



Choices for Children

Delivering better options for
pupils who need them most

BY ANDREW LEWER MP



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About the author

Andrew Lewer MBE is the Member of Parliament for Northampton South. He was first elected to Westminster in June 2017 and is the only person in Britain to have served as an MP, MEP and Council Leader. He served as a university governor for nine years and was a member of the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee. He is a member of the Commons Education Select Committee and leads the All Party Parliamentary Group for Independent Education.

Acknowledgements

Having given the issues raised and policy options mentioned in this report much thought over the years, I am most grateful to the Centre for Policy Studies for the opportunity to have them appear as a report under their auspices. I am especially grateful to Mark Lehair for our detailed conversations and the work he put in before his new responsibilities at the Department for Education.

Having attended a state school with boarders and seen the fine example of my late mother and her 40 years of teaching (and whole lifetime of working with young people), the genesis of the contents of the report is a long one. I have led a County Council with Looked-After Children responsibilities and have seen how other European countries tackle these challenges during my time on the Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament as an MEP.

Now as a member of the Education Select Committee of the House of Commons and as the founder and Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Independent Education, I have been able to draw experiences past and present together for this work.

I would also like to thank the Independent Schools Council, the Boarding Schools Association, the Local Government Association and my colleagues on the Conservative Growth Group for their conversations and encouragement.



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Introduction

We should be proud of England's education system and what it has achieved in recent times. Schools are more orderly. Teachers are better trained. The curriculum studied and exams taken are more rigorous. And when it comes to reading, our primary pupils are now the best in the West.

These and other improvements have not happened by accident. Families and professionals have put in enormous effort. Government too has played its part, rolling out the evidence-informed reforms that have enabled school standards to rise and increasing the core schools budget to record levels, both in terms of overall size and per-pupil funding.

Of course, we know that it is not just the amount of money available that matters, but how it is spent. The improvements we have seen have come about because taxpayers' money has been spent in ways that get the biggest bang for every buck: giving schools greater autonomy; letting heads control budgets; and developing and disseminating the evidence on how to best use that spending power.

‘ At the heart of the education reform agenda, under both Labour and Conservative governments, has been the principle of choice ’

However, as we look to the future, there is scope to do even better and go even further.

At the heart of the education reform agenda, under both Labour and Conservative governments, has been the principle of choice. The idea was that by letting parents choose which schools were best for their children, and avoid those which were worst, you would drive up standards across the board – even to the extent of letting dissatisfied parents set up new schools founded on different principles, via the free schools programme.

One of the most common attacks on school choice is that it is of greatest benefit to the middle classes. In fact, there are many, many working-class pupils who have benefited from education reform. Yet it is true that it is those at the bottom of the economic pyramid who often have both the least control over their children's educational experience, and the greatest need for it. Those who cannot afford to buy a home near the best local school, or pay for private tutoring, or even for many of the essentials and basics that other pupils take for granted.

This report explores how we can give more choice, and more control, to the groups that need it most, ensuring that those closest to the children concerned get a say in the funding and decisions that affect them. We need to inform, empower and trust parents and carers, because they have children's best interests at heart. I would therefore encourage all those interested in improving the lives of the most disadvantaged children to think deeply about the proposals in this report.



Executive Summary

For decades now, parents in England have had the right to express a preference as to which state school their child attends. There is no guarantee that they get into their favoured destination, but the vast majority of children are offered a place there.¹

This has gone hand in hand with a shift in the way schools are funded. Today, more than 90% of funding is allocated on a standardised, ‘pupil-led’ basis, reflecting pupils’ numbers and characteristics.²

In other words, funding largely follows the child, which means that parental preferences materially determine how much money individual schools receive each year. This has contributed to headteachers becoming more responsive to the issues and concerns that matter most to families: smarter uniforms, stricter behaviour policies, and more extracurricular opportunities have all become more common as a result of schools having to appeal to the local community in order to encourage applications.

