

Parent Power in Britain

Improving Public Schools with Expanded Choices

Executive Summary

- During the last election campaign in Britain, the Labour government proposed a series of education reforms to secondary schools known collectively as “parent power.”
- The modern British school system has undergone a series of reforms since universal secondary schooling was introduced in 1944.
- The latest wave of reform is based on a government White Paper published in 2005.
- The White Paper called for small group tuition, allowing successful schools to expand and develop additional specialities, enhanced local control over decision-making, a back to the basics emphasis and a new focus on gifted education.
- Taken together, the proposals will significantly expand the range of school choice for British parents and the ability of individual schools to specialize and compete for students.
- While the opposition Conservatives criticized some of the specifics, their education platform was remarkably similar.
- The “parent power” initiative has sparked a major backbench rebellion within the Labour Party. The heart of the reforms may not survive and become law.
- Many of these reforms could and should be implemented in Manitoba.

Introduction



With its beginnings as a Labour Party campaign slogan in the last British election, the phrase “parent power” could have suffered the same fate as any other sound bite designed to attract voters. Fortunately for children in the United Kingdom, however, Tony Blair’s government is implementing the policy. “Parent power” will enable British parents to exert an unprecedented degree of control over the education of their children at the secondary school level. Now the centrepiece of the government’s plan to reform public education, the policy expands choice and significantly moves decision-making power from bureaucrats and “experts” to those who know children best, their parents.

Except for predictable rhetoric about the importance of parental inputs, debates over education policy rarely deal with the issue of their influence over schools. Governments tend to entangle themselves with other central, if occasionally mundane issues like funding, curriculum, the length of the school year or requirements for teacher certification. Because such system concerns are better understood by professional educators, they tend to ignore the need for objective tools to incorporate the wishes and preferences of those who know children best. The often unintentional dismissal of that important role is a common element in debates over Canadian education policy.

The phrase “parent power” has become the centrepiece of the Labour government’s plan to reform public education. Officially unveiled in detail in the fall of 2005, it was the subject of major speeches by both Prime Minister Tony Blair on October 24,¹ and his Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Ruth Kelly on January 6, 2006.² Despite considerable opposition from the rank and file of the Labour Party, the British government is planning to implement broad reforms that will enable parents to take an unprecedented amount of control over the education their children receive at the secondary level. These reforms will make a substantial difference to the way public education is delivered in Great Britain.

Overview of Great Britain's Education System

Formal schooling is compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 16 years. Approximately seven percent of students attend private schools or are educated at home, with the remainder, almost ten million students, enrolled in 35,000 publicly-funded state schools.³ After reaching the age of 16, about three-quarters of students choose to continue in public schools or attend colleges to further their education.⁴

Since 1992, all state schools have been required to adhere to a national curriculum that applies until students reach the age of 14. That curriculum breaks down into four levels:

- Key Stage 1: Years 1 and 2, covering children up to age seven,
- Key Stage 2: Years 3, 4, 5 and 6, for children aged between seven and ten,
- Key Stage 3: Years 7, 8 and 9, for those between eleven and thirteen, and
- Key Stage 4: Years 10 and 11, for those aged fourteen to sixteen, which includes preparation for academic and equivalent vocational qualifications.⁵

The Labour government's "parent power" proposals focus exclusively on the secondary school system in Britain, which that country considers as beginning at age 11, or at Key Stage 3. After completing five years of secondary education, students write standardized examinations in a variety of subjects that are marked by independent examination boards. When these are completed, students have the option of leaving secondary education to take training at a technical or vocational school, or continuing on with further academic study. In order to qualify for entrance to university, students must take an additional year of academics and then write advanced level exams.⁶ The requirement that all secondary students write standardized exams already plays a significant role in holding teachers and principals accountable for student performance.

Background

The "parent power" initiative is the latest initiative in a series of reforms that expand the range of choices available to British parents.

Universal public education at the secondary level was first enacted in Britain with an *Education Act* passed in 1944. It created a system of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. The new system, according to Britain's Secretary of State for Education and Training, had two major flaws:

Grammar schools catered [to] the brightest students, but 80% of children had to go to secondary moderns which failed to challenge them and where many achieved few if any qualifications. Moreover, technical schools never really played a major part in the new system, denying opportunities for a vocational education.

