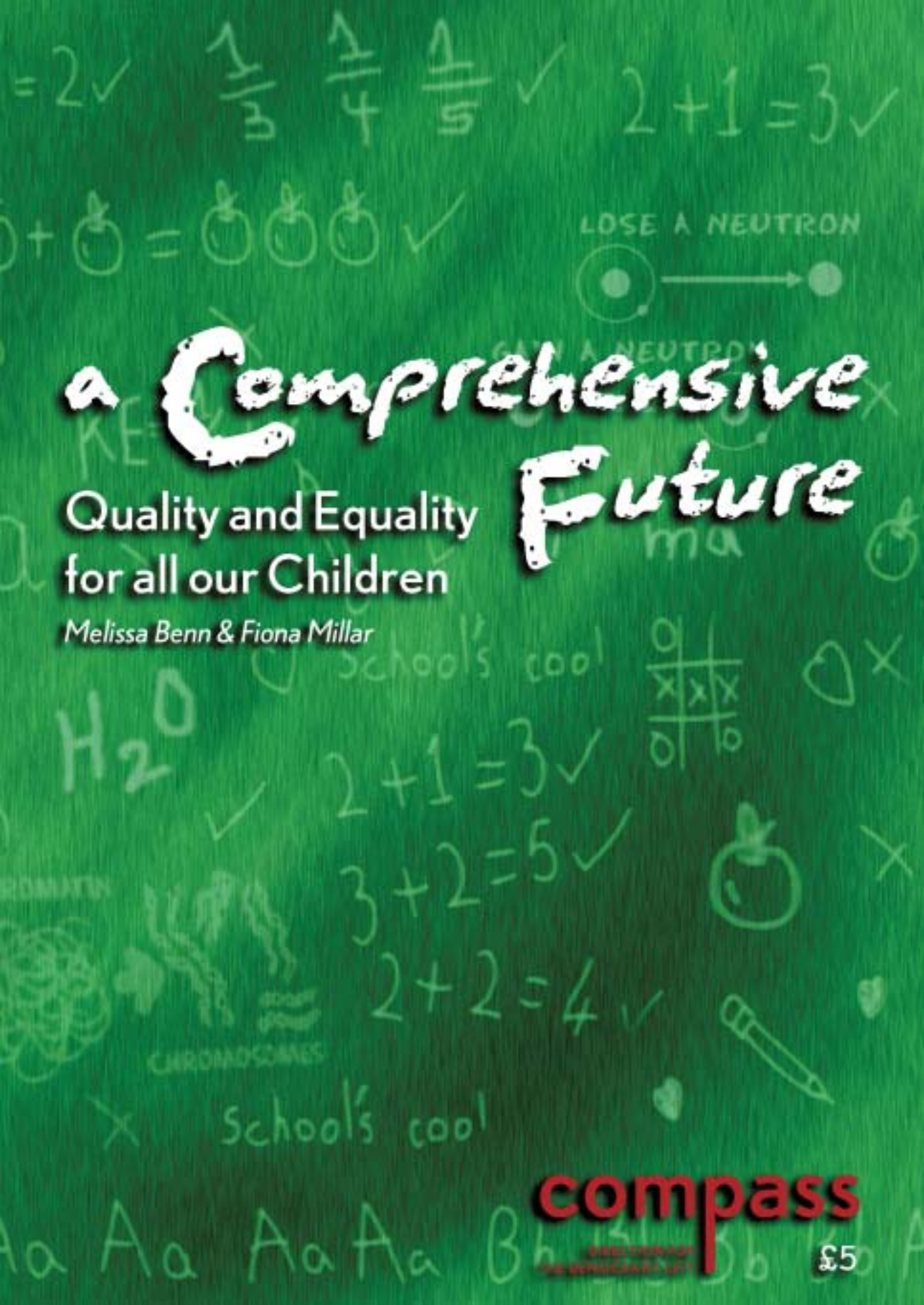


# a Comprehensive Future

## Quality and Equality for all our Children

*Melissa Benn & Fiona Millar*

compass

£5

# Where We Stand

The NUT recognises and welcomes the achievements of the Government in enhancing the educational opportunities for all children and young people.

The NUT is concerned, however, that some of the proposals in the White Paper will hinder, not promote, educational opportunity.

The NUT believes that all children should be entitled to free, high quality education that is publicly provided and publicly accountable.

We seek:

- a good local school for each child;
- collaboration not competition between schools;
- fair and co-ordinated admissions policies;
- the continued right of local authorities to establish new community schools;
- proper funding for all schools;
- an end to the privatisation of education; and
- the enhanced involvement of business in schools that is supportive of the curriculum.

**THE NUT – STANDING UP FOR EDUCATION AND ALL OUR CHILDREN**

NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS

For further information about the NUT campaign around the White Paper, contact the NUT Parliamentary and Campaigns Officer on 020 7380 4712 or via e.evans@nut.org.uk.

**www.teachers.org.uk**

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**Thanks to the following for comments and advice:**

**Tony Benn, Clyde Chitty, Paul Gordon, Neal Lawson, Margaret Tulloch, Anne West, Denise Winn and Susannah Wight, and to our patient children – Rory, Calum, Grace, Hannah and Sarah – without whom we would never have got into all this!!**

# Foreword

We judge a society by the institutions it decides to build, protect or destroy. As governments come and go it is the function, form and culture of lasting institutions like companies, local government and the NHS that allow certain values to flourish or wither away. There are no institutions that are more indicative or important to our society than our schools.

Over the course of history who we teach and how has closely reflected the class nature of our society and the possibilities for social mobility. Because education is such a key determinant of social position, any reform to create more equal opportunity for all has been bitterly resisted. Along with the NHS, comprehensive community schools provide a platform for the key left values of liberty, equality and solidarity to flourish. That is why they have always been under attack by the right.

But it is never enough for institutions just to embody values – they have to work. The great breakthrough of New Labour was the focus on standards backed up by the resources to rebuild crumbling schools and pay more teachers. The problem now though is New Labour's almost ideological obsession with market-style mechanism-like choice and the competition between schools and parents it engenders.

It's not that we don't want choices for our children. They are all different and their education should be as personalised as resources allow. But that increase in personalisation should take place within the local comprehensive, where every child gets the best education possible in part because it is based on comprehensive principles. Opening up the choice of school is not just an impossibly hard burden most parents would rather do without. It also establishes education as a positional good, which means its value is derived from one child getting a better education than the child next door. This offends any notion of the equality of children. Wherever there is a choice of provider those with the confidence, resources and connections always make the best choices. It is up to progressive political leaders to create an environment in which parents want to ensure their local school

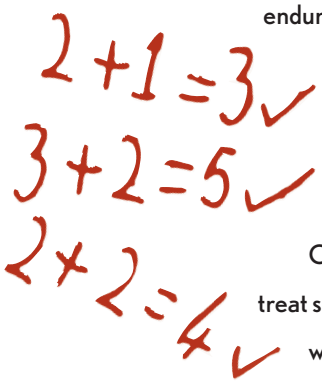
**Along with the NHS, comprehensive community schools provide a platform for the key left values of liberty, equality and solidarity to flourish.**

is good enough by exercising the power of collective voice over the right to exit. With extra resources and the focus on standards this must now be possible.

In this pamphlet Melissa Benn and Fiona Millar provide an urgent, passionate and utterly convincing account of what we need to do to make comprehensives work. Like me, you will probably sit down, make a start reading it and not get up again until you've finished. It left me more confident than ever that modern comprehensives are the right way to educate our children and that the obsession with choice, commercialisation and contestability is the wrong approach. The pamphlet could not be timelier, coming as it does just before parliament discusses the Education Bill, where issues of independence and fair admissions will determine the fate of comprehensive schools in Britain.

Mrs Thatcher understood the political relevance of institutions. That is why she promoted privatisation and council house sales, which embedded her possessive and individualistic beliefs while attacking sites like local authorities and trade unions where collectivism and greater equality could flourish. The democratic left would do well to match this commitment to institutional reform.

But the next breakthrough for the left is the recognition that institutions require both moral and mechanical reform if they are to endure. They have to work, but work for a purpose that inspires a popular moral commitment, not least for when things get tough. Otherwise people will just treat schools as they do shops and walk out when they don't get what they want. Education simply doesn't and can't work like that.




With sustainable funding, an attention to standards and fair admissions, modern comprehensives can prove to be durable institutions that create more equal opportunities for all children and prove, against Mrs Thatcher's lasting wish, that there is such a thing as society. This pamphlet tells us why and how.

**Neal Lawson**
Chair, Compass

# A Comprehensive Future

## Quality and Equality for all our Children

### Introduction

The simplest and yet most profound way to understand the values of any society is through its education system. Is every child given an equal chance to learn, develop their skills and knowledge to the best of their proven and latent abilities? Do the nation's schools offer all children equal access to the rich culture that defines our common humanity? Or does the education system merely confirm the existing privations and privileges of a given social background, thus inevitably offering the less well off a second-class education?

These are not easy questions to answer in relation to our own education system in 2005. There have been many improvements in our schools since 1997 – standards at primary school up, more rigorous inspection, more children going to university, investment in new buildings, better teacher training and fewer failing schools.

