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LEAS -- OLD AND NEW A VIEW FROM WANDSWORTH

Edward Lister

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A VIEW FROM WANDSWORTH

Edward Lister

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The author

Edward Lister has been a councillor of the London Borough of Wandsworth since 1979 and played a prominent part in developing the radical policies which have made the borough one of the most efficient in the country. He has been Chairman of the Education Committee since Wandsworth became an education authority in April 1990. Earlier, he was Chairman of the Shadow Education Committee planning for the takeover of education from ILEA.

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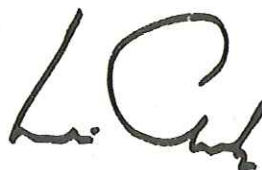
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Foreword

Edward Lister was a leading campaigner for the break-up of the Inner London Education Authority and the transfer of its responsibilities to the inner London boroughs. In this pamphlet he describes how the new Wandsworth Authority under his leadership as Chairman of the Education Committee has gone about reforming the system which it inherited.

His experience has led him to the conclusion that the role of the local education authority must be recast if the Government's aims of higher standards and greater efficiency are to be met.

Wandsworth's situation is not unique. Many of its problems and characteristics are typical of those found up and down the country. For these reasons I am sure that what Edward Lister has to say will make an important contribution to the current debate about how to encourage the circumstances in which good schools and good teaching will flourish.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'K. Clarke', with a stylized, cursive script.

Kenneth Clarke MP
Secretary of State for Education and Science

Summary of recommendations

The days of Leas as most of them still operate, are or should be numbered. They must no longer play the dominant role in deciding the range of schools, or the nature of the education provided, in any area. If the educational improvements for which we all hope are to be achieved the following measures are necessary:

- * *We must stop trying to 'plan' the education service at national and local level.* Planning has not eliminated surplus places efficiently: nationally, during the four years from 1985 only 29% of unused places have been removed; nor has planning created more choice. On the contrary, reducing places through school closures and amalgamations simply reinforces the old system one is trying to reform. The Government's measures to loosen up the system need to go further. Grant maintained schools and City Technology Colleges are welcome additions to the range of schools available to parents and pupils. But ways must be found to make it easier for other types of educational institution to be brought into being, and for existing schools to change their character;
- * *We must regard the surplus of places as an asset rather than a liability, as, in fact, the central means of creating the market conditions whereby genuine variety can be created.* Anyone who has taken part in school closure meetings knows that in far too many instances the parents have an excellent case for the continuation of their school. They are not convinced by the arguments of the politicians or the planners. They want to be in charge of their own children's education, and this is as it should be. The Government wants to see a demand-led economy. It should adopt the same approach to the education system;
- * *All schools should become self-governing.* There is no reason why this should not be so, as all schools, whether those within a local authority's responsibility or paid for directly by the Government, are similarly managed with similar powers and duties; and can be financed on the same basis, that is, mainly on the numbers of pupils they enrol
- * *New arrangements should be introduced to facilitate opening, closing or changing the character of schools.* Under these arrangements:-

- * organisations, individuals, churches, parents, local councils and the Government itself would be able to open schools subject to satisfying the Secretary of State for Education and Science that their proposals met criteria defining required standards in terms of the management of the school, the curriculum to be offered, staffing, accommodation, enrolment and performance.
- * schools not meeting these criteria would be subject to closure by the Secretary of State.
- * changes in the character of a school would be the responsibility of the governors of the school with the support of the majority of parents and subject to continuing to meet the national conditions referred to.
- * the role of the Secretary of State would be restricted to making sure that national criteria were being met.
- * *We must put the financing of education on a new footing.* All schools should receive financial support directly from the Government mainly on the basis of the number of pupils they enrol. In addition, parents must be enabled to contribute, through voluntary payment, to higher standards for their own children than can be met from general taxation. Many are willing to do so. It is absurd to argue that for reasons of macro-economics of a theological complexity, we cannot 'afford' to see that schools are painted more often than once every fourteen years or that we cannot 'afford' the extra couple of hours to a secretary's or a helper's workload which would contribute greatly to the life of a school.

There follows an account of how Wandsworth has been working towards these ends in its few months of existence since the abolition of ILEA. There is a long way still to go.