‘Beyond expressing their school preference at the ages of four, 11 and 16, parents have no say over how the school budget of around £60 billion is spent’

That said, beyond expressing their school preference at the ages of four, 11 and 16, parents have no say over how the school budget of around £60 billion is spent. Indeed, school accountability is something of a blunt instrument, judging schools and trusts against a small number of qualitative and quantitative measures.

Under this system, the typical child in a mainstream school does have a better experience today than in times gone by. But there are still groups that experience far worse outcomes than their peers.

This report explores how introducing greater family choice could help change things for the better for three particularly hard-hit sets of pupils:

- ‘Looked-after children’ (LACs) – by allowing the money that would follow them to a state school to go towards independent or boarding school fees
- Those from poorer backgrounds – by creating a Parent Premium that parents or carers can spend on resources and activities that support learning
- Those in schools judged to be ‘inadequate’ – by giving families a formal say in who takes over and turns around a school

1 Department for Education, ‘[Secondary and primary school applications and offers](#)’, June 2023

2 Department for Education, ‘[The national funding formulae for schools and high needs](#)’, July 2023, p20



Looked-after children

Children are only taken away from their parents and placed in the care of others in the most extreme of circumstances. It is almost inevitable that by this point there has been a negative impact on the child's emotional and academic development.

As a result, looked-after children (LACs) tend to have extremely poor outcomes educationally, economically and otherwise.

There are attempts to mitigate this within the system. If an LAC changes schools, they will go to the top of any waiting list. Local authorities are advised to place them only in schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding'. They are also told that they should 'seek a school or other education setting that is best suited to the child's needs and that this 'could be in a maintained school, academy or independent school, and those schools could be selective, non-selective, boarding or day schools.'³

‘ The Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) runs a scheme in conjunction with state boarding and independent schools to find fully funded places for children in or on the edge of care ’

Some councils have duly made use of independent and boarding schools for the children in their charge – but this is rare. Yet there could be a transformational opportunity here.

The Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) runs a scheme in conjunction with state boarding and independent schools to find fully funded places for children in or on the edge of care.⁴ Over the last three years, 150 such children have benefited. And this has been achieved without any money from the Department for Education (DfE), beyond a small grant to cover administrative costs. The fees were funded by philanthropists, the schools themselves, and contributions from a small number of local authorities.

I believe that many more looked-after children could benefit from the opportunities and consistency that independent and boarding schools can offer. I propose that:

- DfE guidance should be updated to emphasise independent or boarding schools as a routine option available to LACs if they and their family/carers want it
- The money that would have followed the child to a state school or the local Virtual School Head should be made available for independent school or boarding fees.

This would have no additional cost to the taxpayer: it would literally be a reallocation of existing money that would have been spent on the child anyway. But it could hugely improve the outcomes for children with some of the worst prospects in society.

³ Department for Education, 'Promoting the education of looked after children and previously looked after children – Statutory guidance for local authorities', February 2018, page 11

⁴ RNCSF, 'Looked-After and Vulnerable Children'



Children from poorer families

One of the strongest indicators of a child's likely education performance is household income, with the general and predictable pattern being that pupils from low-income families tend to do worse than the more affluent.

Again, the education system attempts to counter this, by adjusting the school funding formula to deliver more money for schools that have more deprived pupils. This includes, but is not limited to, a set amount for each child eligible for free school meals, or who has been at any point in the last six years – the 'Pupil Premium'. As part of the Covid recovery efforts, schools have also been given money as part of the National Tuition Programme (NTP), to provide one-to-one or small group tuition to pupils who need it.

The problem from the children's point of view is that none of this funding is ring-fenced for the pupils in question. It can be spent by the school in whatever way it sees fit and on whichever pupils it considers need support. There are good reasons for this, but it means that money intended to help poorer pupils isn't necessarily spent on those pupils. And in the case of the NTP, it often isn't spent at all. Across 2020/21 and 2021/22, a third of the money allocated to schools was not spent.⁵ In the 2022/23 financial year, nearly half of the total – 43% – was not spent at all.⁶

‘ Across 2020/21 and 2021/22, a third of the money allocated for tuition to schools was not spent ’

I believe that there is a case for ring-fenced money to be spent on poorer pupils, as directed by their parents or carers, and so propose the creation of a 'Parent Premium' for every child who is eligible for the Pupil Premium – a budget for families to spend on their children's education.