Pressure, initially from middle class parents angry with standards in secondary moderns, led to comprehensive schools and the conversion of grammars and secondary moderns in the 1960s and 1970s. But, their introduction was often accompanied by all-ability classes, which made setting by subject ability too rare. Many retained their old secondary modern intake, and failed to improve. There were simply not enough pressures in the system to raise standards.⁷

This dissatisfaction prompted further waves of reform. In the late 1980s, a National Curriculum was introduced, "accompanied by greater accountability through national testing and regular independent inspection. Schools were also encouraged to apply for grant-maintained status, where they had more freedom over their assets and staffing, though critics complained that they were unfairly funded compared with other schools, and that their admissions were unfair."⁸

In 1997, Tony Blair's Labour government started to pressure underperforming schools with targets for improved test results in literacy and numeracy. All schools were enticed into an open admissions policy, partly in exchange for more direct financial control by individual schools over budgets and capital expenditures. The government encouraged all secondary schools to specialize, and decentralized curricula to expand vocational and apprenticeship programs.

An additional incentive came in the form of sharply expanded funding. "Teachers' pay is 20% higher in real terms, and schools employ an extra 32,000 teachers and 130,000 support staff. Schools have access to twice as many computers, as well as new interactive whiteboards and broadband technology, enabling

ICT to become an increasingly integral part of the teaching and learning process. Investment in school buildings has risen seven-fold.”⁹

The combination of more resources and more freedom to spend them has improved outcomes. But ridding such a large enterprise of its unaccountable, bureaucratic malaise is a formidable task. It is to the credit of a left-wing government that it has had the flexibility to recognize the inadequacy of the changes already implemented. Its reasons for pursuing more reform are explicitly couched in a language of expanded choice and empowerment for consumers of school services:

Parent choice can be a powerful driver of improved standards. Performance tables and inspections have given many parents the information that has enabled them to make objective judgements about a school's performance and effectiveness. This has been an important pressure on weaker schools to improve.

Many other countries have successful experience with school choice. There is increasing international evidence that school choice systems can maintain high levels of equity and improve standards. Swedish parents can choose an alternative school to their local one, including a diverse range of state-funded independent schools. Studies have found that schools in areas where there is more choice have improved most rapidly. In Florida, parents can choose an alternative school if their school has “failed” in two of the last four years. Again, studies showed test scores improved fastest where schools knew children were free to go elsewhere.

International experiences with school choice suggest that fair funding which follows the pupil, good information and support for parents, fair admissions, and rapid intervention where schools are failing are all important in delivering choice. In designing our reforms we have learnt from these experiences.

While parents can express a choice of school, there are not yet enough good schools in urban areas; such restrictions are greatest for poor and middle class families who cannot afford to opt for private education or to live next to a good school, if they are dissatisfied with what the state offers.

We believe parents should have greater power to drive the new system: it should be easier for them to replace the leadership or set up new schools where they are dissatisfied with existing schools.¹⁰

“Parent Power” Proposals¹¹

In the spring of 2005, the Labour government proposed several key reforms to secondary schools that give parents more direct control in the sense described. Perhaps the most significant was a promise to provide a service described as “small group tuition.” This proposal entails giving parents of secondary students the power to apply for additional time in small learning groups at school. While much of extra effort would take place during the school day, some of the time could also take place during after-school hours, in order to accommodate the schedules of working parents. Parents will also have the ability to initiate school inspections when they feel a school is not educating their children adequately.¹²

These proposals led to the commissioning of a White Paper—the British method of explaining of future policy changes before they are actually shaped into Parliamentary legislation—released in October, 2005, just before Blair's speech defending the changes. Called *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All*, the White Paper set out the context for the reforms and described their import in considerable detail.¹³

As part of its commitment to enhance parent choice, the Labour government has announced that popular and successful schools will now be allowed to expand, even if this means that fewer students remain at less successful schools. The government plans to introduce dedicated capital funding in order to make it possible to fast-track the expansion plans of successful schools. This will place pressure on under-performing schools to improve or risk closure.