The national background and the local contribution

For over 100 years education in this country was provided through a national system, locally administered. In recent decades, Councils as local education authorities played a major role through their ability to formulate and implement policies about how children are taught and the schools and colleges run, employing most of the staff involved and controlling most of the expenditure and resources needed.

Over many parts of the country local education authorities conducted their affairs responsibly and imaginatively. But too often too many of them abused their powers. They wasted resources, created self-serving bureaucracies and, worst of all, interfered politically in the work of schools, obstructing their main purpose: which is to ensure that all children, whatever their background, are able to learn to the fullest extent of their abilities, and are given a good start in life.

The Government has started to put this right through introducing important reforms which command widespread support: there should be a minimum entitlement of learning available to all children regardless of which school they attend: the progress of children should be tested regularly against objective standards: parents should have access to a wider range of schools and better information on which to base their preferences. Above all the Government has rightly made the self-governing school the cornerstone of their education policy, posing the question: what rôle, if any, is there for the local authority of the future?

Wandsworth

Wandsworth, together with the other inner London boroughs, took over education in its area from the Inner London Education Authority in April 1990.

Starting up a new education authority made us go back to first principles, not only about the kind of schools there should be, but also about the very nature and role of the local education authority itself. It soon became obvious that the powers and responsibilities we had were largely irrelevant to the tasks confronting us. The role of central government needed radical reassessment also. There seemed to be a strong case for the reduction of its powers, too, if the new self-governing schools came to flourish.

Our inheritance

Locally we inherited, in common with other authorities in London and wider afield, an education system which was expensive, wasteful, unpopular and underachieving.

In 1988-89 ILEA was spending £1,604 and £2,506 on each primary and secondary pupil respectively, more than any other authority in the country. Our pupil:teacher ratios in primary and secondary schools were, again, the highest in the country, respectively 17.9:1 and 14.4:1. In themselves these figures did not and do not cause the new authority any difficulty. They are at the heart of any education service, and we have, in fact, protected them in our budgetary arrangements. What is unacceptable was that these levels of resources were not reflected in pupils' performance. Where was the money going to?

One major source of unjustifiable expenditure had to do with the number of empty places in our schools, some 4,000 in our 9 secondary schools and almost 8,000 in our 73 primary schools. This under-use has been estimated to represent a wasted expenditure of some £8 million a year.

Worse, since the mid-1970s people had been deserting the local state schools. In 1976 3,520 pupils entered county secondary schools in Wandsworth. By 1989 this number had fallen to only 1,345. Even taking into account the fall of the birth rate, and the inflow of pupils from nearby boroughs, over these fourteen years the equivalence of two whole secondary schools had left the system. On takeover, some 40% of Wandsworth children were seeking their education elsewhere, either in other

boroughs or in private education.

It was clear that there had been a massive vote of 'no confidence' by many parents in the education they were being offered, and that this confidence had to be restored. So we made it an initial aim to recover at least 30% of our net loss of pupils.

Most important were the low standards. In 1989/90, the year before takeover, over 19% of pupils left school at age 16 without any GCSE qualification at all, compared with a national average of 8%. This deplorable record had to be improved urgently. Truancy rates were high. It is estimated that at any one time 15% of secondary school pupils were skipping their lessons.

Furthermore, fewer children than ever were staying on into the sixth forms of schools. (In 1989/90 only 32% of fifth formers stayed on into the sixth form. 20% went on to Further Education). Most wanted to leave and did so at the earliest opportunity. We made it a target to increase the staying-on rate in schools to 40%.

On the face of it the causes of this indefensible state of affairs, which regrettably typifies education in many parts of the country fell into two broad categories -- 'philosophical' and 'organisational'.

On the 'philosophical' side the schools we inherited clearly belonged to a well defined system of collectivist values which had more to do with conditioning pupils socially than improving them intellectually. Behind the rhetoric which placed 'fulfilling the potential of every individual' at the centre of educational policies lay the reality of a battery of practices aimed at eliminating (or undermining) individual differences, in particular those arising from personal achievement gained through competition whether against others or oneself.

