, Brighouse, 1991; Hopkins 1994; Myers, 1996; Barber & Dann, 1996; Hillman & Maden, 1996). There are many processes which appear to contribute to improving schools. Six appear to come through loudly, clearly and consistently in the recent British literature, so much so that they are now consistently highlighted in government publications and have informed policy on, for example, leadership development and school self-evaluation. While there is no theoretical justification for separating these processes from others, such as parental involvement, these are the ones that have been given emphasis in the British context.

The first of these six features is that improving schools tend to have a clear sense