It could be organised through accounts similar to those the government creates for its tax-free childcare system, to be spent on tuition or other educational activities, or could be combined with other families' premiums to enable small group tutoring or activities.

A benefit for schools is that it will encourage families to register for free school meals to gain access to the money, thus increasing the quantity of Pupil Premium funding they receive.

Children in schools judged 'inadequate'

When a school is judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted (or in some cases receives repeated 'requires improvement' ratings), it is generally transferred to a different 'responsible body' to run. For maintained schools, this means they are taken from their local authority and given to an academy trust; for academies, it means they are transferred to a different trust.

This is one of the core accountability measures embedded within the education reform agenda – swift action to ensure that failing schools get better leadership, and deliver better outcomes. This process of 'rebrokering' has generally been successful at raising standards in the worst-performing schools.

5 BBC News, 'School tutoring: One third of £594m post-lockdown cash unspent'

6 Schools Week, 'Tutoring programme underspend ramps up to £240m'



However, the ultimate decision as to which trust takes on a school lies with the Secretary of State for Education, although in practice it is delegated to the DfE's regional directors. There is an outline process to follow,⁷ but families of pupils affected have next to no say.

There are good reasons why the DfE's decision should not be determined or vetoed by families: they generally are not experts in turning around or running schools, and their involvement with the school is usually tied to their child attending it, whereas the Department has to think about wider concerns and the longer term.

“ The logic behind introducing parental preference to the admissions system 30 years ago was that parents care deeply about their children's education, and are invested in getting the right solutions for it ”

However, the logic behind introducing parental preference to the admissions system 30 years ago was that parents care deeply about their children's education, and are invested in getting the right solutions for it. The same logic surely applies to the identity of those running a child's school, and their approach to it. I therefore believe that affected families should be given more of a say in who takes over a school when it is transferred to another trust.

I propose that:

- The DfE pulls together a shortlist of academy trusts that the school could be transferred to, with its rationale for why these have been chosen
- Families of those in the school, or likely to attend it within a few years, are able to formally express their preference
- The DfE takes these preferences into account when making its decision, and explains how its eventual verdict was reached

Taken together, I believe these three reforms would improve the lives of many children, including those who are currently most likely to be failed by the system.

⁷ Department for Education, 'Information note for academy trusts about academy transfer'



Looking after Looked-after Children

There is no other way to put it: outcomes for children in need of children's social care services are awful, across almost any measure you look at.

A 'child in need' (CIN) is defined by the Children Act 1989 as one who is 'unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of children's social care services, or the child is disabled.'⁸ As of March 2022 there were just over 400,000 children in need – although as the definition suggests, many of these need help due to their disability, rather than their family circumstances. It is this latter group I will focus on in this chapter.⁹

‘The absence rate for children in need is twice that of other children, and the proportion who are persistently absent is shockingly high’

Within CIN, there are two important escalatory categories:

- A child in need becomes the subject of a child protection plan (CPP) if they are assessed as being at risk of harm at an initial child protection conference. As of March 2022 there were around 51,000 such plans in place.¹⁰
- A child is looked-after by a local authority if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours; are subject to a care order; or are subject to a placement order. This applied to around 82,000 children.¹¹

Outcomes for children in need

By definition, one might expect these children to have poorer outcomes than their peers – it is the very reason that social services get involved. But the gaps remain huge even after social services start working with the child and their family, or even after taking them into care. For instance, in 2022:

- The absence rate for children in need was twice that of other children: 15.2% to 7.6%.¹² The proportion who were persistently absent was shockingly high: 43.8% to an average of 22.8%, and 56.2% for pupils with a CPP.
- At Key Stage 2, 59% of all children meet the 'expected standard' in reading, writing and maths – but only 29% of children in need did.¹³