Among the 'organisational' weaknesses identified were:

- * inadequate preparation for secondary school: the 'separateness' of primary education conceptually as well as organisationally: the poor arrangements for the under-5s.
- * the nature of the prevailing type of secondary school, the 'neighbourhood comprehensive', in particular:

- * its admission procedures and its assumption that it could cater for the needs of all pupils, whatever their abilities and background
- * the higher value it placed on considerations of social equality in preference to individual success, exemplified in mixed-ability teaching, for example, the inadequate curriculum it offered, especially to the more academically able and to those more gifted in technical and technological subjects
- * unsatisfactory arrangements for inspecting schools, monitoring children's progress and keeping parents informed and involved
- * poor use of resources.

We determined that the priorities were to:-

- * strengthen the position of schools
- * encourage closer relationships between primary and secondary schools
- * improve the arrangements for the care and teaching of the under-5s
- * widen parental choice through providing a greater variety of secondary school to match the differing needs of pupils
- * loosen admission arrangements
- * challenge the methods of teaching and the way the schools are organised
- * reform the secondary school curriculum
- * improve inspection and reporting
- * maximise the use of resources.

Wandsworth's takeover of education in April 1990 was not only an administrative change of control. It brought with it new aims for schools, teachers and pupils. Within a framework of equality of opportunity, emphasis is placed on the importance of individuality, enterprise, competition, achievement, individual responsibility -- all of which aims enjoy very general public support.

Values are conveyed most effectively when they are reflected in the way children are taught and how schools are organised. Many parents and teachers refer to the 'ethos' of a school as among the most important of its characteristics. How children are taught and how schools are organised are properly the responsibility of the teacher and the school, and the limitations of public authorities, whether local or central, have to be accepted in these matters. The final judgement about the kind of education offered to children must rest with the parents. The job of the public authorities is to ensure that parents have access to the widest possible choice of schools which will enable them to educate their children in accordance with their wishes.

Wandsworth forwarded this aim by taking the fullest advantage of powers given to local authorities to delegate to schools, under the Government's Local Management of Schools' Scheme, the greatest degree of autonomy over their day to day affairs.

For their part, schools should be more forthcoming about their underlying philosophy and aims and how they go about achieving them. It is not sufficient for schools to say that they wish all pupils to reach their potential but omit to mention, for example, the means whereby this to be achieved in practical terms.

Primary education

Policies towards primary education in Wandsworth aim to:

- * take advantage of the surplus spare capacity we have, and
- * improve continuity between all the phases within primary education and between primary and secondary education.

A most important development has been the introduction of improved nursery education. Another is worthy of mention, although it is in its very early stages, namely the establishment of French schools alongside our own in the same buildings.

Nursery Places

By assuming responsibility for education the Council was able to extend the arrangements for both the care and the teaching of the under-5s in the borough. High among the priorities of many parents is a nursery place. They believe that good quality schooling in their children's early years can often make an important contribution to their future progress. By bringing 2,000 surplus primary school places into use and transferring resources from under-used Social Services provision, the Wandsworth Council has been able to offer nursery places to all those between the ages of 3 and 5 whose parents want them, whilst maintaining a full programme of day care for those who continue to come within the responsibility of the Social Services Department. This has been achieved without any addition to overall costs.

One way of offering greater choice in this field is the introduction of vouchers exchangeable throughout the network of institutions run by individuals and voluntary agencies as well as by the Council. Wandsworth is pursuing such a scheme; and the author believes that it is the first authority to do so.

Les Écoles Maternelles

These should be mentioned because, although they are in their very first stages, they may well turn out to be the prototype of an entirely new kind of school. From this year classes of French children will begin their education in the premises of two primary schools alongside their English contemporaries. They will be taught by French teachers in their own language and follow their lessons in exactly the same way as they would in France.

Apart from the better cultural understanding to which this should lead, it will help to counter one of the most persistent criticisms of the English system: our neglect of foreign languages, and the fact that we do not introduce our children to them early enough.

The idea can be extended to other nationalities. We would welcome this.

