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Social justice & schools: A blueprint for equity

In a series of articles for *SecEd*, school leader David Anderson draws on his Master's research to consider how schools can be a key driver for social justice and how we can make our education system more equitable. He tackles issues including collaboration and competition, resources, funding, policy, admissions, assessment, accountability

‘I wouldn’t want my grandchildren to go to that school..’

The pandemic has shone a light on disparities within the English education system. Many have suggested that this is our ‘Build Back Better’ moment. But what might a ‘better’ and more socially just and equitable education system look like?

The English education system is segregated and stratified, with well-defined hierarchies of schools. It maintains privilege for the most advantaged in our society at the expense of the disadvantaged. School leaders and teachers are overwhelmingly pre-occupied with high-stakes accountability measures, and do not have the freedom to challenge the status quo.

Yet the levels of disparity between the winners and the losers in our schools are under the spotlight like never before. Is the pandemic giving us the chance for a fresh outlook on how we want society to view education – and do we as a profession have the courage and conviction to create something better?



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In these pages, I explore how the English education system is set up to create an uneven playing field through seven interlinking areas.

I suggest, by looking at alternative solutions from educational thinkers and other countries, how the teaching profession could and should push for something so much better for our society and for our young people...

Chapter 1: Good schools & equity in the system

Does your school represent a microcosm of its local community, serving the needs of all the young people in the area? Finland spent more than 30 years refining its education system with this question in mind and with equity at the core of its vision. The aim was to ensure that all schools were good schools, with little variation, so that the need for parental choice became unnecessary (Sahlberg, 2015).

Over the last 30 years, parents have become accustomed to the idea that parental choice of a school for their child is an undeniable right and is central to the improvement of education in this country. But, while all parents want a good school for their child, good schools come in many shapes and sizes. And there is certainly not a level playing field when it comes to English secondary schools.

When I consider the school where I work, I might at first conclude that it represents a microcosm of the community in which it is located. As a standalone academy, we have a transparent admissions policy based on proximity, feeder schools and siblings. There is no preference given to those of a certain faith, academic ability, talent or with ability to pay.

But scratch beneath the surface and we discover that there are local children who would never come to our school, however good it might be. From an early age, they are educated in a parallel set of local independent schools that have little contact with us. Our students may walk the same pavements in the morning, but they enjoy very different experiences during their days. This is despite both schools being “good” or better in terms of a variety of measures.

Let us return to my conversation with the taxi driver, and the clear school hierarchy that exists in that town, and many others.

Schools in England have a big variation of both intake and outcomes. I am sure you can picture a diverse range of schools in your area. But perhaps you have never considered why this is, what this variation looks like, and what the impact might be on our young

people. Below I list the types of secondary schools in England (DfE; State Boarding Forum; Green, Henseke & Vignoles, 2017).

- Community/maintained schools: 15 per cent.
- Foundation and voluntary schools: 16 per cent.
- Academies: 61 per cent.
- Grammar schools: 5 per cent.
- Faith schools: 8 per cent.
- Faith academies: 11 per cent.
- Free schools: 4 per cent.
- City technology schools: Less than 1 per cent.
- Special schools: 3 per cent.
- State boarding schools: 1 per cent.
- Independent schools: 7 per cent.

With these different designations come large differences in approaches to admissions, resourcing, governance and accountability. These differences also bring very different experiences of education for young people. I want to consider the effect of these differences on educational equity.

According to Ofsted’s 2019/20 annual report, published in December 2020, 86 per cent of schools in England are either “good” or “outstanding”. That means 14 per cent of schools in England provide an education that is judged to be “not good” for our young people. This is a worrying statistic, but one that is rarely mentioned.

So how does this variation compare with other countries around the world? One of the best comparisons we have is via the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges and their tests are carried out every three years.

According to the 2018 results (OECD, 2019), England ranks 15th out of 37 countries in terms of variation between schools, with Finland topping the rankings as having the least variation between schools.

So, schools in England vary greatly in intake and in outcomes. We know this from our own

“Our students may walk the same pavements in the morning, but they enjoy very different types of experiences during their days at school”

experiences and also through the publication of Ofsted reports and academic attainment data. What is Progress 8 and the published league tables, if not an indicator of great variation between schools?

Schools in England do not necessarily represent a microcosm of the local community. Some schools select by academic ability, faith or ability to pay. I, and many others, would argue that the selection of “more able” students from an area removes these students from the wider pool. This leaves a pool of “less able” students to be divided among the remaining non-selective schools.

Similar selection happens with faith schools, and schools who give priority for talents such as music or sports. Again, this detrimentally affects the pool of students “left-behind”.

Research by Kalogrides and Loeb (2013) and Massey and Fischer (2006) shows that students who attend a selective school are more likely to be surrounded by motivated and academically aspirational peers, and therefore “do better” at school.

Similarly, a variety of research shows that students who do not go to a selective school in a selective area, are more likely to be surrounded by less-motivated and less academically aspirational peers, and therefore “do worse” at school (Gorard & Siddiqui, 2018; Kitchen & Hobbs, 2016; Boliver & Swift, 2011; Perera, 2016).

The research into the damaging effects of selective education on the students who do not attend selective schools in selective areas is clear and emphatic. Yet it is not widely

admitted by either those making policy decisions in government or by parents/teachers.

Interestingly, research from the Sutton Trust (Coe et al, 2008) found that nearly three-quarters of schools in England are affected by the presence of a selective school. So, while currently only five per cent of schools in England are grammar schools, the detrimental effect on other schools is disproportionate.

The government is not showing signs of changing legislation to allow the creation of new grammar schools, although the opportunity for satellite grammar schools, which some have described as “backdoor grammars”, remains.

Finally, on the issue of selection by ability to pay, it is well-known that advantaged parents have more books at home and read to their children more often. Research shows that, by the age of seven, the gap in the vocabulary known by children in the top and bottom quartiles is around 4,000 words with children in the top quartile having a vocabulary of around 7,000 words (Biemiller, 2004).

The children of the advantaged are therefore already educationally ahead when they start school. And the size of a pupil’s early vocabulary – the number and variety of words that the young person knows – is a significant predictor of academic attainment in later schooling and of success in life (Save the Children, 2016; Parsons & Schoon, 2011).

More advantaged parents can pay for tutors to help their children gain access to selective schools and the most advantaged parents can pay independent schools for their children’s education (about seven per cent are educated this way).