In theory, England provides a more or less equal system of public education. Despite the continuing existence of many selective schools, selection in theory has been decisively rejected by the majority as unjust and impracticable. In practice, however, as the continuing existence of so many selective schools proves, the situation is far from simple. The gap between the best and worst schools is still too great. A powerful private sector offers highly resourced and privileged learning, including access to the more elite universities, to the wealthy few. Within the state sector there are now numerous subtle and not so subtle gradations among schools, leading to what London Schools Commissioner Tim Brighouse calls 'a dizzyingly steep hierarchy of institutions'. Every piece of legislation over the last 20 years has resulted in more rather than less selection, covert and overt.

Most comprehensive schools, particularly in rural areas, offer a good schooling to most local children. In the cities, the multiplicity of provision means that many children are 'sorted' between different schools at the age of 11, with many of the more well off parents opting either for private schools or for some form of selective secondary education, be it an existing grammar or one of the burgeoning faith schools, both of which, according to statistics on free schools meals, take fewer disadvantaged children than do their neighbouring community schools.

Even so, many local schools in large cities retain the essential ingredients of the original comprehensive ideal, having a mixed social and academic intake, high quality teaching, and strong connections with the community. These schools enjoy a high degree of parental support and produce excellent results for many local children.

But a significant minority of children are in schools which struggle with a wide range of social problems and not enough funding to deal with them. They suffer from a polarised system which 'creams off' many of the more motivated, and wealthy, families in their locality to the private, selective or faith sector. The existence of these struggling schools has led to the perception that the comprehensive ideal itself has failed when, in fact, the existence of so many 'escape routes' from the local school has meant it has never been given a chance to establish itself properly.

Faced with these problems of polarisation and underfunding, and the perception of failure in some metropolitan areas, particularly London, the government and many commentators have sought to promote radical new structures. The most extreme example of this 'post-comprehensive ideology' is the current plan for independent state

schools as set out in the recent white paper Higher Standards, Better Schools for All (DfES, 2005b) which, if ever implemented, would intensify the very divisions it is designed to redress.

New Labour's vision for education is that of diversity and choice. On the face of it, these are seductive and politically powerful concepts. In theory, diversity and choice offers every parent access to the best school available to their child. To those parents in boroughs where local schools are struggling, it suggests that Labour education policy will provide them with a high quality local school.

But the evidence is already beginning to show that this is a false agenda, often offering opportunities to the few, at the expense of the many, while dressing it up in democratic language. One of the enduring paradoxes at the heart of the New Labour project has been its stated commitment to social justice at the same time as it promotes and supports the language of the market. In the words of Cabinet Office minister John Hutton, government has a commitment to 'harness and manage the modern tools of competition and choice' (Aug 2005).

**The simplest and yet most profound way to understand the values of any society is through its education system. Is every child given an equal chance to learn, develop their skills and knowledge to the best of their proven and latent abilities? Do the nation's schools offer all children equal access to the rich culture that defines our common humanity?**

The private sector is one of those 'tools'. The recent white paper promotes an increasing role for private companies in autonomous and essentially unaccountable schools, although there is scant evidence that business sponsors will add any more value than a good local education authority. The once almost absurd notion of a Big Mac Academy or a fundamentalist Christian group running a set of urban secondary schools, funded by taxpayers' money, outside any local democratic framework, now seems eerily possible.

Intensifying competition between schools will inevitably increase competition between parents. In this battle the 'tools' of selective admissions policies and league tables are vital. Look at the features that regularly appear in newspapers and magazines, heralding 'Britain's best schools'. League tables are used constantly to create a sense of intense competition between schools, inevitably creating a sense of failure in those who are not topping the leagues; that is, most of Britain's hard-working schools.

There is a basic unfairness underlying this vision which, at worst, could create a fractured, splintered set of services in which schools have autonomy to select their pupils, and parents scramble for places in a few more generously funded high status institutions, while the rest slowly sink under the weight of insufficient resources and scant public regard. Contrary to the government's stated best intentions, these post-comprehensive developments do not treat parents and children equally; far from extending genuine parental choice, they risk entrenching existing inequalities in our education system and storing up trouble for generations to come.

We hope to build confidence in an alternative vision for education in which all children have access to the best kind of comprehensive community schools – a vision that incorporates both quality and equality. Education is not just an economic activity, a means of training a future workforce. Nor is it a morally neutral activity; the nation's schools play a vital part in creating, confirming and debating the kind of society we live in and want to live in.

A fair society needs a fair education system, a system that offers excellent schools to all children, regardless of social background. All the international evidence suggests that a modern, well-funded, non-selective comprehensive system, with a focus on high quality teaching and learning and strong leadership, is the best possible way to level up.

High standards in our schools are extremely important. But there is no evidence that increased market competition drives up standards for all; there is plenty to show that increased funding, strong leadership, high quality teaching and aspiration can make a huge difference to children's chances in life.

As we will argue, relentless emphasis on what goes on inside (not between) our schools is one key to improving school standards. Accumulated experience among parents, teachers and heads has indicated that some changes must be made to the way we teach and the way students learn, if standards are to continue to rise. Some of these changes, such as personalised tuition, are included in the latest government proposals. Others, such as smaller class sizes, remain an apparently unattainable dream but could be a reality as we face a falling school roll over the next 15 years.

But the best way to deliver these higher standards is within the firmly local context. One of the greatest contradictions at the heart of the most recent government proposals is the vision of free floating autonomous schools in the same white paper, which claims that 'the best schools sit at the heart of their local community drawing strength and support from those they serve'.

The comprehensive ideal remains the most vibrant statement possible of the sort of society many of us want to live in. Many people forget today that the comprehensive principle was founded on the idea of 'equality of respect' and 'equal worth'; whatever the differences between young people in class background, ethnic background, so-called aptitude or ability, each should be treated with equal importance. Only comprehensive schools can seek to educate children of every social class, faith and ethnic background, thereby giving all children a broadly equal chance until they reach early adulthood.

**Education is not just an economic activity, a means of training a future workforce. Nor is it a morally neutral activity; the nation's schools play a vital part in creating, confirming and debating the kind of society we live in and want to live in.**

In the words of writer Robin Pedley, one of comprehensive education's pioneers:

> *Comprehensive education does more than open the doors of opportunity to all children. It represents a different, a larger and more generous attitude of mind … the forging of a communal culture by the pursuit of quality with equality, by the education of their pupils in and for democracy, and by the creation of happy, vigorous, local communities in which the school is the focus of social and educational life' (Pedley, 1963).*

Pedley identifies the essence of the comprehensive ideal. At its best, such a school creates powerful social bonds that contribute to community cohesion and wellbeing. There is no more powerful sight than that of the children of Muslim and Jewish, black and white, the most well off and the poorest families, all walking through the same school gate in the morning. Imagine a history lesson on the legacies of colonialism or the

holocaust, a discussion on social and economic equality or religious freedoms, where those participating bring the widest range of personal histories, in terms of social, faith, ethnic and family background, to the topics under discussion?

Similarly, there is nothing more depressing and divisive than the sight of the children of the well off shipping out of their local area solely in order to get a 'first-class' education elsewhere. How good an education can any child, rich or poor, receive when the schools in which they learn are depleted of a significant part of society and so manifestly demonstrate in themselves the deep divisions between the well off and those on lower incomes?

We should be under no illusions about the ill will and resentment caused in communities that see good schools being accessed only by the well off or the educationally knowledgeable, while the poorer children of any community are offered second-class facilities and instruction.

Of course, no body or government deliberately designs a divisive system, but it requires a clear and tough political vision to overcome it. And the existence of such divisions creates a malign legacy in terms of disaffection among disadvantaged youth, higher crime rates and a general intensification of class and ethnic boundaries. The recent riots in the poorer urban areas of France are the most extreme manifestation of the bitterness felt by communities who continue to face social exclusion daily. We do not want that here.

For public services to be truly first rate and not merely safety nets for the desperate and destitute, they must be of the highest quality and used by all sections of society. The payment of Child Benefit, for example, is a potent demonstration of the common regard in which family life is held; it is the state's payment to all parents, regardless of wealth or background, for the job they do and the social good it brings in its wake. A first-class system of public transport, health care and education are all signs of a civilised society.

The concept of an education service delivered through a network of community comprehensive schools and colleges, non-selective in character and offering good education from 5 to 18 for all the nation's children, including the well off and highly motivated, goes beyond the Old Left vs New Labour argument. It is a powerfully progressive ideal which, if implemented in practice, would be the most potent signal of a thriving economy and an inclusive society.

**There is no more powerful sight than that of the children of Muslim and Jewish, black and white, the most well off and the poorest families, all walking through the same school gate in the morning.**

But for such schools to provide both quality and equality, we must have a government pledged to deliver on both those values, a state prepared to provide the necessary funding and commit to those first principles of comprehensive education – that all children are worthy of equal respect – and to get both the structures and standards right.

## The Early Comprehensive Vision

In this pamphlet we question whether having an unshakeable belief in diversity and choice can really create a system that is fair to all parents and children while giving equal opportunities and raising standards for all. Are comprehensive schools, the model that outperforms all others in international comparisons, really a failed social experiment of the past or an experiment that hasn't actually been tried yet in this country and one still crucial to a modern and progressive education policy?

It is important here to remind ourselves briefly of the history of the comprehensive idea and why it was – and by many continues to be – seen to represent such a powerful ideal. Comprehensive schools were conceived in response to the blatant injustice of the old tripartite system, in which

children were selected, by examination, at the age of 11 and divided into different categories of learners – labels which affected many children for life.