Continuity

One of the main educational aims of the Government's reforms is to introduce a greater degree of progression into the system so that pupils can move with the minimum interruption through the stages of their education. The organisation of education in this country, however, is astonishingly fragmented, and is reinforced by the arrangements for teacher training and education. Significant divisions mark off primary, secondary and further education from each other. Within primary education, even the nursery, infant and junior phases have come to be regarded almost as worlds of their own, each with its own territorial approach to teaching.

To improve continuity, two measures are being put in place:

- * removing the divisions between infant and junior departments and schools wherever possible, to establish a pattern of 'all-through' primary schools for children between the ages of 5 and 11, each with its own attached nursery class, wherever there is space;
- * establishing closer links between primary and secondary schools so that primary schools become more like 'preparatory' schools. Here the public schools have shown the way. In the state system, the break between primary and secondary education is too abrupt, and too much wasteful effort has to go into the early years of secondary school to ease the transition, at the cost of children's learning. We must move away from the notion that 'primary education' is a self-contained phase of education. It forms the essential foundation for successive stages of education, in which basic knowledge and skills are mastered and good learning practices are acquired. Our primary schools will be encouraged to become deliberately more 'preparatory' in nature.

The growing importance of technology in both primary and secondary schools will help to bring them closer together (though this is not to say that skill in the use of electronic equipment is any open sesame to education). Primary school children should have routine access to the sophisticated technological resources in secondary schools, which cannot be provided economically in all primary schools, but from which many children of primary age can benefit.

One of our intentions is to establish a junior City Technology College. As in the

teaching of modern languages, we introduce our children to technology later than we need.

Widening choice

There are many ways to create wider choice, In Wandsworth, the aim is being pursued by breaking up the near-monopoly of the 'neighbourhood comprehensive' -- establishing new schools and changing the character of others through the following measures:

- * support for the establishment of a City Technology College sponsored by ADT, the international security and car auction group, in the premises of a redundant school. When fully established it will offer a distinctive technological education with an emphasis on maths, science and technology to 900 pupils. It opens in September this year. Its 300 first and second-year places were over-subscribed six times;
- * support for the application of two of our county schools for grant-maintained status;
- * support for the relocation of a Church of England secondary school from inadequate accommodation in a neighbouring borough to empty and better premises in Wandsworth by next September: over 1,000 pupils living in Wandsworth have to seek an Anglican secondary education elsewhere because the borough has no school providing it -- although it has two Roman Catholic secondary schools, and ten primary Church of England schools;
- * plans to convert our secondary school in Battersea into a new-style City Technology College. If approved, it will be the first county technical school to be established in thirty years;
- * strengthening single-sex education by concentrating all-boys' and all-girls' education in two schools, each of which will provide better education than the previous four under-subscribed single-sex schools we inherited;

Widening choice in these ways has not been easy. It brought us up against formidable legal difficulties and problems arising from the establishment of new

schools -- essential to greater choice -- at a time when we had more secondary school places than, it was thought on certain calculations, we needed. To align supply with demand, however, by the time-honoured method of closing or amalgamating schools, would have merely reinforced the system we are trying to reform.

Widening choice is not a conservative cliché. Children just do differ one from another. They need access to different kinds of school. The tragedy of the post-war educational history in Britain is that we set up a system of comprehensive schools, instead of providing a comprehensive system of education. We may observe that among the first reforms of the new Federal Republic of Germany, was the abolition of the comprehensive school in what was formerly East Germany.

Changing the admission arrangements

Under the previous system, children were allocated to their local school on the basis of the results of non-verbal reasoning tests. The aim was to ensure that each school received an intake of pupils reflecting a cross-section of the community as measured by ability to reason. Whatever its good intentions, the problem was that it didn't work. Planning simply did not deliver the goods. Beneath the rhetoric of equality of opportunity lay the reality of a two-tier system barely distinguishable from the grammar/secondary modern school divide which 'comprehensivisation' was meant to remove.

One of our first steps was to enable parents to express three preferences with the intention of satisfying their first preference wherever possible, an elementary liberalising measure in operation in many authorities.

Creating more parental access to schools

But we want to go further. It is a bad system which makes parents depend on the Town Hall for allocating places for their children, on criteria partly based on geographical proximity in aid of fairness and objectivity, partly on administrative convenience. This very often reinforces rather than cuts across social class; and one can scarcely expect a single local school to cater properly for the needs of all those in its catchment area.