Students who attend independent schools generally have access to more resources, smaller class sizes, different standardised high-stakes tests (e.g. iGCSEs), a more positive culture and climate for learning, superior guidance for university applications, and enhanced job prospects, networking and earning capacity.

Of course, the reverse is true for the vast majority of students (93 per cent) who do not have the opportunity to attend fee-paying



It was my taxi driver who said the words quoted in the headline above. I was being driven through unfamiliar streets and during the short journey, she described the perceived hierarchy of secondary schools in this town in North West England.

At the top of the pile was an independent school, then a grammar, followed by a faith school. Below those were a number of academies and finally the school I was visiting – which, in her mind, sat firmly at the bottom of the pile.

We can all probably compile a similar rank order for the schools in our area. Do we even question why we have so many different types of schools, with differing levels of status and desirability? Can you even name the 11 different types of secondary school that the Department for Education (DfE) lists as existing in England?

This is my 25th year of teaching, during which I have worked in three state comprehensives. The schools have differed geographically and in intake, but with one key similarity – they all serve their local communities and admission is open to all in the catchment.

My current school is located in a rural and affluent area and is surrounded by a number of high status independent schools. This has allowed me to glimpse some of the most privileged educational establishments and witness the contrast in experiences of our young people. Furthermore, as part of the research I undertook for my Master’s in education I visited and spoke to students from a school that was perceived locally as being at the “bottom of the pile”.

During my research, I had the rare opportunity to gain insights into the feelings and perceptions of students

who attend one of the least desirable schools in their area, where there are grammar schools and selection by ability at age 11.

I have also experienced my own children’s progression through the education system and witnessed first-hand the decisions made by other parents in determining what is best for their children. As such, my insights into the English education system are formed from years of professional and personal experience.

In this series, I will be looking critically at English education and considering the implications of a “stratified and segregated system” for all students in our schools. My aim is to scrutinise the pieces of the jigsaw that make up a picture of educational inequity in England. I will share examples of how other countries tackle these issues very differently (and more effectively).

Our system is imperfect in many ways. I wish to challenge some of its assumptions and suggest how we can improve – and how teachers can be the agents for change.

I will argue that the English education system should be a key driver for social justice – the objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters. I will argue that we must aim to create a more equitable education system – one where all students have access to high-quality education regardless of background. I have grouped the influences on equity into seven key areas:

- Good schools & equity.
- Collaboration vs competition.
- Resources.
- Education policy.
- Admissions.
- Assessment.
- Accountability.

‘We outperform every school in the area by quite a distance’

schools – they are at a disadvantage. So, England offers a wider variety of schools types and designations than many other countries and this leads to a great disparity in intake and outcomes. Some parents have an advantage in obtaining access to better and segregated school systems for their children. The research shows that it is the disadvantaged who are disproportionately adversely affected by this lack of a level playing field in education.

There is not equity in our system – our young people do not have access to a high-quality education regardless of home background. The issues surrounding selective and private education sit at the heart of this debate.

What can you do, if like me, you feel strongly that our system is set up to favour the most privileged in society to the detriment of others? I would suggest the following: read widely – there is a suggested reading list at the end of this article to get you started.

You can get involved more directly by engaging in the work of organisations such as Comprehensive Futures or Private School Policy Reform. Above all, do not assume that the system we have is the best and only option. Authentic change takes time, but is possible.

Chapter 2: Collaboration vs competition

I will now consider how competition between schools contributes to this stratification in our education system and will argue that it is through collaboration, rather than competition, that we can ensure greater equity in our schools.

A consumer marketplace

In the English education system schools compete with other local schools to attract students. This has been the case since the 1988 Education Reform Act, which placed parents as consumers, able to choose their product (a school) the marketplace.

By introducing competition, it was claimed, standards across all schools would be driven up. Schools, eager of course to ensure full rolls, have therefore had to advertise their

unique advantages over competitors.

While other measures, such as access to sporting or creative opportunities are often touted, schools largely rely on Ofsted rankings, Progress 8 and other outcomes statistics to try and win this competition. For example, one school in the Midlands boasts as the strapline on its homepage: “We outperform every school in the area by quite a distance. Our students achieve a grade more on average, in every subject, than at the nearest grammar schools and, according to the National Teaching Awards, we have the best maths department in England.”

“It is, of course, the more disadvantaged who have the least or often no choice in our competitive system. This is where social justice is absent”

This seems to be a school desperate to attract students, but at the expense of other local schools.

Another selective school located more than 20 miles away from me, and therefore operating well outside its natural catchment area, regularly posts adverts in local magazines promoting its open evenings, not to mention its 11-plus testing information events for year 5.

This is in stark contrast to most of the other 20 secondary schools that lie between my home and the school in question. Again, in its quest to drive up pupil numbers, I would argue that this school is damaging future intake for all the other schools within its massive catchment area.

I am sure you can name schools local to you that operate in a similar manner – an unaltruistic by-product of a market-driven system. If you want a look, simply type your postcode into the DfE’s schools comparison website and see how the hierarchy pans out in your area.

But unpalatable self-promotion strategies are not the main issue with our competitive system. My argument is this...

Schools compete with other local schools to attract students. The schools that appear to be the most successful can attract more students, and indeed more students with academically motivated or advantaged parents. This will inevitably lead to better outcomes in a variety of accountability measures, which will in turn increase the school’s ability to self-promote and so on. Furthermore, for a school to be oversubscribed leads to greater financial stability and security, and therefore improved strategic financial planning.

But that is not the end of it. Schools that appear to be more successful will also attract bigger fields of candidates for teaching and other positions. This is likely to lead to higher quality staffing, improvements in the delivery of teaching and learning, and therefore better outcomes for students.

It follows then, that the reverse is true, and research backs this up. Schools that appear to be less successful – those in Ofsted categories, the “sink” school, the school at the bottom of the educational pile – have an uphill battle in recruiting students generally, but particularly students from more academically motivated backgrounds and, inevitably, will struggle to recruit and retain quality staff (Reay, 2017; Gorard & See, 2013).

Our system of highly public, high-stakes accountability measures with league tables and school rankings leads to a self-perpetuating cycle of frustration for those with the least choice. The competitive English education system is set up to favour those who are most advantaged – those who can afford to pay for an independent school education, for a private tutor to help prepare for the 11-plus, or to move to a certain catchment area.

