The School Report: Why Britain's Schools are Failing — a book by Nick Davies

3 February 2001

The School Report presents an overwhelming case against Conservative and Labour Party education policy pursued from the 1980s to the present day. Written by investigative journalist Nick Davies, it brings together his articles, letters and comments serialised in the *Guardian* newspaper between September 1999 and July 2000.

Davies points out that in his articles for the *Guardian*, he was not uncovering the unknown but exposing something that “no one with any power would admit”. The “great unmentionable”, Davies shows, is the direct correlation that exists between educational performance and poverty.

The Labour government has attacked such an approach as providing an “excuse” for educational failure. Prime Minister Tony Blair and Education Secretary David Blunkett have personally denounced Davies' writings. Conversely, from the moment Davies began his series of articles on education, many people working in the field and concerned at the retrogressive direction education policy had taken, felt a sense of relief. This was reflected in the many letters of support received by the *Guardian*, and the comments of numerous individuals interviewed for the series.

Davies' account is both shocking and enlightening, vividly portraying the current state of many schools and the impact that education policy has on the lives of tens of thousands of working class children.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first, *The Truth About Failing Schools* begins with the article *Poverty Invades the Classroom*. Davies shows that a school's position in the exam league tables is not primarily determined by teaching methods, pupil behaviour etc., as claimed by the government, but the social composition of its intake. To illustrate this he compares Abbeydale Grange Secondary School in Sheffield with Eton, Britain's leading private school. “The truth is masked by academic results. They simply disclose how well the children did in their exams, but they don't tell you how well the school did with its intake,” Davies notes.

His account brings out the fragility that exists in schools whose intake is drawn from the most impoverished areas. Davies spent at week at Abbeydale Grange towards the end of the summer term in 1999. The area in which most students live is one of the most impoverished in Sheffield—30 percent of families are dependent on state welfare payments; 12 percent of adults are diagnosed as suffering from depression and 25 percent of the children live in homes officially deemed to be overcrowded.

At the time of Davies' study, 53 percent of the school's 521 students claimed free school meals (the most commonly used measure of poverty in schools) and 45 percent were on the special educational needs (SEN) register. Almost half of the pupils (204) are from the Indian subcontinent together with children from Columbia, Brazil, Somalia, Venezuela, Kosovo, Senegal, Portugal and China. In some classes, 70 percent of pupils had English as their second language.

The description of his week at Abbeydale Grange illustrates how the chaos of some of the children's home lives is reflected in the school. Fortunately, the school's ethos recognises these difficulties and has succeeded to some extent in creating a happier environment for children to learn, despite the constant pressure to perform to national government test requirements, and the daily juggling with a general lack of resources.

Davies draws attention to research carried out by Dr Phil Budgell, former Chief Inspector of Schools in Sheffield. Matching census data on household poverty with individual pupil's addresses, Budgell produced an index of disadvantage for Sheffield—a table ranking all 27 secondary schools according to their social intake. He then compared this with academic outcomes. The pattern was clear: more than 90 percent of the difference in exam results between schools was accounted for simply by reference to the poverty, gender and final-year attendance of the children enrolled there. Schools were only able to influence 5-10 percent of the outcome.

Budgell explained, “In order to explain the failing of inner-city schools in terms of incompetence you have to make the bizarre assumption that these schools have hired a mass of incompetent teachers while good schools have hired none. There is a volume of evidence that schools are not playing on a level playing field. When you look at these intake factors, the level playing field is more like the side of Mount Everest."

Since 1979 childhood poverty has increased to the point where one-third of Britain's children—more than four million—are now classed officially as living below the poverty line.

Entire cities and towns, such as Sheffield, have been devastated through the closure of many factories, the replacement of decent paid jobs by low wages and cuts in public spending.

Bearing this in mind, the second chapter, *The Killing of the Comprehensives,* compares the changing fortunes of Abbeydale Grange and Silverdale, the top performing state school in Sheffield, over a period of 30 years. The schools are located within half a mile of each other, yet over time the divergence between the two has become dramatic.