For these reasons we have invited our county schools to reconsider their character and their place in the local education system, and are discussing with them the possibility of their assuming direct responsibility for their own admissions. We are also seeking relaxation of the DES rule that parental and pupil interviews should not be held where admission is being sought to a non-selective school. Few, if any, family

decisions are more important than the choice of school. Parents should have the opportunity to discuss their children's prospects directly with the school itself.

Probably only four of the eleven secondary schools in Wandsworth which depend on or benefit from public funding next year will fail to enjoy legal control of their own admission procedures. That all parents should have direct access to the schools of their choice, whatever their status, is only sensible. To require parents to wait four months for news from the Town Hall, whether their child has got a place at the school he or she has chosen or not, is most objectionable.

To make sure that all parents know how many opportunities their children have, the annual booklet we publish for pupils transferring to secondary school contains details of all schools in Wandsworth offering places -- the county, voluntary-aided, grant-maintained schools, the independent schools offering Assisted Places and the City Technology College.

Challenging the methods of teaching

How children are taught and how schools are organised are the prerogative of the teachers and the schools themselves. But this is not to say that they are beyond debate. Wandsworth has made it clear that it does not support mixed-ability teaching in key subjects, and that it does not want pupils to be held back by being taught in classes grouped solely according to chronological age. Pupils, particularly as they get older, should be allowed to move through their levels of attainment -- or grades, as they are called in every other country -- at their own pace.

No research of which the author is aware supports the contention that children learn better when they are in classes made up of pupils drawn from very different abilities. To add to teachers' burdens out of social dogma in this way is culpable folly, particularly as those pupils who lose out are precisely those the system was introduced to help, the so-called less 'academically' able.

Organising classes according to age developed in an era when it was thought that children get cleverer as they get older, in a fairly consistent and predictable way. Everybody now recognises that wide spans of intellectual ability are represented in each age group. In mathematics, for example, it is considered that seven years of understanding may be reflected in a class of eleven year olds. It follows that wherever possible, with proper allowance made for considerations of maturity, pupils should be taught according to their abilities and attainments rather than to their ages.

Children are best taught and learn best when in groups of those who have like minds and capabilities as themselves. Pupils in secondary schools, therefore, should be able to follow different subjects according to their varying abilities and demonstrable attainment -- to 'track', as the Americans call it -- through their various programmes in an individual way. The straight-jacket of the traditional timetable is one of the most depressing features of our education system. Like the system of 'allocating' places to schools from outside, the timetable within schools belongs to the same repertoire of control and direction and defensive reluctance to let people, whether parents or pupils, make decisions for themselves about their own education.

DES regulations entitle parents to know how their child's school is organised, particularly whether children of different ages and abilities are taught together or in separate groups. Schools should deal with this crucial matter in their publications in more detailed and considered ways than is often the case.

Reforming the secondary school curriculum

Perhaps the most serious shortcomings of the comprehensive school have been its failure to meet the needs of the *less* academically able (as well as those of the academically gifted), and its neglect of the sciences and technology. This is not surprising as one of the founding aims of the comprehensive school was to extend a 'grammar school' education to all. It was to put this right that the Government launched its Technical Vocational Education Initiative and the concept of the City Technology College in the '80s.

The pretence that schools can be all things to all men should be dropped. It is not possible (even were it desirable) for all schools to offer a full range of 'academic' and 'vocational' courses at ages 14 or 16. Schools should, therefore, offer specialised 'magnet' courses providing centres of intellectual, artistic and practical excellence for the 14-18 age group. These 'magnet' schools or courses would:

- * enable bright pupils to go well beyond the expectations of the National Curriculum and to motivate those who might be 'switched off' by traditional teaching or timetabling approaches, but who would reach higher standards following courses which engage their interests and in which they can succeed;
- * provide a new enrolment point on transfer to schools at 14 as well as 11;

- * provide, in many cases, a vocational or 'applied' bias and be related to the world of work;
- * offer prospects of further education and employment through involving the Further Education sector and employers. Compact schemes -- arrangements whereby employment is guaranteed in return for a proven record of meeting predetermined targets -- would often be an integral part of such a programme;
- * improve performance through establishing exceptional standards, and encourage effective approaches to learning and teaching;

Some specialisation is necessary if important subjects are not to be lost to the curriculum (as they have been under the existing system). Pretending that all schools should offer most subjects has, in fact, led to the disappearance of many. It is instructive that as a result of a remorselessly planned and lavishly-funded system over decades, many key subjects cannot now normally be offered in many schools beyond the age of 16.