It is, of course, the more disadvantaged who have the least or often no choice in our competitive system. This is where social justice is absent – the forgotten children at the bottom of the educational hierarchy. And all this, of course, despite the

fantastic efforts of the dedicated and hard-working professionals in these “less desirable” schools.

International lessons

So, what can we learn from the approach of other countries? In her fantastic book *Cleverlands* (2016), Lucy Crehan explores how in Japan all students up to the age of 15 attend their local elementary and junior school. Teachers are employed by the local board of education and are moved schools typically every four to five years. Teachers are given frequent feedback on their practice and are confidentially graded A to E. This grade is then used when moving teachers between schools to help balance the quality of teaching over time.

In Finland, there is a consistent focus on equity and cooperation rather than choice and competition. Since the 1970s, their aim has been to have a good school for every child, but they have sought to achieve this without a school inspection regime, with no standardised high-stakes testing before the age of 18, and with the absence of test-based accountability.

And yet, Finland outperforms most other nations in terms of academic outcomes and in terms of equity of education, according to the OECD (Schleicher, 2019). In Finland, education is seen as a “public good” and is protected as a human right.

Covid-19 has presented a rare opportunity for the English education system to operate without our usual set of high-stakes accountability measures. Might the temporary cessation of Ofsted visits also mean subsequent comparisons carry less weight?

Do we, as teachers and school leaders, have an opportunity to demonstrate that the collaboration between schools that we have drawn upon in the challenging circumstances of the last 18 months is a superior way to improve practice and therefore raise standards?

Schools work best when given the opportunity to collaborate with others, but this must operate in a framework of trust. Colleagues working within multi-academy trusts (MATs) know this only too well, but for schools outside of MATs, or



network partnerships, the spectre of competition looms large and prevents authentic collaboration from taking place.

What I would like to see is a removal of publicised high-stakes accountability and therefore public rankings of schools. There is no evidence that this raises standards in all schools and, in fact, it perpetuates inequity in our system at the expense of those with the least choice, as argued by Melissa Benn and Janet Downs in their 2016 book *The Truth About Our Schools*.

I would like to see all schools collaborate in an authentic way, free from the pressures of marketisation. There are undoubtedly models of excellent practice within MATs, local authorities and other peer challenge partnerships that could form a new framework for genuine sustainable school improvement for all schools.

For true equity in education we need to reach a position where “parents rarely worry about the quality of their neighbourhood school because there is so little between-school variation”.

This may seem an impossible dream but it is exactly how Pasi Sahlberg describes the situation in Finland, in his book *Finnish Lessons 2.0*. In 2018, PISA found that Finland had the lowest between-school variation of any OECD nation, an accolade definitely worth competing for (Schleicher, 2019).

Chapter 3: Resources and funding

Every normal working day I drive past students walking in two different directions. One group is walking up the hill to the state comprehensive where I work. The other is walking down the hill, from their boarding houses to their lessons in an independent school. Both schools in this middle-England market town have a similar number of students – about 900.

These two groups of students walk the same pavements and breathe the same air. However, once they arrive at their respective schools, their experiences are markedly different.

At the independent school, each student is funded between four and 6.5 times the amount of those at my school. The following comparisons can be made.

- We have six tennis courts, they have 39.
- We have one cricket pitch, they have seven; we have no cricket nets, they have 19.
- We have no cricket coach, they have two full-time dedicated cricket staff.
- We have one drama studio, they have a professional 300-seat proscenium arch theatre.
- We have one sports hall with a small dance studio, they have a state of the art sports centre which houses a six-lane 25m

swimming pool, a 62-station fitness studio, three squash courts, a gymnasium, two dance studios, a large hospitality suite, and a six-court sports hall.

- We have one art room, they have an award-winning art, design and technology centre including a dedicated gallery space.
- We have six science labs, they have a world class science centre, complete with dedicated science library.
- We have 11 buildings on a site of 17 acres, they have 75 spread over 120 acres.

I could go on, but I think you get the picture. These are not slight differences in provision but represent the massive disparity in resourcing of education that exists across our schools. Equity in education means giving all children access to a high quality of education regardless of their background.

Funding

Let us start with the basics. In an equitable education system, we might expect all similar schools, and therefore students, to receive broadly the same level of funding, with some adjustments for disadvantage. You might expect this to be true for the 93 per cent of our students who are educated within the state system (Sutton Trust, 2019).

However, similar state schools do not receive similar levels of funding.

In 2019/20, according to DfE statistics, the difference in state secondary school funding per-pupil at a national level ranged from £3,866 to £9,852. In my local city, the range was £4,860 to £6,675.

These differences exist because schools naturally have different contexts and therefore funding requirements, but also historically, the 152 local authorities have implemented their own local funding formulae. The new National Funding Formula (NFF) seeks to address these local variations in approach. It sets minimum levels of funding in schools from 2020/21 (albeit at a local authority level, so still maintaining local differences). In addition to local adjustments, voluntary-aided faith schools can receive extra funds, for example from the diocese.

There is of course another source of financial resource that state schools can tap into, some very much more lucratively than others – parents. A 2018 survey from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) found that 20 per cent of schools had asked parents for voluntary contributions. Perhaps this is understandable given the level of real-term cuts facing schools since 2010. However, such approaches can dramatically increase the funding gap.

For example, a report for *The Observer* (Ferguson & McIntyre, >

Independent schools are almost entirely exclusive to the rich



2019) found that England's 30 most successful state school PTAs raised £3.6 million for their schools. That is an average of £120,000 per school – equivalent to roughly four extra teachers. Meanwhile, the National Governors Association reports that the average raised by PTAs is £6,500 per year (NGA, 2011).

The *Observer* report also highlights that the schools with the highest proportion of pupils from low-income families usually do not have a PTA and those that do raise very little money from parents.

Many of the schools in the top 30 asked parents to donate regularly or to set up legacies. It is particularly noteworthy that those schools had an average free school meal (FSM) population of five per cent compared to the national average of 15 per cent.

In the local town where my children go to school, their state comprehensive PTA admirably raises roughly £5,000 per year to contribute to books, various prizes and resources such as recycling bins. The

independent school in the same town, in the year 2018/19, raised £2.33m through parent and alumni donations, legacies, corporate giving, transfer of assets and other fund-generation activities.

And of course, the disparity is growing. This is all set against a backdrop of state funding of education falling in real terms by eight per cent since 2010 and independent school fees rising by 29 per cent since 2007 (Belfield, Farquharson & Sibieta, 2018). There is of course the Pupil Premium, but this is just a drop in the ocean compared to the disparity in resources between the state and independent sectors.