Davies recounts the history of each school. In doing so he illustrates the disastrous consequences of Conservative education policy in the 1980s. For a number of reasons, by the early 1980s Abbeydale Grange had a larger intake of children from poor families than before and had introduced a policy of mixed-ability teaching. Conservative legislation gave parents the “right to choose” their child's school, but this heavily favoured those with greater incomes. As a result, better-off parents began sending their children to Silverdale, and so the vicious circle began, one school prospering as the other declined.

Conservative education policy deliberately advantaged those schools in better-off areas, encouraging them, where possible, to “opt-out” of local authority control.

This decision increased the flow of pupils from more prosperous homes to certain schools, which also had the effect of raising their overall level of academic attainment. Moreover, the Conservative government ordered that exam results had to be published as part of a national schools' “League Table,” naturally leading to more and more parents opting to send their children to for the “better performing” establishments.

Tory policy pegged school budgets to the level of pupil intake. Since

© World Socialist Web Site

those schools that did not perform as well in the League Tables attracted fewer pupils, they received less resources, making efforts to combat their inbuilt disadvantages even more difficult. The introduction of market forces into education has led to accusations that "academic cleansing" is being practiced, whereby those children who might do badly in exams are either never entered for them, or they are removed from the school on another pretext. Under Labour, League Tables are now used to determine whether a school continues to receive funding or is deemed to have "failed," meaning it is threatened with closure.

One of the most revealing sections of the book is an interview Davies conducted with Kenneth Baker, former Minister for Education under Margaret Thatcher. Baker's 1988 Education Act introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS), in which budgets were devolved to the control of individual schools, who then were forced to decide which services they "bought." This often meant schools having to make trade-offs, for example between financing extra teachers to reduce class sizes or repairing dilapidated school buildings.

Baker admitted that the legislation was a double-edged sword—to attack the teachers' unions, which were then engaged in a rolling strike, and to undermine the independence of the Local Education Authorities (LEA), which had previously been responsible for schooling in their area. "I legislated for LMS and it diminished the power of the teacher unions and the LEAs. They hate me," Baker told Davies. The former minister then went on to explain that there had been no educational basis for introducing LMS whatsoever.

He had also introduced "parental choice" and combined this with the new funding formula based on pupil numbers. "I would have liked to bring back selection", Baker continued, "but I would have got into such controversy at an early stage that the other reforms would have been lost." Asked whether he realised that the introduction of "parental choice" would polarise the system and effectively kill off the non-selective comprehensive schools introduced in 1968, Baker replied, "Oh, yes. That was deliberate. In order to make changes, you have to come from several points."

In *The £19 Billion Lie—How Mr Blunkett Fiddled the Figures*, Davies gives a painstaking account of how the Labour government has used "creative accounting" to conjure an illusion of huge sums being put into education. He shows that, stripped bare, the £19 billion ($28.1bn) of "extra funding" trumpeted by the government in fact comes down to a measly £1.2 billion ($1.8bn) of new spending.

The only other "new money" is in the form of targeted grants. However, individual schools must apply for these and can only be successful when their bid is matched by the LEA providing funding of up to 60 percent.

This once again leads to the more prosperous schools receiving greater funding. Davies writes that Don Foster, the Liberal Democratic Party spokesman for education, had found schools with the most affluent pupils, i.e. those where less than 10 percent were eligible for free school meals, "were receiving grants worth between £326 and £1,264 per pupil [$482-1,870]", while schools with the most deprived pupils (with more than 40 percent eligible for free meals) received "no more than £791 [$1,170] per pupil".

Davies adds, "There is no other country in Europe where private schools present a fully-fledged alternative to the state system, open essentially only to the affluent." He cites research from many areas to back this up, such as that of Simon Szreter, an economic historian at St Johns College, Cambridge who analysed World Development reports. Szreter found that "in the last twenty years, Britain had fallen behind just about every other developed country in its investment in teachers for the state sector."