Five 'magnet' programmes in Wandsworth schools are already being developed: in media and communications studies: languages: art and design: leisure and tourism: business studies and marketing.

Wandsworth wishes to see magnet programmes in schools and, indeed, 'magnet' schools prominently represented in its system for two reasons.

First, they reinforce motivation as a principal aim of our education policies. Schools are not custodial institutions. We want children to *want* to go to school. Only thus will we help them to achieve their own goals. Only thus will we improve attendance, performance and the realisation that education can be a lifelong experience. Many children need to see a direct relationship between their own interests and talents, what they are being taught in the classroom and their prospects of employment outside. Specialisation can help to establish this awareness.

Second, magnet programmes or schools reintroduce selection into the indefensible indiscrimination we now have. Selection is the means whereby children are matched to the education which suits them best. No one would support a return to the post-war

system which, against all proclaimed intentions, relegated by crude systems of assessment 80% of all children to the inferior education of the secondary modern school. There is, however, for the reasons given, a larger role than now exists for selective schools, not along the lines of the old fashioned 'grammar school', and 'secondary modern school' nor along the lines of so-called 'academic' or 'vocational' courses. Our aim must be the widest range of schools geared up to the differing and specialist needs of young people as they and their parents see them, the criterion of admission, solely the demonstrable ability by them to benefit from the education being offered.

Improving inspection and reporting

Inspection

The responsibilities of the Inspectorate we inherited were not clearly laid down, and its effectiveness was correspondingly impaired. Many of its duties were concerned with administration, personnel matters, the appointment of staff, for example. Reports on schools, with one or two notorious exceptions when, in fact, conditions had reached scandalous proportions, were anodyne to say the least, more concerned with what teachers were teaching than with what pupils were learning. And some parents, because industrial relations were troubled, had not received reports on their children's progress for over a year.

One of the first steps we took was to staff an Inspectorate whose terms of reference are clearly drawn. Its main duties are to inspect and report on:

- * the standards of attainment of pupils and students
- * the effectiveness of teachers
- * the efficiency of educational establishments and educational programmes with regard to the requirements and guidance set out by the Government and by the education authority.

A set programme of inspection ensures that each educational establishment is visited at least once a year, and made known annually in advance to schools which were consulted on the 'ground rules' to be observed.

Reporting

All reports on schools and aspects of school work and the work of the authority are reported to the elected members. As far as pupils are concerned, the present arrangements for national assessment are scarcely adequate. If necessary, we intend that local arrangements should include:

- * standardised tests in reading and numeracy, and
- * tests of non-verbal reasoning and aptitude.

It is important that parents should have a full report on their children's progress at least once a year, and we made representations to the Government to that effect. Good schools will report termly.

Better use of resources

Working out the real cost of the new authority was impossible. ILEA's previous budget was simply disaggregated between the successor boroughs. Wandsworth's share for its first year was £105.7m. Through more accurate estimating, less bureaucracy and the beneficial effects of tendering, the budget has been reduced by £8.4m. Spending on the classroom, however, has and will be maintained.

These policies are proving cost-effective -- taken together with devolving an ever greater proportion of the overall budget to the schools; transferring to them responsibilities presently undertaken by the Town Hall; extending tendering services beyond those now required by Government; maximising income; removing surplus places and attracting more pupils to our schools.

Summary of Wandsworth's programme

The key elements in our education programme, therefore, have been: improving nursery education; better information to parents about the progress of their children; putting the pupil's ability to succeed at the heart of the purpose of the school; more parental choice through a greater variety of school and better means of exercising that choice; more choice, too, for pupils, through a wider range of specialised courses; effective inspection arrangements; and better use of resources.

