

The Market can make a difference for the disadvantaged in education

Rob Wilson MP

At the moment, the wealthier you are, the wider the choice you will have for your child's education - whether through paying independent school fees or moving in to the catchment area of a good state school. The families who would benefit the most from choice have the least choice. This is a scandal that the Conservative Party can and must change.

The Chancellor's approach is a top down one - change the catchment areas, call in the School Adjudicator, monitor and watch the schools Big Brother style. Meanwhile he will hand out the funding from the centre aligned with all his targets and controls. He announced in the 2006 budget that he will raise spending per pupil in state-maintained schools to the same level as the private sector. That would mean raising funding from around £5,000 per pupil to £8,000 at current prices, effectively a 60% uplift (although the significance of this aspiration depends on the, as yet, unannounced timeframe).

Many would argue, as I do, that raising spending doesn't automatically raise standards and therefore the return on investment may continue to be poor. Force feeding a system that is unable to cope with the tensions and pressures created is unlikely to have a happy outcome for the taxpayer, teacher, parent or pupil. Let's not forget, it's been tried in the health service! The Chancellor has provided more of a dead hand to the NHS than a "clunking fist" of reform. Most of the money has been merely spent rather than invested - there is a difference although I'm not sure the Chancellor understands it.

State education does need further reform, but the new Education Act has taken only tiny steps in the right direction by removing powers from Local Education Authorities and offering more independence to schools. For budget increases to be spent effectively, additional reforms will be required.

However, there are improvements we can make immediately that could start flowing through the current system within a relatively short space of time and that will help the most disadvantaged. It involves using the market and I tried to get these accepted as amendments to the Education Bill last year.

There is no doubt that we need to put additional focus on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recent research has confirmed that the ladder of opportunity once offered by education has diminished. Today in Britain, if by accident of birth you are born poor, it's likely that your life chances will not improve much and probably worsen. The wall of social exclusion has been built around education in the last decade in a way only a Labour Government can. In many households there is now a poverty of ambition and expectation coupled with a lack of opportunity that is more akin to a peasant society than a modern industrial nation.

Currently we have around 500,000 pupils in secondary schools on free school meals across the country and we spend £5,000 on each pupil. What would happen if we attached an additional £2,000 (40 per cent) to every secondary school pupil on free school meals? The cost would be around £1 billion extra in the each year and anyone who has looked through the DfES budget in any detail would agree that this money could be found by re-ordering existing expenditure priorities.

So what can targeted money and a more market driven approach offer parents and disadvantaged children?

It makes these children more attractive to good schools. Even the schools at the top of the league tables have tight budgets to manage plus a desire to make improvements to what they can offer their children. It is often argued by this Government and Labour backbenchers that good schools use the admissions process and other administrative processes to exclude disadvantaged children (who can be the more difficult to manage).



Although I have yet to visit any school (and I have visited many) that has operated such a policy, I accept that there is a need to make disadvantaged children more attractive to a wider range of schools. We cannot go on with the situation that exists at present, where many of these children are condemned to the local sink school, where often there is more of an emphasis on crowd management rather than opportunity and improvement for young people.

These schools often end up in special measures or failing, which results in money then being thrown at the problem – often with less than successful results. That money is failure money and should be used to encourage good schools to actively seek out children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There are some who would prefer other methods such as benchmarking to distribute pupils around schools or by tweaking catchment areas as is proposed by the new School Admissions Code, but it is better not to force schools or parents to accept social engineering. Top down solutions are rarely effective. Significant additional funding for poorer pupils therefore offers a solution that involves free choice and positive benefits to a school rather than negative Big Brother style coercion.

The market can act to ensure that all schools take their fair share of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and as a by-product reduce the number of sink schools. Parents with children at schools located in better off areas would positively welcome more funding and improved opportunities and amenities for their local school.

Allowing funding to rise by 40% for children who are in receipt of free school meals will be a win-win situation for all concerned, reducing the number of failing schools, improving the social mix in schools and giving many disadvantaged children a chance to take the opportunities in life they richly deserve.

However, it is worth considering how we extend these opportunities even further, so that it goes throughout the whole school system - including the independent sector. Why shouldn't parents in the poorer areas of my constituency have the opportunity to send their child to one of the excellent local independent schools? Why can't the private sector in education be used to increase the choice and diversity of

education open to poor families? This would clearly require further thinking, but it would certainly be worth the effort.

Increasing funding by £2,000 per pupil makes the funding level comparable to the fees that many independent schools charge. It makes independent schools more of a realistic choice for disadvantaged children. I have spoken to many independent schools and their representative body and there is real enthusiasm for this approach to funding. Many already actively seek out these children and support them with bursaries, but it is only on a small scale. These schools would welcome opening their doors wide to disadvantaged pupils.

This is about giving real choice to disadvantaged children. It's about raising their expectations and ambitions in life, about saying to parents anything is possible for your child in our great country. It also passes David Cameron's key test; "how does the policy affect the least well off in our society".

I believe we must take bold initiatives. If we do not, will somebody please explain to me how we break into the endless cycle of deprivation in which these children appear to find themselves. At the moment, in some areas, one generation hands on to the next a life of poverty, crime, prostitution and drug addiction.

I believe that all disadvantaged children should have at least one cast iron opportunity to pull themselves out of the life they were born into, through no fault of their own. Education, in my view, is the only way to do it. This means showing these children that there is another life, full of promise and full of new and exciting opportunities. That cannot be done by sending children to a local failing school.

Only a real choice between all schools will provide an escape route for these children.



"I believe that all disadvantaged children should have at least one cast iron opportunity to pull themselves out of the life they were born into, through no fault of their own. Education, in my view, is the only way to do it."

"This is about giving real choice to disadvantaged children. It's about raising their expectations and ambitions in life, about saying to parents anything is possible for your child in our great country."

***Rob Wilson is the
Member of Parliament
for Reading East and a member of the
Education and Skills Select Committee
robwilsonmp@parliament.uk***