Those who passed the '11-plus' went to grammar schools, well-funded, highly regarded institutions, with direct routes into the universities. The remaining 80 per cent went either to secondary moderns or technical schools, which had less generous resources and were considered second-class institutions. By the age of 11, some 80 per cent of the nation's children were, in effect, written off as second rate failures. Only the 20 per cent in grammar schools were considered successful.

Recent research into declining social mobility has been seized on by pro grammar school campaigners and some commentators to suggest that the abolition of the grammar school has been solely responsible for this. However, the reality of our changing society is complex and a definitive causal link between slower social mobility and the end of selective education is unproven.

**The comprehensive ideal is a powerful one, challenging as it does deep and often unconsciously held notions about class background, motivation, innate ability and those who are considered to 'deserve' or merit a good education and those who are not.**

Decline in social mobility needs to be put in the context of a declining working class in manual occupations (75 per cent in the 1950s and 1960s, down to 30 per cent in 2005). As the middle class has expanded, social mobility has inevitably declined. The Economist recently argued there may be nothing more sinister in this than economic progress (Economist, 2005). A decline in manufacturing primary industries, such as farming and coal mining, and the growth of more white collar jobs may have led to social mobility slowing down in the last decade, but it does not suggest that Britain is less egalitarian.

Despite the well-established myth that grammar schools provided a route out of poverty for the clever, working-class child, the evidence suggests that the direct-grant grammar schools mainly educated the middle classes and that it is these schools that dominated the 'state school' entry to the top universities. The less prestigious grammar schools mainly educated the lower middle-class and skilled manual-class children.

A study of children coming from their streamed primary school in 1964 showed that the A-stream came from homes where parents were predominantly professional, managerial or clerical workers, while the C-stream had parents predominantly in manual jobs (Jackson, 1964). The A-stream children were the ones who predominantly 'passed' the 11-plus. Home background was largely reproduced in the nation's education system.

A closer look at the so-called golden age of the grammar schools also shows that the majority of university students came from professional and managerial backgrounds and comparatively few working-class children gained a good education and route out of poverty and low aspirations. On the whole, grammar schools benefited the already privileged. In those grammar schools that still exist today, most of the pupils still come from above averagely well off families.

It is also important to remember that much of the pressure to abolish grammar schools came from middle-class parents whose children had failed the 11-plus and who objected to a system which branded their children as failures for life. Personal anxiety and fear made them grasp the destructive nature of a system that labelled over two-thirds of children as failures at the age of 11, and which effectively consigned the majority to institutions that did not attract equality of respect.

In contrast, the comprehensive school was designed to take children of all abilities and backgrounds from within a locality and offer them all a decent education. The idea of the comprehensive school first emerged in the late 1940s. During the 1950s and 1960s many comprehensives were purpose-built or created, by

means of a merger of existing secondary moderns and grammars. Lack of political will by successive governments, however, failed to root out the cancer of selection entirely; local authorities were merely 'requested' rather than 'required' to go comprehensive in 1965. Thus, there remain today 150-plus grammar schools. In some counties, such as Kent and Buckinghamshire, children are still selected by means of the 11-plus, vastly depressing the educational and life chances of children in surrounding schools and areas. Despite consistent claims by successive Labour ministers to be firmly against any selection at 11, no Labour government has successfully tackled the problem of the existing grammar schools even though, since the advent of the comprehensive movement, there have been no successful parental campaigns to bring selective schools back in an area where they no longer exist.

The comprehensive ideal is a powerful one, challenging as it does deep and often unconsciously held notions about class background, motivation, innate ability and those who are considered to 'deserve' or merit a good education and those who are not. Comprehensives were also introduced during a time of radical ferment in education, generally. A few schools, particularly in parts of London, attracted enormous amounts of media attention, often for some of their more radical teaching methods. At the same time, the whole notion of streaming was also being challenged, with mixed results.

Whatever the merits, or lack of them, of more experimental educational ideas, they should not detract from the solid achievements of the majority of England's schools, which suggest that, on the whole, the comprehensive has been a successful innovation. It has opened up opportunities for many young people in the past four decades. The percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*–C passes or five or more GCE O-levels has risen from under a fifth in 1964 to over half today.

The percentage of pupils achieving two or more A-level passes has increased five-fold from just over 8 per cent in 1964 to just under 40 per cent in 2004. In the same period, participation in education post-16 has risen from less than a quarter of 16-year-olds on full time courses to almost three-quarters today. In 1963 the Robbins Report set a target of 17 per cent of young people entering university. By 2000, 33 per cent were entering higher education.

**But whatever remains to be done, and there is a great deal, we should recognise and salute the fact that 40 years of comprehensive innovation has transformed our educational and, in many ways, our social landscape.**

There are many challenges still facing our education system – to meet the needs of the 40 per cent plus young people who fail to achieve five good GCSEs and the 25 per cent who leave school at 16, and to increase the numbers of young people from disadvantaged homes going on to higher education. We also think greater attention should be paid to offering a more challenging and stimulating curriculum so that all children should have a taste of the excitement of learning itself, whatever their particular educational outcomes.

But whatever remains to be done, and there is a great deal, we should recognise and salute the fact that 40 years of comprehensive innovation has transformed our educational and, in many ways, our social landscape. At the very least, it has challenged a deep, fundamental prejudice concerning the educability of any but the elite.

Comprehensive education may be hotly debated in practice, but nobody now seriously disputes the right of all children to a first-class education. Indeed, this was a marked feature of Tony Blair's most recent Labour Party Conference speech. Similarly, very few in public life now defend the principle of selection on grounds of academic ability at the age of 11. As a result of all these changes, England's deeply entrenched class divisions, once so noticeable in public, have been seriously challenged if not entirely eroded.

# Education, Education, Education

Like all public services, education was ill served under three terms of Tory rule. With the introduction of a market in education, and the introduction of different elements of selection at secondary level – in particular, city technology colleges and grant maintained schools – the comprehensive vision was being unpicked before it had really been established. In particular, many inner city schools were starved of resources and the crucial quality of public respect, and were consequently demoralised.

When Labour came to power in 1997 many parents felt elated by the prospect of a new government committed to education as its top priority. The new prime minister Tony Blair energised millions of voters with his belief in policies 'for the many not the few'. A lot of people were excited by New Labour's commitment to the belief in its new constitution in 1994 that 'by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone'.

Nowhere could this quest for social justice be better demonstrated than in a clear commitment to comprehensive education, and the improvement of so many local schools. Many Labour voters believed that a fairer education system was on the way, the cornerstone of a government pledging policies to create a more just society.

The first few years of New Labour in power were promising. 'Standards' rather than 'structures' were at the heart of policy. Investment in school buildings, reform of the primary school curriculum, including the introduction of the literacy and numeracy hours, better teacher training, professional development and recruitment, a focus on school leadership and the early years helped rapidly to raise standards at primary school.

Of course, the task was easier in primary schools. State primary schools are by definition comprehensive; they generally take children from a given neighbourhood and work hard to improve the skills and abilities of all children within that school, regardless of their background. They are not subject to the constant political and moral arguments about from where and how their pupils should be drawn. The simplicity of this basic comprehensive structure makes working to improve standards at primary level a much more straightforward task; each school can get on with the most important job at hand, teaching its children.

Education policy becomes much more complicated at secondary level, for it is at age 11 that the system begins to sort children along overt or covert lines, often relating to social class and parental background.

New Labour's failure fully to back the comprehensive model and to tackle head-on the innate unfairness of existing structures in secondary education has created its own problems. After 1997, the Conservative idea of a quasi market in education with league tables supposedly to indicate which schools were good and which were failing was maintained.

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The government attempted to exercise some restraint on the market-style development with a new code of practice on admissions (DfES, 2003) and a new Office of the Schools Adjudicator. Under this non-statutory code, adjudicators were able to limit some schools' capacity fully or partially to select pupils by academic ability, if they had not done so previously, or determine that they should not use certain other potentially selective criteria.

But New Labour failed to tackle the existing problem of selection, despite commitments made by previous Labour ministers that they would not allow schools to 'cream off' pupils at the age of 11. The most famous of these was David Blunkett's 'read my lips' commitment to no new selection in 1995. Successive secretaries of state and the prime minister have referred repeatedly to the bad old days of the 11-plus.

Yet, in government, little has been done to tackle existing selective and partially selective schools apart from the introduction of a convoluted system of parental ballots, which, in one county, would require the signatures of more people than voted in the last European elections in order to trigger a vote on whether to abolish grammar schools. Overall, there are now more selective school places than there were in 1997.

The 2001 election marked a decisive new era in the government's approach to secondary education. A new 'post-comprehensive' era of education was announced. Existing community, faith and selective schools were now complemented by a push to expand rapidly the specialist schools started by the previous Tory administration. These benefited from more money per pupil and the freedom to select 10 per cent of pupils by aptitude. The introduction of the specialist school was designed to mark the end of the 'bog-standard comprehensive' and usher in a new era of parental choice which, it was argued, would satisfy the consumer instinct in parents to shop around for schools in the way that they might shop around for a new hairdresser or fridge. Such competition, it claimed, was driving up standards, although evidence to back up these claims is thin.

According to the Education and Skills Committee (House of Commons, Jan 2005), the number of young people getting five good GCSEs is still inching up at the same rate as it did under the Tories, in spite of increased investment. The improvements in results in the Key Stage 2 national statutory attainment tests (SATs) key indicators for the primary sector appear to have stalled after the initial huge rise in children achieving Level 4 in English and maths, following the introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategies post-1997. In other words, progress on standards, judged by the government's own key indicators, is still incremental, 17 years after the Conservatives first introduced the idea of 'choice and contestability' to schools. It is also likely that progress at GCSE level will take a knock next year, when the school league tables will be required to specify GCSE passes including those in English and maths. This may disadvantage schools where an ICT GNVQ qualification worth four GCSEs has been gained but English and/or maths has not, and make the overall rate of improvement over the past decade appear slower.