In their book, *Engines of Privilege* (2019), Professor Francis Green and David Kynaston point out that on average, independent schools can deploy three times more resources than the average state school. The average annual fee for an independent day school is around £13,250. By comparison, state schools spend between £3,000 and

£8,000 per pupil, per year (Benn & Downs, 2016). In my school, we are spending £5,744 on each student this academic year. The independent school down the road has day fees of £23,970 and boarding fees of £38,718 per year.

So, what is all this extra resource spent on in the independent sector?

- Enhanced physical resources, such as sports facilities and curriculum centres.
- Smaller class sizes: OECD studies show that average class sizes in UK state schools are more than double those in independent schools (Benn & Downs, 2016). Green and Kynaston (2019) point out that while 1 in 16 students are educated in independent schools, those same schools employ 1 in 7 teachers.
- Enhanced social environment: Green and Kynaston argue that despite scholarships and bursaries, 85 per cent of independent students come from families in the top five per cent of earners in the country.

- A greater range and quality of extra-curricular provision. The independent school near me offers more than 50 “electives and societies” including rifle-shooting, water-polo and school radio.
- Enhanced SEN resources.
- A focus on “character” and “confidence”.

This last point is not to be underestimated, as it perhaps underpins the unseen benefits bestowed upon many independent school students that sets them up for a lifetime of advantage over state school alumni.

An intangible advantage

A few years ago, I was invited to spend some time at the independent school down the road from my school. In addition to seeing the fantastic resources and beautiful surroundings, I witnessed an almost intangible advantage that only a high level of educational funding can secure.

At lunch, the students and affiliated staff queued calmly in small numbers for a hot buffet lunch back at their boarding houses. We sat at tables of six or so in an elegant dining hall with girls from years 9 to 13. Each table had a mixture of ages and was allocated an adult to sit at the head. The girls made polite and formal conversation with me for 40 minutes. They led the conversation confidently and were naturally inquisitive about the “school down the road”, as you might expect.

Afterwards I reflected on how that experience, for those students, engaged in quite formal surroundings and conversation with a variety of adults every day, week after week, for five school years, would contribute to their character and confidence provided by this type of school.

On top of this, alumni networking and being the “right fit” socially mean that a privately educated man has a seven to 15 per cent pay gap over a state-educated man with the same degree (Green & Kynaston, 2019).

This notion of “fit” is explored more deeply in *The class pay gap: Why it pays to be privileged*, an article by Sam Freidman and Daniel Laurison (2019). They write: “In

accountancy, for example, and particularly in spaces such as the City (of London), the historical residue of an overwhelmingly privileged (White, male) majority is an enduring emphasis on corporate ‘polish’ – encompassing formal dress and etiquette, interactional poise and an aura of gravitas.

“This, of course, is not assessed in any formal way, but instead discerned via an instinctive gut feeling, an intuitive sense, as one senior accountant put it, that some simply ‘feel like a partner.’”

Quantitative analysis of the advantage offered by the superior resources of the independent sector comes in the form of the 2019 Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission report entitled *Elitist Britain*. It highlights that while only seven per cent of the population are privately educated, they make up 39 per cent of the “elite”, including senior judges (65 per cent), government permanent secretaries (59 per cent), newspaper columnists, (44 per cent), and England cricketers (43 per cent). This all suggests that there are substantial barriers to people from less advantaged backgrounds – and I would argue that the disparity in resources is a major contributing factor.

Where to find a solution?

So, what is the answer? What does my blueprint for equity suggest for this most intransigent and emotive subject? Covid-19 has only highlighted the differences in resources between our schools and communities, with many independent schools being able to provide a greater proportion of live online lessons for all their students since the beginning of the pandemic. Most state schools have found reaching all their students in this way near-impossible.

But, does our current situation also give us a unique, once in a lifetime opportunity to stop, step back and look at the English education system with fresh eyes? It was after the two world wars that some of the most profound changes to our education system took place, namely the 1918 and 1944 Education Acts.

Is now the time to try and persuade society that it is socially

and morally unacceptable to pay for superior access, so that those with the ability to pay gain an advantage at the expense of the rest?

In Finland, during their long period of education reform, it was famously made illegal to pay for education (Sahlberg, 2015). In other countries, where private education exists, it often provides funding in line with state education, or only slightly higher (Green & Kynaston, 2019).

In England, uniquely, independent schools are almost entirely exclusive to the rich.

There are many suggestions of how to reduce the disparity. These include: adding VAT to school fees, removing charitable status for independent schools and applying full business rates (they currently pay 20 per cent of the full amount); using contextual university admissions (this is already in place); increasing the number of state places at independent schools; integrating the two systems, phasing out and the abolition of all independent schools.

The issue of inequity in resourcing cannot be examined in isolation. It is tied up inextricably with the other themes I explore in these articles and requires nothing short of an educational revolution, the like of which we have not seen since 1944.

If you would like to learn more about these highly complex issues, I would suggest exploring the wealth of information and opinion compiled by Private Education Policy Forum. I would also recommend reading *Posh Boys* by Robert Verkaik (2018) and *Engines of Privilege* as referenced.

History provides us with a catalogue of missed opportunities, false starts and forgotten promises in regard to creating a truly level playing field in our education system. If we are going to bring about genuine and sustained reform, then it will only be through an inclusive and rational debate.

I urge everyone who sees the injustice in our current system to get involved. There are 500,000 teachers working in 21,000 state schools. Together we have a voice – challenge your union, lobby your MP, empower others with information. Above all, do not assume that the system we

have is the best and only option. Authentic change takes time, but is possible.

“As of February 2020, 69 per cent of Boris Johnson’s cabinet were educated privately, which is the highest proportion since John Major’s tenure”

Chapter 4: Policy and policy-makers

During the 25 years that I have been teaching there have been 12 education secretaries. Only two of these, Justine Greening and current incumbent, Gavin Williamson, attended comprehensive schools. The rest all went to grammar schools (four) or private schools (five), with the exception of David Blunkett (special school).

Only about 12 per cent of people in the country go to either private school or grammar school, but their alumni have largely been responsible for the highest office in education, overseeing all our schools, 88 per cent of which are comprehensives.

So, but for two exceptions, they have no experience of what it is like to attend the type of school that the majority of children go to.