Szreter also found that throughout the 1970s the gap between state and private schools had been closing. But this changed during Thatcher's period in office. "During the 1980s, half of the extra teachers who had been hired in the 1970s—50, 000 of them—were removed from the payroll." Many accounts are given to show the varying ways huge cuts took place in the 1980 and 90s in education spending, so that by the early 1990s private schools had average class sizes of just 10—nearly 100 percent lower than in the state sector. "Szreter estimates that to regain a position where the state school classes are only 50 percent larger than private ones, the government would need to hire 100,000 new teachers."

A major aspect of the private sector's ability to keep afloat has been the subsidy that it received from the state through tax breaks, as well as school fees paid by the Ministry of Defence (worth £72m) and Foreign Office (£12.5m) for children of some of their personnel. The Assisted Places Scheme introduced by Thatcher in 1981 also provided over £900 million ($1.3bn) during the Conservative years. When Labour took office in 1997 they ended this subsidy but recouped much of the funds with the introduction of fees for university students.

The book's final section takes apart the flawed arguments used in support of current measures imposed on the thousands of young people who do not like school, and either engage in truancy, or have been excluded for their behaviour.

The Audit Commission estimates that some 12,000 children are permanently excluded from school each year, and a further 150,000 are excluded temporarily. This situation "has far less to do with the discipline than it has to do with an epidemic of emotional damage, particularly among the 30 percent of British children who live in poverty", Davies states. Some 20 percent of children growing up in homes where both parents are unemployed suffer mental ill health. These problems are left almost entirely untouched and unchallenged by government strategy, he continues: Less than half of the nation's health authorities have a policy for child mental health.

Children with mental ill health are four times more likely to commit truant than others; three times more likely to have specific learning difficulties and/or special educational needs and 10 times more likely to be in trouble with the police. Yet there is currently a national shortage of child psychiatrists—just 180 in the whole country. The 1,820 educational psychologists also find that much of their time is taken up with the bureaucratic business of providing assessments for special needs "statements" entitling schools to extra money. Even so, because of national shortages only 48 percent of draft "statements" are prepared within the statutory timescale of 18 weeks.

The Labour government's latest schemes—such as Learning Support Units and mentoring— claim to be targeting children most at risk of exclusion at school. They are based on programmes underway in the USA, but can only really be of benefit if there is a heavy investment in training, supervision and support. But as Davies states, almost all of these schemes that are aimed at the most needy children "suffer from a potentially devastating weakness. They rely on the same over stretched network of specialists who are already struggling to find time to work effectively, and so they attempt to delegate skills to teachers and parents and others, none of whom has any specialist training at all. As a result, they cannot be and do not claim to be therapeutic in any meaningful sense."

No matter how many "schemes", "programmes" or "targets" are implemented, in themselves they are incapable of overcoming the problems in Britain's schools because they fail to address their root cause: the enormous social gulf that now exists within society, and which is widening daily.

Davies is at his weakest on precisely this ground. At one point, writing on the period leading up to the 1988 Education Act, he quotes favourably from a national trade union leader and a former education chairman in Sheffield to back up his claims that the education debate had become "poisoned by politics". But in this instance, the example he gives is the struggle by teachers to defend jobs and conditions.

Whilst correctly identifying that education, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds, has been adversely affected by years of rightwing

© World Socialist Web Site

policy making, Davies can only suggest a new round of educational programmes that essentially leave fundamental social relations untouched.

Nonetheless, in drawing up a balance sheet of educational policy over the last two decades and showing its relationship with the social reality confronting millions of families, Davies has done an invaluable service to those seeking to understand the source of the present crisis in Britain's schools.

* * *

The School Report: Why Britain's Schools are Failing, paperback, 2000,Vintage, ISBN 0-099-42216-6, £6.99

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site