8 Children Act 1989, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/17>

9 Department for Education, 'Characteristics of children in need', October 2022

10 ibid

11 Department for Education, 'Children looked after in England including adoptions', November 2022

12 Department for Education, 'Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England', March 2023

13 ibid



- At Key Stage 4, the 'Attainment 8' score they achieve is less than half of their peers, at 20.2 versus 48.8. In other words, their average grade on the nine-point scale that replaced the old GCSE scale is a 2, compared to other pupils' 4.88.¹⁴
- Only 12.1% get 5s or better in both English and Maths GCSE, versus 49.8% of others. A year after their GCSEs, only around 75% are still in education, employment or training,¹⁵ versus 90.5% for all young people.¹⁶

‘ A year after their GCSEs, only around 75% of these children are still in education, employment or training, versus 90.5% for all young people ’

There is a faint flicker of hope within the data: children taken into care for more than 12 months do see a significant improvement in their attendance, and a small uptick in their test and exam results.^{17, 18} This is of course exactly what you would hope to see – after all, the whole aim of taking a child away from their parents and into care is to ensure they have a safer, more stable environment. But overall, average outcomes for children in need are desperately poor.

In an ideal world, with infinite resources, we might be able to find the people and support to raise these children's performance, and prospects, to the same level as their peers. We are not in such a world. But there are some practical things we can do to improve the outcomes of those children who have had the toughest time: those who are in or on the edge of care.

Broadening Educational Pathways – a model for greater success?

Statutory guidance to local authorities makes it clear that looked-after children (LACs) should only be placed in 'good' or 'outstanding' schools, and that those looking after them should 'seek a school or other education setting that is best suited to the child's needs' – whether it is a state or independent, or boarding or day school.¹⁹

For many LACs, or other children in need, the quality and consistency of academic and pastoral provision that independent and boarding schools can offer is precisely what they need to overcome the challenges they have faced to date. For some, a boarding school place is the very thing that can avoid them being taken into care, as it will facilitate their being looked after by a member of their extended family or someone else.

Public money is tight, especially in local government. But many places in these schools can be found at no extra cost to the taxpayer thanks to bursaries and philanthropists. Indeed, a charitable scheme to do just this already exists – and it has evidence of major positive impacts. I believe that it could be scaled up to support many more children and families, and potentially transform their lives in the process.

14 ibid

15 ibid

16 Department for Education, 'Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18', June 2022

17 Department for Education, 'Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England', March 2023

18 ibid

19 Department for Education, 'Promoting the education of looked after children and previously looked after children – Statutory guidance for local authorities', February 2018, page 11



The 'Broadening Educational Pathways' (BEP) programme has been run by the Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) since 2020.²⁰ The charity identifies care-experienced children who may benefit from attending a state boarding or independent school, and then brokers a place for them at such an institution. It also provides support and guidance for the child, their carers and the school, to maximise the chances of the placement succeeding.

The programme's aim is to improve the outcomes of those concerned – academic and otherwise – by providing them with greater stability of school placement and enhanced wraparound academic and pastoral care.

The thinking is that the experiences available at the chosen schools – longer school days, smaller classes, enhanced support for academic or university pathways and so on, plus of course the home life provided by boarding – give the children a better chance to do well and make up for the disruption they have previously experienced.

‘ Three quarters of those placed by RNCSF continued to higher education, compared to 13% of other children in need ’

The scheme was set up because of the incredibly strong data from previous programmes. An independent evaluation by the University of Nottingham of the outcomes of children placed by RNCSF at boarding schools between 2013 and 2020 found, among other things, that boarding pupils were four times more likely to get five good GCSEs including English and Maths than the comparator group – 54% versus 13%²¹ – and that they typically made five months' more progress in their Attainment 8 scores.

In terms of getting children into university, the statistics were even more impressive: 75% of those placed by RNCSF continued to higher education by age 19 compared to 13% of children in need.²² And where only 2% of looked-after children went to a higher tariff university, 31% of the RNCSF cohort did.

In the past three years, through the BEP, RNCSF has brokered 150 placements for vulnerable children or children in care.²³ In some cases, the provision of a place has saved care placements from collapse. Others have enabled children to be cared for within their extended family and avoid entering the formal care system.