Labour's most recent proposals set out in the 2005 white paper have now paved the way for an even greater commitment to the concept of choice and diversity of education providers. Ministers are committed to the expansion of popular schools and the academies programme, which would give control of 200 new state-funded schools to private sponsors by 2010.

Both primary and secondary community schools are to be encouraged to opt out of local education authority control and exist as independent institutions. All new schools are to be self-governing foundation schools, voluntary aided schools, academies or established by 'trusts'. Ministers are actively seeking to bring other 'independent providers' into the state system and to put parents at the heart of the education system as the 'drivers' for change. In spite of the fact that it goes further than the commitments in the Labour Party manifesto 2005, the white paper states bluntly, 'no more community schools (primary or secondary) will be established'.

In the presentation of these third term proposals, some less eye-catching but important initiatives about personalised learning support for hard-to-reach parents, extended schools, plans to deal with disruptive pupils and the new inspection regime have received less attention than the structural proposals. But pressure to reorganise the status, governance and 'ownership' of schools, possibly involving huge upheaval at local level, could be at the expense of an existing focus on standards and developing proposals for personalised learning and assessment.

## Strong Communities or Markets and Competition?

The Education and Skills Committee recently concluded in its report on secondary education that it was 'difficult to detect a coherent overarching strategy' in the government's policies for secondary schools (House of Commons, Mar 2005).

We agree. It is hard to grasp a coherent set of values underlying present policy. Government ministers repeatedly commit themselves to social cohesion, citizenship and opportunity for all but appear equally beguiled by the notion of parents as consumers, or what one cabinet minister described during the 2005 campaign as the trend among voters to look at public services and say, 'What is in it for me?' (BBC, 2005).

It is not surprising that many government ministers appear to be what the Americans would describe as 'conflicted' when it comes to education. In parts, the most recent white paper reads as if it has been written by two different authors, each with a radically different view of what the secondary school system should look like.

On the one hand a picture is painted of strong communities, more inclusive locally based childrens' services, extended schools and parent 'power' to improve failing schools. On the other hand, the vision is of independence, competition and freedom from local accountability in a fragmented system where schools become free-floating institutions, allowed to control their own admissions, with minimal local or parental representation on their governing bodies, and parents are actively encouraged not to support but to flee their failing school.

This hotch-potch of provision, euphemistically described by the present secretary of state as a comprehensive 'system', constitutes Tim Brighouse's dizzying hierarchy. Private, selective, semi-selective, faith, specialist, foundation and secondary modern schools, city technology colleges, further education colleges and academies co-exist, often within one neighbourhood. In future, students are to be encouraged to travel between them for different subjects and courses, if it is geographically possible, if they can afford it and if it fits their social and academic requirements.

The term 'choice and diversity' was first used by the Tories in their 1992 education documents. Ministers repeatedly assert that this will lead to high standards, a claim that has yet to be fully tested, at the same time as they ignore the clear evidence that creating so-called super schools, free of local control and accountability, and with a measure of selection, depresses the potential for achievement in schools in a surrounding area. Nor is there any real evidence that this is what the majority of parents want.

One of the government's flagships policies in the new diversity agenda is the academies programme: the pledge to build 200 schools, under private sponsorship, free of local control. Under government plans, sponsors put in a maximum of £2 million, which will then be matched by anything from £20 to £35 million of government money for a state of the art new building. The schools can then set their own admissions policy, change the curriculum and run free of local control and accountability.

In many areas, local authorities and schools are being told that, in their bids for 'Building Schools for the Future' money, they must include an academy school. This 'no academy, no school' ultimatum, presumably determined by the need to reach the arbitrary figure of 200 academies by 2010, naturally puts parents and teachers in any local area in a terrible dilemma, especially where there is a chronic shortage of places and many school buildings desperately needing repair.

So far, 27 academies have been opened. In his recent Conference speech, the prime minister pledged himself to even greater and more radical reform in this area, even though early evaluation of the city academies, on which £5 billion will be spent in the next five years, suggests that they are potentially divisive and are not raising standards any faster than other rapidly improving inner city schools that haven't benefited from the same investment. Ofsted has now put one academy into special measures.

## Diversity and Choice

Are diversity and choice an illusion, a radical idea or a failed experiment of the past? They are certainly not new ideas. There has always been a hierarchical British education system embracing diverse providers, from the independent sector to the

churches and voluntary aided foundations. Schools have always had their own distinct ethos, too, whether single sex, co-ed, faith based, uniform or non-uniform wearing. If anything, the system is less diverse now than it has ever been. Of course parents wish to express a preference concerning the school their child will attend. However, with a highly prescriptive curriculum, driven by tests and exams at ages 7, 11, 14, 16, 17 and 18, most also know that the difference between what schools are offering, even if they specialise, is, in effect, marginal.

League tables encourage the erroneous idea that there is a standard model of academic success for children, whether that be the 11-plus, SATs results or a number of good GCSE passes. Little attention is paid to the creation of a personalised or genuinely diverse curriculum and overall experience of schooling. Moreover, when parents or government talk about good and bad schools, they are often referring to more subtle aspects of the institution, such as pupil intake.

Too often, what diversity really means is hierarchy, a hierarchy that many parents instinctively grasp. In some areas, it is as if the old grammar–secondary modern divide has reappeared in new, and newly various, forms. The difference nowadays is that it is not always so clear what admissions criteria are being used for the so called 'good schools', making admissions policy a source of intense anxiety for many parents. Ministers encourage this idea of good and bad schools by talking of 'ladders' and 'escalators' which schools can move up or down, implicitly condoning the idea that some schools will be better than others and encouraging parents to aspire to the better schools, although never explaining which children and parents would deserve to be in the worse ones.

However, most parents know that it is simply not possible, logistically, for all children to get into the most popular schools. Schools would have to double or treble in size and/or maintain surplus places – unlikely with limited public funds and head teachers who might prefer to focus their energies on their existing pupils rather than expand exponentially and possibly lose the competitive advantage their size gives them.

School places cannot be supplied like tins of baked beans in a supermarket. Adding an extra class or two onto a popular school isn't a long term solution. With limited budgets, boosting the resources of one school will inevitably harm another, just as permitting one local school to control its own admissions will skew the intake of neighbouring schools. This concept of popular school expansion raises real anxieties for many parents, teachers and governors concerned that delivering true equality of opportunity will be impossible when set against the reality of there being greater inequalities between schools.

According to recent research from Bristol University's Centre for Market and Public Organisation on choice in the public sector, the theoretical base for choice-based policies in education depends on a system where 'individual schools can grow or shrink costlessly to accommodate the outcome of parents' choices' (Burgess, Propper and Wilson, 2005). Without that, the evidence suggests that the poorer children get 'sorted' into the worst schools, while the more knowledgeable, affluent parents get into the better schools.

They conclude, 'In practice the flexibility is often lacking so the empirical evidence is to some degree disconnected from the theory' – a complicated way of saying something that most parents know instinctively: absolute choice is an illusion.

## What Do Parents Want?

Recently ennobled education minister Lord Adonis, a firm advocate of choice and more private provision in public services, recently claimed that the fact that some of the new academies (many of them established in parts of London where there are too few school places) were massively oversubscribed was evidence of the success of this kind of diverse provision.

This is a revealing and depressing definition of success. Surely any policy that results in the majority of parents not getting into their first choice school is a policy that has failed.

Lord Adonis is inadvertently pointing up one of the great failures of the illusory promise of diversity and choice in schools provision. No-one seriously disputes that parents should have a say in how their children are educated, but too many parents are now competing for too few places in some schools, leading to yet more anguish at secondary transfer for many parents and children. In London nine out of ten children got into their first choice of secondary school under the old ILEA banding system. Today, the proportion of parents offered a place for their child at their 'favourite' schools is in the region of seven out of ten. Parents living in London were the least likely to be offered a place for their child in their preferred school: 68 per cent compared with 85 per cent nationally (Flatley et al., 2001).

In one inner London borough this year, only just over half of parents got their children into their first choice of school. Research published by the London Challenge suggests that parental satisfaction with their child's school is lower in London, where the market is more diverse and active, than it is in other parts of the country, where comprehensive community schools are the norm for most parents (DfES, 2004).

These findings were echoed in two more recent surveys of parents. One, in the Times Education Supplement (2004), suggested that the majority of parents were opposed to selection and valued schools that gave priority to local children. More recently, Which? published a detailed policy report, based on extensive research around the country on choice in education. It showed that, above all, parents want access to a high-quality, local school; 95 per cent of respondents agreed with this (Which?, 2005).

Parent campaigns for new schools in parts of the country where poor local planning and market forces have failed to provide enough school places back this up. In the London borough of Lambeth, between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of local children leave the borough every year, many of them forced to go to schools miles from where they live because there aren't enough school places close to home. Many local faith and single-sex schools are importing pupils from outside Lambeth, rather than meeting the needs of local children. In the last five years, campaigners have held five public meetings, all attended by hundreds of parents of all backgrounds. Each time the meeting has voted not for more diversity, choice or specialisation but for a community school with fair and open admissions.