There are some who would argue that this is exactly as it should be – the “best and brightest minds” or “the products of a superior education” making the important policy decisions on behalf of the nation. However, those of us dedicated to the notion that all children, regardless of family background, have an equal propensity for intelligence, skill, creativity and academia find such views abhorrent.

As the Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission report *Elitist Britain* (2019a) observes: “Politicians are also ultimately responsible for education policy ... it is therefore important that many of those

responsible for these areas have experience of the state education system.”

When Nicky Morgan became education secretary, her entire department at that time was privately educated (Green & Kynaston, 2019). How are things now? Well, 41 per cent of the current Conservative government was educated privately, compared to 14 per cent of Labour MPs. Overall, 33 per cent of MPs in England were educated privately, 15 per cent went to selective schools and 50 per cent attended comprehensives (Sutton Trust, 2019b).

Up until recently, things were moving towards better representation but, as of February 2020, 69 per cent of Boris Johnson’s cabinet were educated privately, which is the highest proportion since John Major in 1992 (BBC, 2020).

Another way of looking at this, is that members of the cabinet are 10 times more likely to have attended private school than members of the public. This begs the question: How can the people responsible for making decisions about how our nation is run have a true empathy and understanding of its people, when so many of them have been educated in a parallel and segregated system?

As Mike Trace, a former government advisor and co-founder of Private School Policy Reform, eloquently puts it: “A much more important qualification for people making policy decisions is the ability to understand, empathise and communicate with the people they are governing. In this sense, the over-representation of ‘the elite’ in the most senior positions is a real problem.”

He added: “To pursue effective policies ... leaders need to understand the lives and motivations of ordinary people: those who struggle to get access to good healthcare, education for their kids, or social care for their parents. My experience is that government leaders – not all but most – are supremely poorly qualified to do their job well in these areas.” (For more, see Trace, 2020)

Let us now consider how education policy looks in a country where they have put equity at the

Education has always been a party-political football...

heart of policy – Finland. While there are obvious limitations in comparing us with a nation that has just 5.5 million people and a very different socio-political history and structure, their approach to education has been so radically different to ours that it is worth consideration, not least since Finland outperforms us by a variety of measures such as for reading, maths and science, financial literacy, student wellbeing and frequency of bullying (OECD, 2018). Here, then, are a few snapshots of the Finnish educational approach (Sahlberg, 2015):

- Policies are based on equal opportunities and equity in education, and put teachers at the core of educational change.
- Policies since the 1970s have prioritised creating equal opportunities for all children to have a good education (compare this to the English segregated system where a minority receive a substantially better resourced education).
- Educational policies designed to raise student achievement have focused on teaching and learning. These are seen to be the key elements that make a difference in what students learn – not standards, assessment or

alternative instruction programmes.

- There are no standardised high-stakes tests before the matriculation exam at the end of upper secondary (age 18). Compare this to SATs (years 1, 4, 6), GCSEs et al (year 11), A levels et al (year 13).
- During the 1960s and 1970s, private schools and grammar schools were integrated into a single “municipal structure” (equivalent to a nine-year comprehensive school).
- Between the ages of seven and 16 all students are educated at the same type of school. From age 16 there are vocational schools or upper secondary routes, both leading via different routes to university. These are not necessarily policies that I would jump to introduce in England. But the contrast is stark and reminds me of two things. First, the system we have is not the only way of organising education. Second, with careful planning, inclusive dialogue, and time, a much more equitable system of education is achievable.

Of course, when the Finns first proposed their new system it was not without its critics, particularly in Parliament, hence the time it took to

“The pace of educational change should not be affected by party politics. The teaching profession should be centrally involved in developing future education policy”

establish, from 1950 through to the mid-80s. However, what they have now has persisted despite 20 changes of government and 27 education ministers. The Finnish goal of building a good, publicly financed, and locally governed school for every child is so deeply rooted that it has survived opposing governments and ministries.

Rather than repeatedly allocating financial resources and time to implement new reforms, teachers in Finland have been given the professional freedom to develop pedagogical knowledge and skills related to their individual needs (Sahlberg, 2015).

So, how should educational policy

in England be reformed to make our system more equitable?

The English educational expert, Peter Mortimore, in his 2014 book *Education Under Siege*, argues: “In the legal sphere there is a permanent Law Commission charged with monitoring the legal system and suggesting improvements and revisions. Surely this is what we need for education?” This could take the form of a permanent commission of non-party political experts.

Renowned British educator Sir Tim Brighouse, writing in the *Guardian* in 2018, suggests an educational revolution similar in scale to the 1944 Education Act, claiming our system to be broken and in need of a new act and a new body to oversee education. His act would have five aims:

- Resolving teacher recruitment and retention.
- Reforming the curriculum.
- Reforming the accountability system.
- Fairer admissions.
- Closing the funding gap between private and public.

In her 2018 book, *Life Lessons*, Melissa Benn, argues for a National Education Service, “like the NHS, providing a framework for a life-long entitlement to education: from early years provision to Apprenticeships, universities and adult education”.

She adds: “It should be free at the point of delivery and its aim should be an integrated, comprehensive system available to all.”

The Headteachers’ Roundtable, an independent group of school leaders, has proposed an idea for a “rigorous, inclusive and flexible curriculum and qualifications framework” (2013). Among its five guiding principles, it states: “The pace of educational change should not be affected by party politics. The teaching profession should be centrally involved in developing future education policy.”

There are numerous other educational organisations we could list – our teaching unions, the Chartered College, the SSAT, teacher training institutions and research schools, for example – who are all dedicated to improving education in this country. And yet I fear many expend much energy interpreting

and then aligning with the latest government educational policies.

For those of us working in the English education system, it is easy to recall myriad changes of policy direction – initiatives launching and collapsing at the whims of various school ministers and governments over the last 25 years.

Education has always been a party-political football; for most of us in education this is all we have ever known and experienced.

A recurring theme in this series is that school leaders and teachers are too tied up with meeting high-stakes public accountability measures and other pressures to question or challenge the fundamental issues at stake.

Policy decisions about education should be carefully considered and made by professionals with a deep understanding of and a background in education. Educational policy should sit outside political influence and must reflect quality educational research. There should be an overarching single aim – to deliver high-quality schools for all students, regardless of their family background and where all students have the opportunity to perform beyond their potential.

