

A Charter for Inner City Schools

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One of the long-term challenges we face is how to raise standards and aspirations in inner-city schools. These schools are often in communities which suffer from the blight of multiple deprivation. The problems that their teachers and governors confront are complex and inter-related:

- **Nearly a third of all failing schools are in the most deprived 20 per cent of communities. Schools with highest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals are on average 2.7 times more likely to be judged as underperforming by OFSTED.¹**
- **Higher levels of socio-economic deprivation are closely associated with lower GCSE attainment.² A report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister this month found a large gap in pupils' performance between cities and the rest of the country, and a strong relationship between deprivation in a city and the proportion of its population with no qualifications.³**
- **Those living in the poorest fifth of local authorities have seen their life expectancy decline by two per cent against the national average for males and by five percent for females in the years since 1997.⁴ A child born in Canning Town in the East End of London has a life expectancy eight years less than one born in Westminster.⁵**
- **Poorer pupils (those eligible for free school meals) play truant more frequently than more affluent pupils.⁶**
- **Those sympathetic to the plight of failing schools too often focus on explaining failure, not curing it. The DfES is now introducing 'Contextual Value Added' (CVA) tables, which weight schools' and pupils' scores by taking into account levels of deprivation.⁷ Whilst it is right to recognise that teaching pupils in deprived areas is tougher, there is a risk of embedding low expectations.**

Our Approach

The best way to raise standards and aspirations in our inner-city schools is to trust the people who work in those schools and communities – while recognising that central government, local authorities and voluntary organisations all have important roles to play. We need to strike a balance between giving teachers the freedom to exercise their professional judgment, and ensuring that schools meet the standards that parents and the wider community expect.

So today we are publishing a Charter for Inner-City Schools – a summary of best practice that we believe all inner-city schools should adopt. We are submitting this to our Public Services Improvement Policy Group to consider not just the merits of the measures themselves, but how these measures might be implemented without excessive interference that undermines teachers' professionalism.

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The Charter

Focus on Literacy and English language. Basic spoken and written English are the gateways to all other avenues of learning. Inner-city schools whose intake includes many pupils whose first language is not English should ensure those pupils are taught English first. The head teacher of the school with the most linguistically diverse intake - White Hart Lane School in Tottenham- has reversed a policy of teaching in pupils' first language after it failed to improve results, saying 'these children will live and work in London and therefore what we need to be doing is improving their competence in English.'⁸ The Cattle Report after the Bradford riots in 2001 also identified the primacy of the English language as key to promoting community cohesion.⁹ Synthetic phonics should be the basis of this teaching. Evidence shows it actually works better for those from lower socio-economic groups and those with English as an additional language.

Teach pupils in classes set by ability. Pupils learn better when they are engaged at the right level of ability. That is why setting children by ability in the classroom produces improved results. Schools should set subject lessons in every single subject, to benefit the brightest and the least able alike, regardless of background.

Home-School Contracts. Pupils can only learn in classrooms where good order and discipline are maintained. Pupils from inner cities where social influences may be less stable should be able to look to school for that order and stability. Schools should make greater use of home-school contracts to ensure parents and pupils sign up to the ethos of the school and its discipline policies. The Government currently bans their use as a condition of entry. We will table amendments to the current Education Bill to remove this ban, and would like our Policy Group to consider how else these contracts should be made enforceable.

Give proper choice on Special Educational Needs. Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) should be given the best educational provision for their needs. This means giving a proper choice of either special schools or properly-resourced mainstream provision. The bias in law in favour of mainstream inclusion should be removed, and the whole system should be simplified so that poorer parents are not disadvantaged by lacking resources to fight legal battles over their child's education. The Policy Group should consider the interim proposals of Sir Robert Balchin's Commission on SEN published in November 2005 and look at ending the 'judge and jury' role of local authorities in the statementing process, replacing it with a transparent system of automatically attaching resources to different levels of need.

Attract and reward good teachers. Good teaching requires good teachers. Schools in inner cities should have the freedom to pay higher salaries to attract and keep good teachers in 'tough' areas. This means giving schools the freedom to vary pay and conditions much more easily than under the current bureaucratic 'Power to Innovate' process. It should also be simpler for people to enter teaching from other professions, bringing their own particular expertise and experience to bear. This would build on the success of the 'Teach First' scheme and help break down the barriers between the prosperous professionals who work in cities and the children at nearby schools for whom they could act as excellent role models.

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Better school meals. Pupils in inner cities often have worse levels of nutrition and overall health than those in other areas. Schools in these areas should play a key role in tackling this. Promoting healthier school meals and encouraging more pupils to have them benefits behaviour and concentration, and for some will be the only chance of a healthy meal during the day. The lunch break should be promoted as a focal point in the day for pupils to eat together and take exercise, rather than leave school premises to buy junk food.

Build links with local voluntary groups. A school's role in a child's social development is particularly important in areas of deprivation where incidences of family breakdown are higher. This means more than good discipline - involving children in extra-curricular activities by forging links with local voluntary groups and social enterprises should be encouraged. Equally, more focus on school sports is essential in these areas where opportunities outside the school day may be limited. It therefore makes sense to improve links to existing sports clubs in cities.

Conduct away-days and summer activities with businesses and universities. Pupils in inner-city schools too often suffer 'the soft bigotry of low expectations', with economic poverty too often leading to a poverty of aspiration. These schools should open pupils' minds to the opportunities a good education can give them, by forging partnerships with businesses and universities. Pupils should be encouraged to participate in away-days with local businesses, and to participate in summer schools run by leading universities. This is something which the development of Trust schools should be used to achieve. The Government's 'AimHigher' scheme, whilst well-intentioned, is too limited, especially as it only targets children who are about to leave school, rather than reaching out to them sooner.

1 *Improving Poorly Performing Schools in England*, National Audit Office, 11 January 2006

2 *Improving Poorly Performing Schools in England*, National Audit Office, 11 January 2006

3 *State of the English Cities*, ODPM, 7 March 2006

4 King's Fund, *Health Inequalities*, 1 May 2005

5 London Health Observatory, Office of National Statistics 2004

6 *Improving School Attendance in England*, National Audit Office, February 2005, Appendix 2, table 2

7 http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables/pilotks4_05/aboutcva.shtml

8 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/4739090.stm

9 *Report of the Community Cohesion Review Team*, Home Office, 2001

(<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sysfiles/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/communitycohesionreport.pdf>)