All the evidence suggests that most parents would prefer the guarantee of a place in a good, genuinely mixed local school that reflects, serves and benefits from the local community and doesn't require their children to make a long journey on public transport every day, over the uncertainty and unfairness of a system geared to the market and competition with other parents.

It must be government's job to ensure that there is efficient planning and enough places, in institutions of genuinely equal worth, to go round.

## A Good Local School For All?

What is the alternative to the government position on diversity and choice? We would argue that the best model is a modernised version of the comprehensive, a local school, drawing from and accountable to its community.

The comprehensive ideal has often been unfairly caricatured as a levelling down, quasi-Stalinist form of social engineering, yet what system provides a better example of social engineering than a model that channels a small percentage of the nation's children through private schools or selective state education, and from there to the more elite universities and jobs? The difference between this model and the comprehensive vision is simple: while the private, selective model aims to provide a good education for only a few, the comprehensive ideal aims to deliver a good education and fairness for all.

It is clear that most parents would prefer a high quality local school and so should any government whose political aim is truly social cohesion, equality and a furthering of genuine democracy.

Reforming the secondary school admissions system, while focusing on raising standards in the

classroom, is key to achieving this. The Which? survey identified unequal school standards and lack of transparency in school admission criteria as two clear obstacles to parental choice.

The prime minister and successive secretaries of state for education have rejected the idea of a return to selection at 11. However, all have neatly side-stepped the fact that more English children face selective entry tests, either on ability or 'aptitude', than when Labour took office in 1997.

Fully selective schools still exist in a fifth of all education authorities. Partial selection by ability, aptitude and faith continues in many other areas. Academically selective schools routinely take far fewer children who are eligible for free school meals and from some ethnic minorities, compared with the overall make up or their local community, undermining their claim to be a route for social mobility.

The national school average for children in secondary schools who are eligible for free school meals is currently around 14 per cent. In the average grammar school that figure is 2 per cent. Entrance to grammar schools is often accompanied by an active private tuition industry, as parents seek to buy their children competitive advantage in the 11-plus. This sort of extra coaching can cost several thousand pounds a year and is therefore beyond the reach of the average family.

Children in public care, who the Department for Education and Skills is simultaneously championing through the new children's services agenda, are routinely left out of some schools' admissions criteria. City technology colleges, created under the years of the Thatcherite government, can also design their own entry criteria, using 'structured discussions' with applicants. The Thomas Telford School, a high achieving city technology college in the West Midlands, invites prospective pupils for assessment to provide a photocopy of their Year 5 primary school report and details of their primary school attendance. The headmaster then selects students from within nine ability bands and takes into account 'those applicants most likely to benefit from the education on offer at the School and who have the strongest motivation to succeed' (Thomas Telford School, 2005).

Some faith schools also use their power to manage their own admissions to use subjective methods of social selection, such as interviews and references from primary school head teachers, about the type of 'commitment' the family is likely to show to the secondary school ethos and values.

The proposed new independent foundation schools will have the freedom to manage their own admissions, as have the academies. Presumably the 'private providers' who are to be encouraged to bid for new schools will be given the same advantages.

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In urban areas where the 'market' in schools is most active, parents face a bewildering array of different admissions criteria, which often benefit the most knowing and affluent but are frustrating, time-consuming and opaque for the rest. Families are either unable to get into a local school if it selects by ability or faith (plus possibly by aptitude) or they face the reality of a school that isn't really comprehensive at all. It may well be sinking under the weight of social problems that a disproportionate number of challenging pupils inevitably import from home, while the more affluent aspirant and supportive local parents take the escape routes the state currently offers them to 'better' schools elsewhere.

The recent Education and Skills Committee report on school admissions (July 2004) admitted that 'fairness is a matter of luck rather than of course' at the moment. But all parents are entitled to a system that treats them fairly. Is it fair that some schools should have the power to engineer themselves more favourable intakes (and therefore a higher league table position) and effectively lock out the children they don't want to teach? Is it fair that some parents should have fewer options open to them because of their income, social background or lack of a religious faith? If the government really wants 'parents to choose schools, not schools to choose parents' (Blair, 2004) radical reform is needed.

So what would a fair admissions system look like? Professor Anne West of the Centre for Educational Research at the LSE has carried out extensive research into the tensions and contradictions between autonomous or own admission schools and fair admissions.

She argues that a fair admissions system needs to adhere to anti-discriminatory legislation and that priority should be given to those whose needs are greatest, for example children with special needs or in public care. She also argues that the admissions system should address issues of social cohesion, ensure that all applicants are treated equally and that some do not have greater priority than others by virtue of their social background.

International comparisons such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies show that non-selective systems achieve the highest standards and lowest social differentiation in achievement and suggest that the school's wider socio-economic intake can have an effect on individual student performance (OECD, 2004). So a fair admissions policy might also aspire to schools with a critical mass of students who are positive about learning and education generally. It is hard to see where either wholly or partly selective schools fit into such a policy. Populated largely by the better off, selective systems ensure that the majority of children start their secondary school careers as failures, while depleting other local schools of the critical mass of most able pupils. They have no part to play in a fair education system offering high quality to all, especially as there is considerable evidence to show that bright children do just as well in comprehensive schools with balanced intakes.

The government claims that decisions about getting rid of the existing 11-plus exam are a matter for local determination, to be exercised through an expensive, highly bureaucratic, cumbersome system of parental ballots. However, an issue as important as this is surely a matter requiring direction from the centre. Other highly controversial education policies, such as the introduction of academies, are being firmly led from Whitehall, which is putting pressure on local authorities through their Building Schools for the Future plans to have academies where they want them or not ('No academy; no funding').

The government could exert similar pressure on local authorities to devise and implement non-selective, transparent and fair admissions systems for their area, using the incentive of capital funding. Applying truly objective admissions criteria in this way would not lead to the abolition of any schools, as some of the more alarmist pro grammar school campaigners suggest, simply a change in the way they admit their pupils to reflect the local communities they serve, while removing one of the most unjust elements in the current education system.

The number of allegedly non-selective schools that set their own rules of admissions has also increased in the last 20 years. While some of these faith and foundation (formerly grant maintained) schools do serve their diverse local communities, others use partial selection on either ability or aptitude, faith-based criteria and a range of other criteria as a means of practising social selection.

In the words of the chief adjudicator of schools, left to their own devices schools will inevitably 'drift to the posh'. Anne West's research into 'own admissions' schools shows that just under half were operating some sort of covert–overt selection (such as giving priority to a proportion of pupils on the basis of aptitude or ability).

This 'cream skimming' ranges from tests that band children against the ability of those applying,

or the performance of siblings at the school, to letters from priests and clergymen, and reports and attendance records from primary school heads. Anne West's research also shows that schools that are their own admission authorities take fewer children with special educational needs than those which aren't (West and Hind, 2003; West, Hind and Pennell, 2004).

As one league-topping London church school explains in its brochure, the primary school head teacher reference gives primary heads 'the opportunity to show that the applicant and her family's attitudes, values and expectations are in sympathy with this Church of England school' (Lady Margaret School, 2005). Is this highly subjective system compatible with giving local parents a chance to gain a place at the school of their choice if they don't have the 'right' religious affiliation?

These schools are clearly responding to the market-oriented system, with its incentives to take pupils who will maintain their league table positions and reputation, but in many ways these forms of covert selection are even more unfair than the 11-plus, as they are highly subjective and make it extremely hard for prospective parents to judge their chances of success.

Such forms of covert social selection should be outlawed and would be easy to prohibit if the government were to introduce a menu of objective admissions criteria, excluding selection by faith, academic ability, interviews, headteacher references or giving priority to the children of former pupils or staff, to be applied consistently across the country with some adaptations for local need. The Education Select Committee drew up a model for how schools should allocate places once they are oversubscribed, giving priority to local children as well as those in public care or with statements of special educational needs.

The arguments against criteria based on distance are that it leads either to selection by postcode, with affluent parents able to buy homes near to popular successful schools, or to highly unbalanced intakes in impoverished areas. Neither of these is an insurmountable problem in seeking to create good local comprehensive schools with effective local monitoring and accountability.

One guiding principle for a fair admissions policy is that every school should take its fair share of children with acknowledged difficulties. Once children with statements in care or with other independently supported medical or social needs have been admitted, and locally agreed protocols for sharing out the most challenging children have been implemented, priority can be given to siblings living within the schools' normal intake areas.

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After these conditions have been met, locally agreed admissions criteria could be adapted to help all schools achieve a balanced intake. For instance, the remainder of places could be allocated simply on distance, a mixture of banding by ability and distance or by a system of local feeder primary schools, which might also help to include children in primaries that don't automatically fall within the catchment area of any schools. Queens Park Community School (QPCS) in Brent, north-west London, allocates its places each year to applicants from one of several partnership primary schools. Children in these so-called 'feeder schools' are given priority; only where more children in those primaries apply than there are places, does the criterion of distance come into play. Such a system means both that QPCS can build up a good relationship with local primary schools and that children are drawn from a wider cross section of the neighbourhood than would be achieved by distance alone. Of course, there is nothing to stop a parent in one of the feeder primaries expressing a preference for another local secondary school if they wish.

Another idea currently being trialled in some schools is that of random allocation; allotting a certain percentage of places to families who live in and beyond the catchment area, but still broadly

within the local area, to prevent the problem of people being able to buy places at a school simply by moving near to the school. There may be a case for a proportion of randomly allocated places within a fair admissions system, if all schools were operating it fairly, but it could still mean anxiety and uncertainty for parents.