Along with allowing successful schools to expand, the government also plans to allow successful schools to develop additional areas of specialization, no longer limited to specializing in only one area. In addition, high-performing specialist schools will have the chance to become training schools or leaders of partnerships. These opportunities are designed to encourage additional levels of improvement.

Another aspect of the “parent power” initiative will allow individual secondary schools to have even more control over their own affairs. All secondary schools will obtain more freedom to own their own land and

buildings, manage their assets, employ staff, improve their governing bodies and initiate partnerships with outside sponsors and educational foundations. Along with this, the government has stated it will implement plans to reduce the amount of red tape schools need to cut through in order to change their policies. Since parents will also have an expanded amount of influence in the governance of local schools, they will ultimately have a lot more to say about the way education is provided.

The Blair government's "parent power" initiatives echo a frequent rallying in North America, the demand for a "back to the basics" approach to education. The proposals acknowledge the importance of a solid grounding in basic subjects like Math and English. Students will no longer be able to receive a high school diploma unless they demonstrate proficiency in these basics on their standardized exit examinations.

Finally, the government has openly acknowledged the importance of ensuring that gifted children are adequately challenged in public schools. The "parent power" initiative would open up more challenging programs for gifted students, who will also have the option of writing secondary exit examinations at an earlier time. In addition, secondary schools will be encouraged to develop International Baccalaureate programs that enable gifted students to take more advanced courses.

The Positives of "Parent Power"

Many aspects of the "parent power" proposals are praiseworthy. Parents are usually in the best position to know what their children need, so giving them more influence in their children's interaction with the education system makes sense. Allowing schools to have more control over their own affairs, at least in theory, enhances parental control by enabling local authorities to make decisions about the best interests of their students. Reducing the amount of red tape for local schools is also welcome.

Britain's Labour government should be applauded for recognizing that true choice is impossible if growing schools are unable to expand their facilities. A major weakness in Manitoba's school choice legislation is the province's unwillingness to allow successful schools to grow at the expense of under-performing schools. Instead, the government insists that all schools in a division be completely full before it will countenance the expansion of an existing school. This misguided policy effectively reduces the range of parental choices.

Another commendable development is the recognition of the importance of ensuring that all students have a firm grounding in the basics before allowing them to complete secondary school. Unfortunately, because of the almost complete absence of standardized examinations, it is entirely possible for a student in Manitoba to receive a grade 12 diploma without having a firm grasp of the basics.

On the flip side, the greater focus on gifted education promised by British Labourites is also long overdue, and a development that the Manitoba government would do well to emulate. Out of the \$1.4 billion spent on K-12 education in Manitoba, only about \$1.7 million (about 0.1%) of that amount goes towards gifted education.¹⁴ A standard definition of equity would seem to imply that gifted students are just as important as special needs students or average students, and just as eligible to be challenged by their schools.

The Negatives of "Parent Power"

Critics of the Blair government's "parent power" initiative are lining up from the right and the left. One key criticism from both camps has attacked the "small group tuition" proposal as vague and unfunded. The latter charge relates to the fact that schools are informed that they will need to provide the required tailored education programs within existing budgets.¹⁵ If the government is serious about requiring schools to provide more small group instruction, the critics complain, it needs to be clear about its expectations and be willing to fund the program accordingly.

The opposition Conservatives have argued that the Labour government has not gone far enough in allowing for parental choice. In particular, they note that in order for successful schools to expand, they need approval from their local councils. Since local councils may have a vested interest in keeping student enrolment relatively uniform among their schools, they may choose to veto such expansions.¹⁶ While "parent power" proposals sound positive, the Conservatives argue, a closer look at the specifics is needed to see whether they are actually being implemented.

Although they differ on some details, Conservative and Labour proposals for reforming education have a remarkably similar focus.¹⁷ Quite predictably, as a consequence of that both Tony Blair and his Education

Secretary are under considerable attack within the Labour Party, and at this date the outcome is far from clear.