Already there are signs that our policies are beginning to work. Enrolments to secondary schools this September are likely to be 7% higher than in 1989. Attendance rates in primary and secondary school have risen from 92.6% to 93.7% and from

83.4% to 89.2% respectively. 20.5% of pupils left school at age 16 this year with 5 GCSE A-C grades compared with 17.2% in 1989. 10% more pupils stayed on into the sixth year last year than the year before, raising the figure to 42%. An additional 20% went into Further Education increasing the total participation rate to 62%.

Many factors are, naturally, contributing to these improvements; meanwhile what part have government policies played in them?

The Government's role

In many of these reforms, Wandsworth, like other authorities, has been helped by national developments. It has been able to add two new kinds of schools, a City Technology College and a grant-maintained school. The introduction of the National Curriculum has, by proposing for all children the same good grounding in the main subjects, opened the way to a greater variety of schools if the opportunities are taken. The Government's decision to limit the full extent of the National Curriculum to age 14, and to introduce vocational subjects from age 14, has strengthened the case for specialist 'magnet' programmes for the 14-18 year olds.

The proposed national assessment system based on levels of attainment unrelated to age may soon mean that pupils can transcend the limitations of their contemporaries and progress at their own pace; it heralds an education based on entitlement, in which pupils succeeding at one level have the right and opportunity to go on to the next -- a new and powerful motivator in our system. Commitment in the Citizens' Charter to provision of better information about the performance of pupils and schools are welcome reinforcements of good practice.

But, in three important ways, schools' reform has not proceeded quickly or deeply enough in spite of all the gains made in a single year. First, the changes in the way children are taught and schools are organised still depend on a generation of teachers and governors wedded to the social engineering ideals of the '60s. And the Government has made schools more powerful in relation to their local authorities than before. Second, and most important, a means has not yet been found of creating the new kinds of schools, or of changing the character of existing ones on a scale which will bring about the variety and choice on which the Government's whole strategy rests. Third, many of the powers and responsibilities of local authorities have been transferred to central government and to the schools and colleges themselves -- or privatised. This brings us to the central issue: what rôle, if any, should the local authority have in the future?

The Local Education Authority's rôle

In 1989 the Audit Commission suggested a rôle for local education authorities in the light of the education reforms.

An LEA was to be:

- * leader, articulating a vision of what education is trying to achieve;
- * partner, supporting schools and colleges and helping them to fulfil this vision;
- * planner, of facilities for the future;
- * provider, of information to the education market, helping people to make informed choices;
- * regulator, of quality in schools and colleges; and,
- * banker, generating the funds which enable local institutions to deliver.

Experience as Chairman of an Education Committee has convinced the author that this is a completely impossible combination of rôles. But it will serve as a useful agenda for discussion.

Leader

It is nonsense to look to local government to articulate a vision of what the education service is trying to achieve. The Government is right to replace the town or county hall with the school and college as the centre of our system. Directors of education and committee chairmen do not teach children. Teachers, schools and parents do, and it is right that they, in partnership with government, should play the leading part in the education service.

Partner

The local education authority will see itself more readily as a partner and enabler. Nevertheless, a warning is in order. Some hold that the local authority of the future

should provide to the growing number of institutions outside its control services on competitive terms which can be provided by other agencies. But the *raison d'être* of public authorities is that they are uniquely equipped to provide some services which other bodies cannot. Where education is concerned, no services provided by the local council cannot be provided equally well or better by other means. Catering, cleaning, security, maintenance of buildings and grounds, legal counsel, payroll, personnel management, in-service training, inspection, professional advice, careers advice, even psychological and child welfare services, all can be provided by organisations outside local government. This basic fact cannot be overemphasised because it provides the essential starting point for an examination of local government's future role in education nationally.

Planner

The local authority can no longer usefully act as planner, even if that were desirable. The variables are too many. The ability of schools to opt out or threaten to opt out, increasing government intervention (the recent, sudden plans to remove from local responsibility Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges, for example), the rapid changes in central and local financial arrangements, the impact of changing policies in neighbouring boroughs, welcome though these may be in themselves, in any case combine to make it impossible to plan long-term. It will certainly be one of the duties of the local authority to ensure that there are places for those children who have special educational needs.