The government argues that its code of practice on admissions is the guardian of 'fair admissions'. In the words of the latest draft code (DfES, 2005a) it is designed to ensure that admissions criteria are 'clear, fair and objective' and 'as far as possible allow local parents to gain a place at the local school of their choice'. But the code has advisory rather than statutory powers and schools are asked to 'have regard' to its guidance rather than forced to comply with it.

The Office of the Schools' Adjudicator is largely designed to respond to complaints from schools and other admissions authorities, rather than those from individual parents. There appears to be little monitoring on the ground to ensure that own admissions schools are implementing their policies fairly, to the extent that the Department of Education cannot even say how many selective places in partially selective schools exist.

The limits of the current code were starkly highlighted by the recent decision by the secretary of state for education Ruth Kelly to uphold the right of the London Oratory School, a highly selective Catholic boys' school in west London, to use interviews when selecting pupils – even though interviewing is in breach of the code and the school's adjudicator had already ruled against the school (Office of the Schools Adjudicator, 2004a). The School's governors argued that they had 'had regard' for the code of practice and then decided to ignore it. They claimed that if the government had intended to ban interviewing it would have done so through primary or secondary legislation, not using quasi regulatory guidance (Office of the Schools' Adjudicator, 2004b).

We need to learn from this judgement. A fair admissions policy should prevent any school from administering its own admissions. Instead, parents' preferences should be balanced against a set of fair, non-selective over-subscription criteria (which exclude admission by faith, ability or aptitude, interview or primary head teacher reference among others) by an independent local authority. Such an authority would have a vested interest not in the pupil intake at any one school, but in creating balanced intakes in all schools within a local area. Above all, the code of practice should be mandatory.

The London Oratory case illustrates quite how far the government pledges on 'fair admissions' fall short of the reality of what is going on in many individual schools. The free for all envisaged by thousands of new trust, foundation or academy schools is profoundly worrying.

## Inside the Good Local School

However, fair admissions alone won't deliver high quality education for all children. A modern comprehensive school does not simply require a genuine mix of pupils of all backgrounds and ability, important as that is. It also needs resources and a range of practical strategies to meet the often complex needs of pupils, and to tackle the myriad reasons why some children underachieve.

The characteristics of an 'effective' school are well known and spelled out at regular intervals by the out going chief inspector of schools, David Bell: high quality school leadership, continual responsiveness to change, good teaching, close monitoring of each pupil's progress, high expectations of all pupils, effective communication between parents and school, and the ability constantly to self-evaluate. A political focus on these questions in relation to every school rather than quirky plans to help parents exercise more choice in relation to a few schools is essential if we are to improve the quality of the majority of local schools.

On the day before the recent white paper was published, Peter Hyman, a former Downing Street special adviser (who is now training to be a teacher in an inner city school), argued powerfully in the

Guardian for an adjustment in education policy and tactics towards what makes a good school.

In his opening paragraph he described standing in front of a class of 'tired, rain sodden, additive fuelled English, Nigerian, Turkish, Somali, Indian and Iranian 12 years olds to teach the Reformation'. He wrote,

> *I wished for a fleeting moment that Tony Blair, my former boss, could be there too. Not just because he might enjoy teaching the Reformation but because he would get some idea of just how much still needs doing in our schools … Education policy (and rhetoric) needs to return to its core missions: to make the teaching and learning experience more rewarding and successful. To achieve this we must give teachers the tools to deliver excellence in the classroom (2005).*

His recipe for real school improvement? Smaller schools, smaller classes, high quality teacher training, more teachers, a more relevant and flexible curriculum, more money and a relentless focus on literacy.

We agree. The academic and behavioural problems Hyman identifies are common to too many inner city schools and often contribute to the perception of failure within the comprehensive system in many urban areas. Many parents, governors and teachers would probably agree with Hyman's analysis of how to tackle them. But does it really require a business sponsor or a school with no accountability to its local community to make the changes he suggests?

There are many outstanding examples of inner city schools that have improved rapidly under the leadership of outstanding heads but within a local authority framework and without outside sponsorship. One of these is Lilian Baylis School in the London borough of Lambeth. This was the school that Oliver Letwin referred to in his now infamous comment that he would rather 'beg in the gutter' than send his children to his local school.

In 2002, the year before Letwin aired his views about his local comprehensive, only a dismal 6 per cent of pupils at Lilian Baylis School achieved five A*–C grades at GCSE. It has since received a very positive Ofsted report and this summer, in spite of being a real community school with two-thirds of children on free school meals, high pupil mobility and the lowest average Key Stage 2 points score on entry in London, 38 per cent of pupils achieved five A*–C grades at GCSE. It is now a specialist technology school with a new building.

The achievements of Lillian Baylis, almost certainly down to the strong leadership of its headteacher Gary Phillips, his high expectations and the commitment of his staff, are identical to those of some new academies, although Lilian Baylis fails to attract similar attention.

William Atkinson, head of another rapidly improving inner London community comprehensive, The Phoenix School, recently explained to a London local government conference what schools like his, with highly challenging intakes, needed: 'Teachers who are "satisfactory" [are] not good enough,' he explained. 'Satisfactory teaching colludes with low expectations. Only good, very good or excellent staff are good enough for schools with challenging intakes, if we are to challenge low aspirations' (ALG Summit, 2005).

This emphasis on the highest quality teaching is supported by the Finnish experience. Finland operates an entirely non-selective system from nursery through to 16 years of age and produces some of the most high achieving students within Europe. In the three-yearly PISA tests, first administered to 15-year-olds in schools in 2000, then again in 2003, in 43 countries, mainly in the industrialised democracies, Finnish students came top overall. Finnish children emerge with

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outstanding results in mathematics, science, reading and problem solving.

What is the secret of their success? According to Irmeli Halinen, head of the general education division at the Finnish National Board of Education and a teacher and principal for 16 years, one of the most important factors behind Finland's success is the fact that:

> *Teachers are highly valued ... and they are judged as influencing the atmosphere in schools more positively than is the case generally in OECD countries … Finnish teachers are quite independent and have wide powers of decision making, compared with colleagues in other countries ... Teachers all get very high-quality training. Every teacher has to have a Master's degree, even to teach in primary education, and that provides a strong basis for them to show real expertise in the matters of teaching and learning (Halinen and Winn, 2005).*

Halinen also points out that high quality teaching is linked to teacher autonomy. Teachers are given considerable freedom within the framework of a broad national curriculum. According to Halinen,

> *Principals and teachers decide on how the school works and what is learned and how. But inside these guidelines schools can decide on very many things. For instance, some schools can emphasise certain content areas, like arts or mathematics or environmental education. Or schools can choose quite freely their working approach, such as using Montessori methods, cooperative or entrepreneur working methods, etc. Some schools may decide to enlarge their learning environment, by creating intensive cooperation with, for instance, commercial enterprises or youth, health or sports organisations outside the school. Or they might concentrate on creating international connections to different countries (Halinen and Winn 2005).*

In Finland, there is particular emphasis on the process of learning, rather than the mere regurgitation of facts. Halinen says,

> *We think it is very important that teachers explain to all children why they are learning something. What is the idea behind it? Why should we be talking about this topic? That's why it is important that teachers have been thinking and talking together about goals for learning while preparing the curriculum of their school. It is good to find problems connected to real life as a starting point – for instance, while learning about the relationship between people and technology, the teacher might ask students to plan how they would live for one week totally without technology. So students start to wonder what we mean by technology, how we use it, if we can live without it, etc. (Halinen and Winn, 2005).*

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Finland has one more important lesson to teach us – that constant testing is not the best method for encouraging genuine excitement about, or excellence in, learning.

Over the past two decades testing has been used as a way to drive up standards. As a result, according to English academic Bethan Marshall,

> *Children in England are now examined more than in any other country … During the course of their schooling the average pupil will sit just over 100 public exams, around 40 in the last three years … Evidence that the frequency of testing and the high stakes nature of the examinations is damaging the educational experience of the children in England is now overwhelming (Marshall in Wragg, 2005).*

The damage stems from a number of factors. Teachers 'teach to the test' rather than to the wider subject areas under consideration; learning itself is by rote and so becomes mechanical; the desire to produce good results distorts admissions procedures, where these can be altered, in order

to bring in students who will perform well. And perhaps most damaging of all, qualities that can't be easily measured – imagination, creativity, originality – inevitably play a less important role in children's learning.

Is this the kind of education system we want for our children? In Finland, Halinen says,

> *We think it makes better sense to put our resources into creating a good learning environment, good teaching and good support systems, and not into testing how children are doing. We have national learning evaluations but we do not judge how children are doing, school by school … We trust that our teachers know what they are doing and what they need to do. That is why there is so much emphasis on good teacher training (Halinen and Winn, 2005).*

One of the biggest problems facing British schools is the gap between rich and poor, and the enormous disparity in children's home backgrounds and the social and cultural capital they bring to the educational table. William Atkinson, head of The Phoenix School (discussed above), has called for a serious discussion concerning the resources needed to overcome very basic problems he faces in his school, such as children coming to school poorly nourished, without having slept enough. In particular, he cited the need for proper family learning facilities and for

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classes of, at most, 20 children.

Those schools which face the challenge of overcoming the home circumstances of our most disadvantaged young people clearly need extra help. Strong leadership, outstanding teaching and resources for smaller classes are all important. But we also believe that the way to ensure all children get access to a first-class education is not by removing them from their communities but by embedding them even more deeply, so that parents, teachers, governors, school leaders and local authorities take joint responsibility for raising standards and supporting the most vulnerable.