Chapter 5: Admissions

Just from the people known to me, I can list the following approaches to getting a child into the secondary school of choice:

- Attended church every Sunday in order to gain a place at a Church of England school despite not being religious.
- Entered their child to sit an entrance exam for a place at a Church of England school, competing alongside 250 children for 12 available places.
- Paid for private tuition for all their children for several months to prepare for 11-plus exam (at a cost of £25 per hour).
- Bought a house within the catchment of the “best” school in a town, despite the house not being big enough for the family. I am sure you can come up with your own lists of the “games parents play” or the expensive hoops that more advantaged parents jump through to gain a secondary school spot. I must be clear: I am not

pointing a finger at parents – it is the system that is unfair, not the actions of individuals.

Overt selection

Although only five per cent of students in England attend the 160 or so grammar schools, research suggests that only about 28 per cent of state schools are not affected by the presence of a selective school (Coe et al, 2008). So, selection, and its impact on school intake, is a big issue for many comprehensives in England, whether you live in Bucks, Kent, Lincolnshire (the three counties still with selective systems) or not, since there are further pockets of selective schools scattered all over England.

Michael Rosen, quoted on the home page of the Comprehensive Futures campaign, which fights for fair school admissions and an end to the 11-plus, states: “Grammar schools are a way of preventing a majority of children from going to a certain kind of school. These schools don’t help society to be fairer or better. Just the opposite: a grammar school system forces us all into being one-mark passes or failures at the age of 11 when in reality we’re all complex mixtures of abilities, strengths and weaknesses.”

“Grammar schools are a way of preventing a majority of children from going to a certain kind of school”

Covert or social selection?

All state schools are required to publish their admission policies and these vary from being highly selective, such as with grammar schools, to all-inclusive. Some selection, like with grammars, is overt and obvious, but there are other types of selection that are covert, and this leads to inequity in the system.

I will use a faith academy as an example. The school assigns 120 out

of 140 or so of its year 7 places according to the following admission criteria: 70-odd places for “worshipping members of the Church of England or Methodist Church” then the rest for children of staff, followed by siblings then other faiths and finally, proximity to the school. The remaining 15 students are selected by an academic or music aptitude test.

This school effectively “top skims” children with academic ability, musical talent and aspirational parents from a very wide catchment area and in the eyes of many parents is the next best thing to a private or grammar school education – though you would not necessarily know it from their admission policy.

In terms of disadvantage, the faith school has nine per cent compared to a city average of 30 per cent, so despite apparently selecting students mainly on the basis of faith, the level of disadvantage within the school population is only one-third that of the city average.

To further support the suggestion of faith schools as a method of social selection, Peter Mortimore in *Education Under Siege* (2014) says “there is a wealth of evidence pointing to the more economically advantaged pupil composition of faith schools”. He cites research showing that three-quarters of Catholic schools have a more affluent mix of pupils than other schools in the local area, and that faith schools have a much-reduced proportion of children with FSMs than the local average.

And research by the Sutton Trust (2020) found further differences in admissions and in-take – namely that the highest ranked schools accept around half the average rate of disadvantaged pupils as the national average. They conclude that this contributes to a socially segregated system.

Change is needed

So, what might a more equitable admissions system look like?

Mortimore (2014) suggests creating balanced schools in which there is “an intake of pupils from different family backgrounds, advantaged and disadvantaged; those who find learning easy and those who find learning hard”.

He argues that “in a fair system, each school would have broadly the same proportions of different kinds of pupils. But to achieve this situation, parents would need to give up the ‘notional choice’ of a school for their child”.

This would be a hard sell in England, but it doesn’t mean that it is not worth arguing for. One way of encouraging people that “allocation” of pupils to schools by, for example, their local authority, would be that they no longer have to go through the often-traumatic process of finding a suitable school for their child. Ideally, one would hope that all students could attend their local school and that all schools are “good” schools.

Various methods of school place allocation have been suggested for situations where the local population does not lead to an appropriate mix of students, for example in areas of high population density. Banning systems, where students are distributed evenly among local schools, is one possibility.

Bussing students between areas to ensure a balance is another potential solution. It sounds unpalatable, but compared with the vast distances travelled by many students to “escape” their local, lower status school, it may be more attractive. Finally, random allocation could be used, but only if it achieves the aim of creating schools that have a balance of students of all backgrounds and abilities.

A long way to go

For our schools to be equitable in the way they admit students, there is no room for independent schools, which largely select by ability to pay. There is no room for grammar schools or other forms of selection. And there is no room for faith schools which select by religion and frequency of worship.

As Benn and Downs say in *The Truth About Our Schools* (2016), “comprehensive education sends out an important message about children being educated together, that regardless of class, faith, ethnic background and prior attainment all children should walk through the same gates to school”. Benn goes on to say in 2018’s *Life Lessons*: “All



The league table culture pitting one school against another

schools should have the same rights, the same responsibilities and the same level of autonomy.”

There is so much inequity built into every stage of our current education system that it sometimes seems impossible to imagine us ever moving towards a fairer school system. But we must not lose sight of what is actually best for all the students in our communities.

So, what can we as teachers and school leaders do to really make a difference? I attended a webinar in 2020 hosted by Comprehensive Futures on the subject of grammar schools. Their conclusion, with which I agree, is that no change will come without political pressure. This pressure will come from direct action, from groups of individuals campaigning, lobbying MPs and unions and keeping these issues of inequity in education high on the agenda. Sadly there seems little political appetite currently for such change, but that is no excuse for inaction.

Teachers could and should be a vital part of this political pressure for change. I strongly believe that we should be questioning the status quo and seeking out alternatives.

To move forward on any of the issues I have discussed will be fraught with difficulties, but to do nothing should not be an option. Now may be the time to seize the opportunity for change, however small – any progress is better than no progress. As educational campaigner Fiona Millar said recently: “The inequalities in our society start with education, and this is our ‘build back better’ moment.”

Chapter 6: Assessment

Here are three ways the assessment system in England sets children up to fail:

- At age 11, as they leave primary school, roughly one-third of children are judged as not having reached the expected national standard in reading, writing and maths. This brands more than 200,000 children at age 11 as academic failures.
- Each year, roughly one-third of 16-year-olds do not achieve a grade 4 pass in English and maths at the end of key stage 4 – the so-called “forgotten third”.

This is due to the comparative outcomes system, which means 200,000 or so young people are once again deliberately labelled as academic failures. It is likely that many of these will be the same children who were “failing” at age 11.