In January, 2006, the British Parliament's select committee on education, dominated by Labour and Liberal Party members, demanded key changes in legislation coming out of the White Paper. The committee's majority "proposes that local authorities should be given a new power to clamp down on bias in school admissions systems, and proposes constraints on the independence of trust schools."¹⁸

Although the committee does accept the concept of "trust schools" and supports allowing successful schools to expand, it proposes that they meet quotas for children from poor backgrounds, a suggestion that Blair seems sure to reject.¹⁹ "It calls for councils to have an enhanced rather than reduced role—as Mr. Blair wants—over schools admissions and demands that they gain powers to determine the 'social composition' of schools. It also rejects Mr Blair's plan to ban local authorities from setting up new community schools, saying they should be allowed to compete for the right to do that. This undermines the central objective of the reforms—that in time all schools should become independent from councils."²⁰

In fact, if all the select committee's recommendations were accepted, they would effectively gut the main thrust of Blair and Kelly's reforms. As reported in the *Independent*, they include:

- "Schools should be banned from interviewing parents over admissions or using 'other proxies for selection.'
- Councils should draw up benchmarks showing the percentage of pupils on free school meals they should take in to avoid discrimination against the disadvantaged.
- The government should drop its insistence that all new schools must be independently run 'trusts' or foundation schools, and allow councils to open new community comprehensives.
- 'Trusts' should be a partnership of two or more schools—rather than individual, independently run schools—to encourage co-operation. . . .
- The Government must investigate the under-representation of ethnic minority groups among pupils selected to take part in its programme for gifted and talented youngsters."²¹

Although both Blair and Kelly have indicated some willingness to compromise, it remains to be seen whether the White Paper's key provisions that enhance parental choice and school-based management will survive the backbench rebellion. The fundamental question raised by the critics from the left—"Should public schools become facilities which concentrate on the pursuit of excellence, or be regarded as agents for social levelling?"—remains the most important one.

Conclusion

The "parent power" reforms proposed in Britain, whether or not they are eventually passed, are worthy of closer examination by educational policy makers in Canada and Manitoba. Initiatives that give parents greater control over their children's education and allow schools more flexibility to interpret and meet that need, should be welcomed. Certainly allowing successful schools to expand, and be freed of the limits imposed by school district catchment areas would improve Manitoba's school choice legislation.

About the Author: **Dennis Owens** is the Frontier's Senior Policy Analyst. A descendant of homesteaders near Portage la Prairie, he graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Over a 20-year career in the transportation business, he rose to the position of operations manager of a Winnipeg-based firm. Since then he has researched and written about Canadian public policy issues for a variety of organizations including the Manitoba Taxpayers Association and the Prairie Centre. His specialties at the Frontier Centre include municipal issues, public education, healthcare and aboriginal policy. His frequent exposure in electronic and print media has included a regular commentary on CBC radio and articles printed in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Post*.

Footnotes

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4372216.stm

² <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,5500,1680836,00.html>

³ British Council USA, *K-12 and Primary Education in the UK*, at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-education-uk-system-k-12-education.htm>

⁴ Britain USA, *Education: Frequently Asked Questions*, at <http://www.britainusa.com/faq/showfaqcat.asp?SCategory=169>

⁵ British Council USA, *School Curriculum*, at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-education-uk-system-k-12-curriculum-england.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All*, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, October, 2005, available at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Labour Party of Britain, *Schools Forward Not Back*, March 3, 2005, at www.labour.org.uk/educaton04/fileadmin/labour/user/attachedfiles/pdfs/schoolsforwardnotback2005.pdf

¹² *The Independent*, "Parent Power Within Limits," May 19, 2005, at <http://education.independent.co.uk/schools/article222056.ece>

¹³ *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, *FRAME Report 2004/05 Budget*, available at <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/finance/facts/index.html>

¹⁵ BBC News, "Labour Offers Tailor-Made Tuition," March 3, 2005.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Times Online, "Parent Power and School Discipline Take Centre Stage," April 11, 2005, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,19809-1564478,00.html>

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, "Blair prepares to give ground over education reforms," January 27, 2006.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *The Telegraph*, "MPs tell Blair to do more homework on school reforms," January 27, 2006.

²¹ *The Independent*, "Blair hints at climbdown on schools reform," January 27, 2006.