Government policy is based on funds following the pupil. But the change will take time and we are still at an intermediary stage.

Provider of information

Schools will soon have to provide basic information about themselves in easily understandable and standard form, their examination results, their attendance rates and the numbers of pupils who go on to Further Education or train or find work. And they will have to tell parents how their children are doing in relation to other children and (let us also hope) to their own abilities. It will be necessary to verify this information, to collate, analyse and present it intelligibly, supplement it with local knowledge, and develop, revise and update it. Local councils are well placed to do this.

Regulator of quality

It is important that good inspection arrangements should be in place in which everyone can have confidence. Quality control cannot be left *solely* to the shifting judgement of

parents sending their children to this school one year, to that the next. All children, whichever school they go to are entitled to a first-rate education and to the safeguards which come with that. Parents are entitled to reliable information about schools on which they can base their preferences.

The Government has outlined its proposals for a new system of national inspection, and few will disagree with the principles behind it. The weakness of local inspectorates is that they tend to 'go native'. They lose their objectivity and, too easily, get embroiled in other activities such as administration, personnel management and 'advice'. It is impossible to underestimate the value to schools and teachers of good advisory services. But the main task of inspection is to inspect. Parents, responsible authorities and the public want to know how well pupils and institutions are performing, whether anything is going wrong, and, if it is, what must be done quickly to put it right. For these reasons, it is best to establish inspection arrangements which are not locally-based and which do not belong to the council's organisation. Wandsworth will shortly be examining how to give the greatest degree of independence to its inspectorate.

Banker

83% of local authorities' money comes from public funds allocated by central government. And most of a local authority's education budget (roughly 85%), is now delegated to schools to spend according to their own priorities. Much government expenditure is earmarked for particular projects. The Government directly allocates the finances of large sections of education -- mandatory student awards, grant-maintained schools, for example; and (through their Funding Councils), colleges, polytechnics and universities. It is not, therefore, realistic to regard the local authority as the paramount banker of education.

4.

The new local education authority

A wide variety of self-governing schools and colleges which, by competing with each other for pupils and services (within an open market and within a national framework of ground rules governing quality) will respond to parents' wishes -- that should occupy the foreground of the education stage. Education will no longer be a monopoly service controlled by councils able to interfere improperly in the work of schools.

To some extent, however, education is clearly a local and a public service. The Citizens' Charter reminds us that public services should be accountable, accessible, efficient, responsive to people's needs and be able to put things right quickly when they go wrong. For these reasons, the author proposes that locally elected councils should continue as education authorities for their areas with three principal responsibilities. They would:

- * supervise the publication of information about education in the area;
- * act as ombudsmen for the hearing and redress of complaints;
- * act as educators of last resort.

In both the first two functions, good local knowledge of local circumstances is necessary. (They might of course be carried out by independent agencies or other bodies.) As for the third function -- the 'last resort' -- this is by no means a dismissive phrase. No one would under-estimate the significance of the Bank of England as the bank of last resort in our economic system. As the educator of last resort the new local education authority would perform two invaluable services where this is necessary through its powers to establish schools. It would ensure that enough places are available for the number of children to be educated in the area. Second, it would make its own contribution to the variety of schools available and act as a catalyst of change where others, as they have in the past, feared to tread.

The argument against local authorities establishing their own schools will be that as political organisations they cannot be trusted to provide good-quality education in its purest sense. But the same difficulty arises with the relationship of self-governing schools and central government. Grant-maintained schools are not independent

schools. What is to prevent a government which controls the curriculum and finances of most schools from abusing its powers? The only sure safeguard is to shift power irreversibly towards parents and create genuine market conditions in which they can exercise their responsibilities.

As long as local authority schools are subject to the same rules as all others, and local authorities cannot maintain monopoly positions, only benefit can come from such a development. Councils, as Wandsworth's experience and progress has shown, are more than capable of making a worthwhile contribution to the new education system through, if necessary, bringing into being a new generation of council schools. As schools in Wandsworth are now properly the most important part of the educational system, replacing the previous reliance on the LEAs, the author can think of no better way for local government to contribute to the future.