- In 2019, only 35 per cent of English 18-year-olds went to university (UK Parliament, 2020) and yet our entire secondary education and assessment system appears to be set up predominantly to pave the way for university education – even though in practice this has always been a minority pathway. We also know this: Schools in England are ranked by public, high-stakes, standardised test outcomes. These tests are administered throughout primary and secondary and dominate student and teacher actions at key times; they also profoundly affect the curriculum.

The nature and scope of standardised assessment is not my focus here, however it is worth noting that we have a wider compulsory national assessment regime than most other countries:

- Reception: Baseline Assessment (postponed until autumn 2021 due to Covid).
- Year 1: Phonics screening.
- Year 2: National curriculum assessments in English, maths and science.
- Year 4: Multiplication tables check.
- Year 6: SATs in maths, English (reading and writing, punctuation grammar and spelling) and science (sample tests every other year), published in national performance tables.
- Year 11: GCSEs and other Level 1/2 qualifications, published in national performance tables.
- Year 13: A levels and other Level 3 qualifications, published in national performance tables.

This is considerably more than other European countries and at odds with some of the highest performing international education systems. Countries such as Finland leave high-stakes compulsory testing until the age of 17/18, at the end of compulsory education.

“Other countries do not conduct their most important high-stakes tests at the age of 16”

(Sahlberg, 2015). Italy, by contrast, has state exams at age 14 and 18, but these consist of two to three written exams and an interview (European Commission, 2020). External exams in Canada vary considerably between provinces but are generally limited to year 13 and include 50 per cent continual assessment rather than exams (Crehan, 2016).

Covid-19 has led us to question the nature and purpose of our exam system. The debate over the future of GCSEs continues, particularly since their architect, Sir Kenneth Baker, said that they have run their course (Lough, 2020).

Other countries do not conduct their most important high-stakes tests at the age of 16, when adolescents are not necessarily performing at their most representative. The National Baccalaureate Trust and the Rethinking Assessment campaign, led by prominent state and independent headteachers are but two examples of organisations campaigning for revised models of assessment.

Geoff Barton, general secretary of ASCL, has written previously in *SecEd* about removing comparable outcomes and replacing them with an English and maths “passport” (Barton, 2020) and the One Nation group of Conservative MPs is also calling for a “radical rethink”, citing the impact on teaching time of exam preparation, the fact that we have two sets of high-stakes exams within three years, and the negative impact on mental health as driving forces for change (Adams, 2020).

Performance tables

I want to focus here on how the act of publishing high-stakes assessment data adversely affects equity in our system.

Through the league table culture, our assessment system pits one school against another, highlighting

“winners” and “losers”. This serves only to create tensions between schools and perpetuate inequalities.

If you list the schools in your area by the exam outcomes metric currently in favour – Progress 8 – it is highly likely that the rank order will go something like this.

- Most academically successful school/s – probably faith or selective school/s.
- Most academically successful non-selective school/s.
- Moderately successful non-selective school/s.
- Least academically successful school/s. Probably located in the most deprived areas.

It is also likely that if you ranked these schools in terms of “desirability” from the parental point of view, the order would be very similar (independent schools do not have to publish performance figures such as Progress 8 – another indication that these schools exist in a parallel, separate and socially segregated system).

Now add in the percentage of students eligible for FSMs. The sequence is likely to be the same, only in reverse. So, too often, the most academically successful schools (by the metrics decided upon by government, at least) are the most desirable in the eyes of parents but are also generally those with the lowest proportion of disadvantaged students. The converse is therefore true – the most disadvantaged students find themselves concentrated in the least desirable schools.

As I have said, this effect is compounded because less desirable schools then find it more difficult to recruit and retain the best teachers and find it more challenging to attract more academically motivated students.

Try ranking the schools in your area. I have tried it for many areas, including my local area, my nearest city, a Midlands town, and the borough of London where I used to work – the patterns hold true.

Flawed nature of value-added

Regardless of the pros and cons of particular progress and attainment measures, I would argue that it is the public nature of the “league table”



approach that is most damaging to the least advantaged in our society.

However, let us just briefly consider why some educationalists feel that the data used to make these comparisons is flawed. Stephen Gorard, professor of education and public policy at Durham University, is highly critical of any use by our school system of value-added measures (Gorard, 2018). He makes the point that value-added is almost entirely predictable from raw scores – in other words, more able students generally make more progress than less able students. So schools with a higher proportion of more able students will achieve better progress scores and therefore appear to be providing a better quality of education.

He states: “If value-added (VA) scores are as meaningless as they appear to be, there is a serious ethical issue wherever they have been or continue to be used to reward or punish schools or to make policy decisions. VA is zero-sum, meaning that it is inherently competitive and schools can only improve their scores at the expense of others.”

The truth, according to Gorard (2018), is that “published school performance measures based on VA scores are likely to be profoundly misleading, particularly for those such as parents and policy-makers”.

He describes Progress 8 as “really, really flaky” and just another version of value-added.

How to use assessment data

Assessment data is of course important for individuals, cohorts, clusters of schools and at a national level to inform us of standards and progress. However, this data should be used by teachers, school leaders and educational professionals to inform and make recommendations. Once in the public domain such data will always lead to increasing competition and decreasing collaboration between schools. It also makes it much more difficult for some schools to make the improvements they need.

Instead of standardised national tests for all students, samples of students could sit national benchmark tests for Department for Education monitoring purposes. Such a system is employed by other countries, such as Finland. This could make primary schools a standardised testing free zone, while still providing the DfE with data to demonstrate impact, progress and value for money.

Is it time to re-organise our schools to focus more on the “head, heart and hand”, as Peter Hyman (2020) would say? How could we assess such qualities more effectively going forward? Ranking

schools by assessment data league tables would seem rather short-sighted.

With employers increasingly looking to be “qualifications blind” and seeking other qualities such as creativity and collaboration skills, an education system that focuses so heavily on academic progress and which continues to pit school against school, seems increasingly outmoded and serves only to increase the inequity in our system.

Chapter Seven: Accountability

Ofsted. What emotions does the word stir within you? Fear, perhaps? Anger, nervousness, anxiety, a deep-seated hatred or maybe a quick burst of adrenaline?

In my 25 years of teaching I have seen and felt all of these emotions and I have watched as colleagues have been pushed into high states of stress and fatigue, in some cases leaving the profession altogether.