One of the most enduring features of the British education system has been the link between attainment and class background. The government recently had to admit that improvements in the primary school curriculum have disproportionately benefited children from more advantaged backgrounds. In spite of the huge increase in numbers of young people going to university, only one in ten from the poorest fifth of the population gets degrees.

If there is a crisis in education it is not one of underachievement in Middle England; it is our chronic failure to address the issue of educational outcomes by family background successfully. It is not just poverty, poor housing and inadequate nutrition that blight children's chances. Parental education, particularly that of mothers, and their involvement in their children's learning are increasingly being linked to a child's prospects in life.

DfES research shows that parental involvement in a child's education is a more powerful force for the good of the individual child than any other family background characteristic, including social class. Obviously not all poor children lack a supportive home learning environment in which education is valued but those that do are doubly disadvantaged.

The importance of community schools in raising standards, building partnerships between home and schools and helping schools to support young people with difficult home lives can't be underestimated. For these to work, they must draw in all sections of the community. Where parents are not happy to use their local school, it is often because they feel it is not representative of the local community; its intake has become unbalanced in some way and they fear it cannot provide a stimulating and safe environment for their children.

Community schools are able to foster strong links with feeder primary schools, to smooth the secondary transfer process and ensure continuity and progression. They open up opportunities for

adult and family learning across both primary and secondary schools and also facilitate working with local voluntary organisations that can enhance this.

An extended community school can provide less affluent children with the sort of out of school activities – music, art, sport – which many middle-class children take for granted. As the government outlined in its reforms to children's services, extended community schools provide a focal point – a one stop shop – for collaboration between education, health, social services and other family support groups.

For children who come from backgrounds where help is needed, extra activities and services provided on site, be it breakfast club or after school chess, basketball, Latin or drama, build confidence and skills and, of course, help working parents. The local community benefits from the daily and direct involvement of its young people, and young people too benefit from being educated with a wide cross section of their local community.

Yet pursuit of the diversity and choice agenda often means that young people are forced to move out of their local communities and travel long distances to schools outside their home area, thereby undermining the very benefits the government seeks to reap by investing in extended services.

The £680 million earmarked for the next three years for extended schools is unlikely to fund a universal system to compensate for children's disadvantaged home lives. Many of the schools that are successfully helping to raise children's achievement through building home–school links do so by employing a cadre of extra adults and non-teaching professionals in and out of the classroom in mentoring roles. They can then give attention and support to children who cannot rely on it at home and tact as advocates and task masters for them in the way our own more privileged children take for granted – a truly personalised service.

The recent freedom given to head teachers to plan their budgets over three years, and a standardised system of funding per child, is welcome on a school planning level. However, raising standards for the least well off children demands funding flexibility, so that schools or local authorities can target money on the neediest children, in particular to ensure that their schools can attract the outstanding teachers that William Atkinson refers to.

At the moment relative disadvantage is judged by the number of pupils on free school meals in each school and money targeted accordingly. A more effective way of targeting money might be to link funding to prior attainment on entry to secondary school. While this might be viewed as a 'reward for failure' and an assault on the middle classes by some in the government and media, it may yet prove politically essential to eradicate the stubborn and politically embarrassing failure to raise standards for the bottom 20 per cent of pupils who start secondary school without reaching the average attainment targets (Level 4) in English and maths for an 11-year-old.

**The recent freedom given to head teachers to plan their budgets over three years, and a standardised system of funding per child, is welcome on a school planning level.**

In Peter Hyman's inner city London school four out of ten children arrive in Year 7 with a reading age below age 9. The personal tuition and catch up classes the government proposes are a move in the right direction but policy could go one stage further and allocate a 'bounty' to individual children on entry to secondary school, based on prior attainment. In this way schools in highly disadvantaged communities, where admissions alone cannot help to create more balanced intakes, would be progressively funded.

Writing in the recent book Letters to the Prime Minister, Tim Brighouse states the case with admirable explicitness:

> *In simplifying and reforming the funding system for 2006 it would be possible to introduce for secondary schools a flat rate £2,500 per capita entitlement for youngsters*

*entering with Level 3, £3,500 for Level 2 and £4,500 for less than Level 2 … then schools would have incentives to concentrate their efforts on those who need most help, as well as those who are going to deliver headline scores in terms of five or more higher grade GCSEs (Brighouse in Wragg, 2005).*

Given the evidence that exists about raising standards for disadvantaged children, it is inexplicable that the current strategy to tackle this appears to revolve around spending £5bn on 200 academies in the next five years.

While it is hard to quarrel with the idea of investing heavily in urban areas of high deprivation, there are 3,600 secondary schools in this country, many of which include disadvantaged young people. Rather than expand the number of academies, the academy programme should be halted until the government's own evaluation of their effectiveness has been completed in three years' time. In the meantime, the money could be redistributed more evenly in areas where, as the Labour Party manifesto puts it, 'low aspirations and low performance are entrenched'.

## Quality and Equality Making the Alternative Argument

We are at a critical point in the development of education policy in this country. New Labour, so committed in theory to the aim of providing a first-class education for all Britain's children, risks going down a route that could bring about quite opposite results. Beguiled by the chimera of choice, and the apparent superiority in all cases of the private to the public provider, it appears confused in its aims. Is choice being made the central element of education simply as a way to lure an influential section of the electorate or is it a mechanism to raise standards through increasing competition between schools? If so, are either aims compatible with the goal of social justice and higher standards for all children?

All parents will understandably seek to do what they believe is best for their own children, but the job of a Labour government is, surely, to create a system that is fair to all. A market in schools, some with huge capital injections like the academies, others with private proprietors able to call the shots, unaccountable to the people they serve and free to manipulate which children they choose to teach, will further harm the crucial relationship between schools and community, sometimes severing it altogether. The strongest institutions will select only those that benefit them, by whatever means possible, leaving the weaker schools to educate the rest and possibly sinking under the weight of teaching a disproportionate number of children with problems.

Allowing schools autonomy over their budgets or, indeed, the freedom to innovate in relation to the curriculum is entirely different from making them independent of any local democratic process, where the consumers have a real and active role to play in how they are managed and spend public money.

Accountability is a crucial element of a high quality public service. Yet the new trust, foundation and academy schools have a minimum requirement of having only one elected parent governor. The majority of the governing body will be appointed either by the trust, the sponsor or the foundation, thereby putting decision making beyond the reach of most local parents.

The idea of 'parent councils', which will now be required in the new trust schools, appears to have been introduced at the last minute in the white paper, when its authors realised they had invented a fundamentally unaccountable model. It is far from clear what power the parent councils will have and what part they will play in the daily running of schools. What will happen in these new independent state schools should there be a weak head and a governing body appointed by a sponsoring trust which starts to fail its pupils? Where will the accountability lie? Who will step in, if things start to go wrong?

If the government continues in the direction it is currently heading, we risk creating a multipartite system, a pyramid of provision, with high-achieving state schools at the top, largely drawing from better off families, down to a hard core of low achieving schools and colleges, largely in the inner cities, serving the poorer children. Whatever the language used to describe or label the weaker or, indeed, the stronger schools, parents and children will instinctively know what kind of school their child is in, and the respect, or lack of it, that it attracts, locally and nationally. Such a system is already being put into place in another part of the British Isles. In Northern Ireland, proposals for a system to follow abolition of the 11-plus revolve around a different, in many ways more opaque, form of pupil selection at the age of 11, combining academic tests and pupil profiling by primary school teachers. Then children are advised to apply for a variety of schools, ranging from the traditionally academic to the more technical or vocational institutions.

Writing about this on the Reform 21 website, part of a campaign for comprehensive education in Northern Ireland, Neil McCafferty notes that, in the new plan, 'A hierarchy of schools is required for a hierarchy of persons. Essentially this is a fine-tuned multi-partite 2004 version of the 1944 tri-partite model.'

The old tri-partite model was, of course, where we began 50 years ago, with aspirant parents campaigning against the 11-plus because they knew it was unfair. If the old hierarchies were loathed then, why should they be any more popular now? Most parents know that a system that encourages schools and colleges to compete with each other for league table position and pupils to shore up their competitive advantage is still unfair, however much it is dressed up in the language of choice.

There is an alternative, though: government support for a modernised version of the comprehensive school based on the local community, the model we have argued for throughout this pamphlet.

Clearly, not all communities or neighbourhoods will throw up the same social mix. However, we believe that the reform of the many unfairly selective options that are currently available would have a major effect on all local schools, eventually creating a better balance of pupils. This change would involve the introduction of a mandatory code of practice, which legally ensures that admissions criteria are 'clear, fair and objective' and 'as far as possible allow local parents to gain a place at the local school of their choice'. Draft Code of Practice on Admissions London DFES 2005

**If the government continues in the direction it is currently heading, we risk creating a multipartite system, a pyramid of provision, with high-achieving state schools at the top, largely drawing from better off families, down to a hard core of low achieving schools and colleges, largely in the inner cities, serving the poorer children.**

Selection by ability, faith, interview or head teacher reference should not be included in the 'appropriate and acceptable' oversubscription criteria. Instead, this should be based on distance, feeder schools, possible banding and random allocation within a certain area, dependent on local circumstances. No school should be free to administer its own admissions – this task should be given to an independent local authority with an interest in ensuring mixed comprehensive intakes for all schools and with schools adjudicators empowered to investigate and monitor on the ground.

More research is needed on some inner city areas which, according to many critics of the local school model, would never deliver a fair enough social and academic mix. However, where a neighbourhood does not provide a fair spread of ability or mix of social class, it is even more essential that funding is provided and energy

concentrated on providing the highest quality of education possible to those children in that school.

We believe that government should encourage a language of preference rather than choice. The state should be honest with parents about the limits on the exercising of that preference, while enabling as many of them as possible to choose a school in a fair and transparent admissions system that gives them some certainty about the outcome.

Central government attention should also shift from tinkering with structures and privatisation towards a relentless focus, through the mechanism of local authorities, on standards, quality control, and the recruitment and professional development of highly qualified school leaders and teachers. Then resources must be targeted on the young people with the most challenging home backgrounds, who, by the age of 11, are falling behind in their basic literacy and numeracy skills. In particular, resources should be allocated to recruit the highest quality heads and teachers to all schools in disadvantaged areas where academic and socially balanced intakes are hard to achieve, not just to those schools with 'academy' status.

Accountability should be safeguarded in all schools by ensuring proper elected representation of parents, staff, local authorities and the wider community on school governing bodies rather than allowing them to become the personal fiefdom of individual business people or sponsoring trusts.

Where those stakeholder models of governance fail, local authorities should have a duty to ensure proper support and training for governors and should be able to offer incentives such as childcare payments to ensure that all sections of the community can be represented.

A comprehensive curriculum with high status qualifications embracing both academic and vocational paths needs to be accompanied by a funding system weighted towards the most disadvantaged in terms of attainment.

One stream of funding could come from the abolition of the tax break currently offered to independent schools under the guise of charitable status. Schools that select academically, offer an education suited to a narrow ability range and charge fees that are beyond the means of most people cannot possibly argue that they meet the definition of 'public benefit' set out by the Charity Commission. Rather than continue to subsidise institutions selling a privileged education to an affluent elite, the government could take a bold decision and simply abolish the charitable subsidy altogether. The £100 million thus saved could be directly channelled into the education of those who most need it: poorer children, in schools with scarce resources.

With these moderate measures, we believe that the government could concentrate on building solid, local schools that offer every family a good school in their locality, accountable to its local community, in place of the diversity and choice agenda with its bewildering array of options: independent state schools, flagships, beacons and academies.

**In a truly modernised, well-funded, well-supported comprehensive system, quality can co-exist with equality.**

Current high performing comprehensives show that, with sufficient funds, good leadership and a strong ethos, these schools can provide an excellent education. Children are encouraged to follow and develop their own particular interests, while having access to a broad and stimulating curriculum. The countries that top the international league tables in pupil performance, such as Finland, operate fully comprehensive systems.

Most importantly of all, they demonstrate the profound validity of the comprehensive ethos. By learning with other children of different backgrounds, faiths and abilities young people learn how to operate within society, to respect both the strong and the vulnerable, and to understand and work with all elements of a community; this gives each child the strongest moral and intellectual basis for adult citizenship. In a truly modernised, well-funded, well-supported comprehensive system, quality can co-exist with equality.

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## Melissa Benn

Melissa Benn is a writer and broadcaster on social issues, including education. She writes regularly for the Guardian and a range of national newspapers and magazines on politics, literature and contemporary social policy.

She has published several books including Madonna and Child: towards a modern politics of motherhood, published by Vintage, and a novel, Public Lives, published by Penguin. Last year she edited, with Clyde Chitty, A Tribute to Caroline Benn: education and democracy, a series of essays on contemporary education issues.

This autumn she was featured on Evan Davis's Radio 4 series on the history of the comprehensive school. She lives with her family in Brent, north-west London, where her children attend local schools.

## Fiona Millar

Fiona Millar is a journalist specialising in education and parenting issues. She writes a column in Education Guardian and recently wrote and presented a film, The Best for My Child, about parental choice for Channel Four.

Last year she chaired an investigation for Shelter about the impact of poor housing on children's lives and she is currently working with Teachers TV on programmes about parents and schools.

Fiona is also chair of the National Family and Parenting Institute, a trustee of the Roundhouse, patron of Comprehensive Future and a governor of two schools in north London, where she lives with her partner and three children.

# Useful Contacts

Compass is an umbrella of organisations and individuals who believe in greater equality and democracy. Listed below are some of the organisations who have been involved with Compass or who think are operating in an interesting and complimentary space.

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# About Compass

Compass is the new democratic left pressure group, whose goal is to both debate and develop the ideas for a more **equal** and **democratic** society, then **campaign** and **organise** to help ensure they become reality.

We organise regular events and conferences that provide real space to discuss policy, we produce thought provoking pamphlets and we encourage debate through online discussions on our website. We campaign, take positions and lead the debate on key issues facing the democratic left. We're developing a coherent and strong voice, for those that believe in greater **equality** and **democracy** as the means to achieve radical social change.

We are:

➨ An **umbrella grouping** of the progressive left whose sum is greater than its parts.

➨ A **strategic political voice** – unlike think-tanks and single issue pressure groups Compass can and must develop a politically coherent position based on the values of **equality and democracy**.

➨ An **organising force** – Compass recognises that ideas need to be organised for and will seek to recruit, mobilise and encourage to be active, a membership across the UK to work in pursuit of greater **equality** and **democracy**.

➨ A **pressure group focussed on changing Labour** – but recognises that energy and ideas can come from outside the party, not least the 200,000 who have left since 1997.

The central belief of Compass is that things will only change when people believe they can and must make a difference themselves. In the words of Gandhi

*'Be the Change You Wish to See in the World'*

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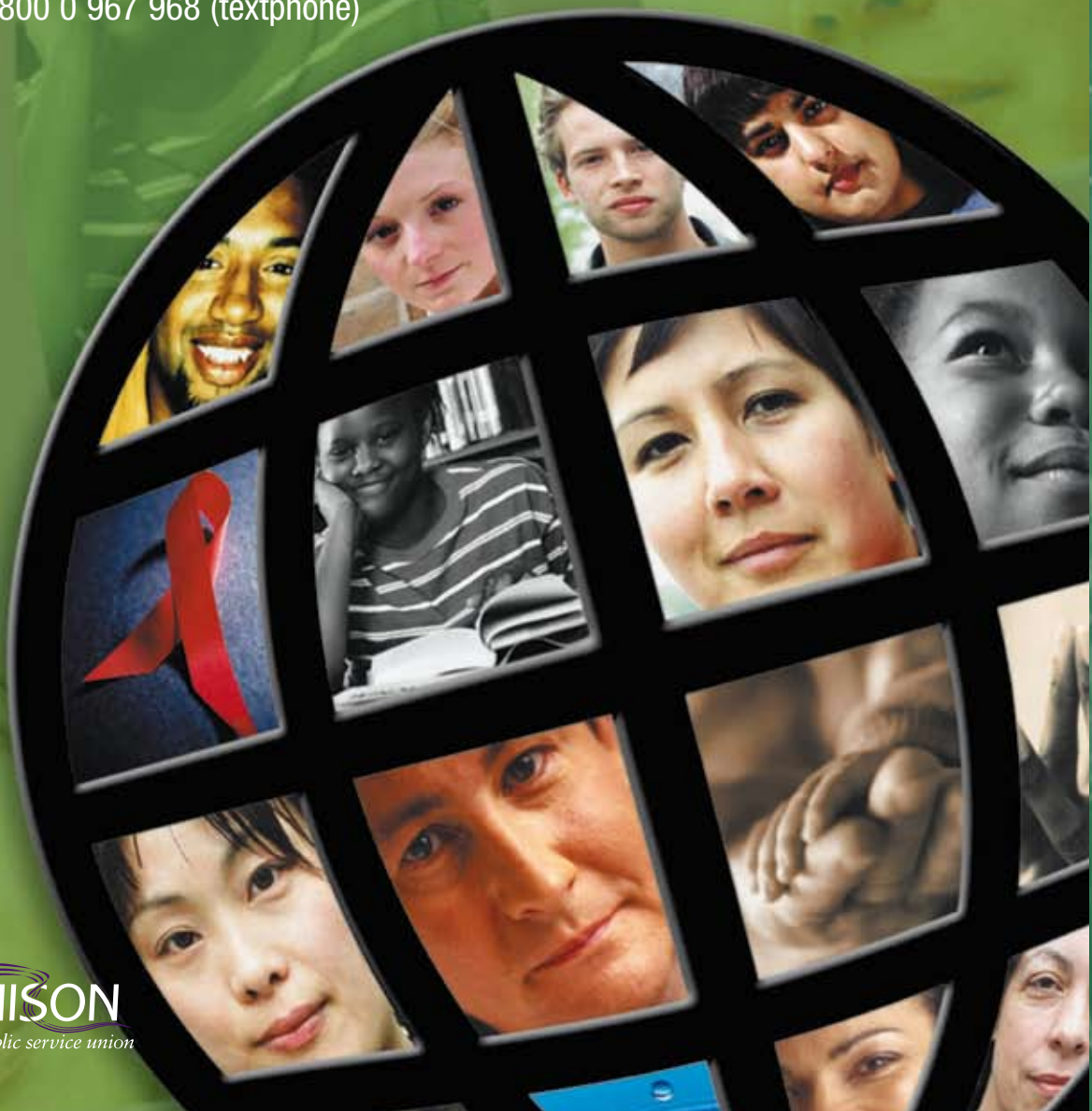

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