Accountability is needed to maintain high standards and to ensure value for money for the tax-payer. But can Ofsted actually claim to do that? The number of children in good or outstanding schools in England has risen from 66 to 85 per cent between 2010 and 2019 (Ofsted, 2019). That apparent improvement in standards may or may not be as a result of Ofsted

inspection. However, that does also mean that in spite of Ofsted, which was brought into existence in 1992, after 27 years, 15 per cent of our schools are still not considered to be “good”.

A report by Ofsted itself states: “In some pockets of the country, two whole cohorts of children have gone through all their primary or all their secondary school life without ever attending a good school.” At the end of August 2019, there were still an estimated 210,000 pupils being educated in these so-called “stuck schools” (Ofsted, 2020).

Which of us has not found ourselves questioning at one point or another whether “we are just doing this for Ofsted” – and then fighting to justify our actions for educational reasons?

With a core purpose of improving outcomes for all students at all levels, schools should find that meeting Ofsted criteria is a natural by-product of their efforts, but this does not always seem to be the case.

Schools in Ofsted categories are in a permanent state of “high-alert”, where the stakes literally could not be any higher – student rolls and therefore financial security, parental support, leadership and governance are all on the line.

Why Ofsted doesn't work I strongly feel that the grading

system and public nature of Ofsted reports work against the most disadvantaged students. As I highlighted in article six, schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged students are likely to perform less well on Progress 8 and subsequently tend to be graded lower by Ofsted.

This leads to these schools being placed further down performance tables. This results in the schools being less desirable to prospective parents and concentrates the disadvantage further. Additionally, the league tables make it harder for less desirable schools to attract quality staff.

Back at Durham University, Prof Gorard is highly critical of Ofsted gradings, particularly in relation to selective schools: "Schools rated outstanding are more likely to be single sex, especially girls-only schools. They are staggeringly more likely to be selective than comprehensive and much less likely to be the majority secondary modern schools left over after selection to grammar schools."

He adds: "It seems that Ofsted

inspectors overall are unable to judge the quality of a school divorced from the kinds of challenges it faces. That is why schools deemed to be 'failing' are more likely to be in urban centres, and so-called 'good' schools are more often in leafy, suburban settings." (Gorard, 2018)

The 2020 paper by Ofsted cited earlier identifies that one of the reasons for schools becoming "stuck" is that "leaders perceived that the quality of the advice (they receive) is often lacking. There is a poor match between the problems of the school and the advice on offer".

What school leaders appear to require in such situations is quality, contextualised advice and support from the right people. Ofsted is not in a position to offer such advice.

North of the border

Scotland's approach is perhaps a step in the right direction. Inspections are carried out by Education Scotland. Like in England there is no grading of lessons, but by contrast there are no overall

gradings for schools – although two core "Quality Indicators" are given an evaluation on a six-point scale.

Outside of a few core areas, schools can choose which areas they would like the inspection team to focus on, and there is a professional dialogue before and after the visit with a focus on partnership with the school.

According to Gayle Gorman, chief inspector of schools in Scotland, while the school's report is published, they tend to publish the school's successes, in stark contrast to what often happens south of the border (see ASCL's November 2019 leadership podcast).

LIP service?

So, what might I propose for England instead? I suggest a model similar to that used by some provinces in Canada, where all schools have a Local Improvement Partner, a carefully selected former headteacher who collaborates with a group of local schools to advise, challenge, share expertise and hold to account.

The advantages of such a system

in England would be that the "LIP" would have credibility, since they would be selected for a proven track record of high-quality leadership and headship and could facilitate sharing of good practice and genuine collaboration between schools in the area.

If all the schools were genuinely comprehensive and there were no public league tables, there would be no competition between schools in an area, only collaboration.

The LIP could help facilitate moving of staff between schools to fill gaps in expertise and balance the provision to the benefit of all the students in the area.

The LIP would be accountable for the performance of all schools in the area to a higher authority, and therefore would work collaboratively to ensure equity across all the schools.

There are disadvantages, including the need for careful moderation of standards between LIPs and, of course, all schools would need to be truly comprehensive in intake to ensure equity under this system. **SecEd**

There must be a better way

On our journey through these seven themes, we have seen how these issues are interlinked and serve to maintain the segregated and stratified system we currently have. The main barriers to equity are:

- Massive variation in the quality of English schools – from the most exclusive independent schools to the Ofsted "stuck" schools delivering an inadequate education over many years.
- A competition-driven market place, with schools competing for pupils and staff to the detriment of other local schools.
- Gaps in funding and resources between different types of school – as much as a five-fold difference between the spend per-pupil in the most exclusive independent school and a local comprehensive.
- Education policy treated as a political football. Decisions made by people who largely have not experienced comprehensive state education in England, but who were educated in a parallel, segregated system.
- An admissions system set up to allow parents with the most resources to obtain places in "superior" schools to the detriment of others.
- A high-stakes accountability assessment regime that ensures schools continue to compete publicly with one another. League tables largely mirror the level of disadvantage in the school.
- A failed accountability system – Ofsted actually compounds differences between schools by adding to the league table culture.

The solutions

If I could draw up my own blueprint to improve equity in our education system, what would it look like? I offer seven principles.

- For all children to have their local school be a good school and for everyone in the community to attend the same school.
- There would be no competition between schools – only co-operation and collaboration. Since there would be no market for schools and no

competition, parental choice would be a thing of the past as all local schools would be good schools.

- School resources, both human and material, would be broadly similar in all schools. However, enhanced resources would be put into more disadvantaged areas.
- Policy decisions about education would be carefully considered and made in the main by people with a deep understanding of, and a background in, education. Educational policy would sit mainly outside political influence.
- School admissions would be coordinated at a local level to ensure broadly similar in-takes and community representation. All schools would be comprehensive in their intake with no selection by ability to pay, faith, or academic ability.
- Assessment up to the age of at least 16 would be low-stakes and formative. Standardised, high-stakes testing would only be used at age 18 for appropriate pathways. Standards would be monitored by samples at different age groups.
- All schools would have a local improvement partner – a carefully selected former head who collaborates with a group of local schools to advise, challenge, share expertise and hold to account. There would be no high-stakes accountability systems.

A pipe-dream?

Such an equitable system for our schools in England seems as far away now as it has ever been, but this is a time of unprecedented change and such systems do exist around the world.

The levels of disparity between the winners and the losers in our education system are under the spotlight like never before. Has the pandemic giving us the opportunity for a fresh outlook on how we want our society to view education, and do we, as a profession, have the courage and conviction to create something better? **SecEd**

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