Funding for the school places came overwhelmingly from the schools themselves and philanthropic donations – over £22 million pounds in total.²⁴ Some came from local authorities as a contribution towards the residential elements of boarding (which of course they would have been covering in any event). Aside from a modest Department for Education grant to help the RNCSF broker places, no other taxpayer money went towards the programme.

20 RNCSF, 'Looked-After and Vulnerable Children'

21 Prof. David Murphy, Prof. Mary Oliver, Dr Michael Adkins, Prof. Gianni De Fraja, & Dr Shun Chen, 'An independent evaluation of the outcomes for looked after and vulnerable children attending boarding schools', University of Nottingham (2023), p18

22 Department for Education, 'Widening participation in Higher Education'

23 Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation, 'Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children', July 2023

24 *ibid*



Building an even better BEP

We have a programme already in operation that can place looked-after or vulnerable children in a great school that suits them, gives them stability and support, and helps them get much better outcomes than they might otherwise have achieved, at next to no additional cost to the public purse. There is an obvious case to build on its self-evident success.

In doing so, the key issue is the limit to how many pupil places can be found funded solely by the schools. While some independent schools have major foundations and alumni networks to draw upon for this, most do not.

Up until now, the RNCSF has been able to unlock places at schools through grants from its 'Challenge Fund', supported by various high net worth individuals. This awards grants to schools of £5,000 or £8,000, to subsidise a portion of the costs of a place and unlock bursaries to cover the remainder. However, the fact remains that both schools and the charity have only a finite amount of money that they can use for this.

‘To date, £1.7 million of ‘Challenge Fund’ grants and £700,000 of local authority contributions has unlocked more than £21 million of bursaries – that’s a return of over 8-to-1’

Our solution? To leverage the money that the state is already spending on these children.

LACs have to be found a school place. If they go to a state school, as the overwhelming majority will, that school will receive the funding allocated via the National Funding Formula. The amount per pupil varies by area, but the average for state schools in England is £7,460²⁵ – not far off half of the average independent day school’s fees of £15,200.²⁶

If the DfE created a mechanism whereby that money followed the pupil to an independent or boarding school, it would not cover the entire cost. But it would very significantly increase the number of pupils who could take advantage of such a scheme. For pupils at that average day school, it would enable two pupils to be covered by the same amount of philanthropic or bursary funding, compared to just one.

However, it is likely that far more children would benefit. The RNCSF believes that introducing such a funding mechanism would persuade schools that do not yet take part in the BEP to do so, unlocking more bursaries and places. It could also encourage more donors to part-fund additional places too. To date, £1.7 million of ‘Challenge Fund’ grants and £700,000 of local authority contributions has unlocked more than £21 million of bursaries – that’s a return of over 8-to-1.

It is not unfeasible that we could grow the number of children benefiting from this from 50 a year to 150 or more. The RNCSF thinks it could potentially be between 200 and 300 a year. However many the number, it would mean significantly more children who have had the toughest starts to life being given access to some of the best support and opportunities available – at near zero immediate net cost to the taxpayer, beyond continued support with the RNCSF’s administrative costs and brokering work.

25 Department for Education, ‘School funding: everything you need to know’, April 2023

26 Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘Tax, private school fees, and state school spending’, July 2023



But there is a case to be more imaginative. One of the most obvious consequences of the kind of family breakdown that LACs suffer, and their awful outcomes, is an increased burden on the state. These children are far more likely to end up unemployed, in jail, addicted to drugs or suffering from a range of other awful outcomes. And that self-evidently has a financial cost as well as a human one.

‘Getting more of our most vulnerable children into great independent or boarding schools, by permitting money that would be spent on them anyway to go towards private or boarding fees, is a no-brainer’

The University of Nottingham’s analysis, and that of other experts, suggests that substantial reductions in public spending can be had from these kind of interventions, because of the expensive care placements avoided, reduced future need for social or health care involvement, and higher earnings potential for those concerned.²⁷ It also seems like a far better way to leverage the skills, expertise and resources of our private schools than hammering them with a tax rise driven purely by class resentment. There is therefore a case for the DfE to invest in expanding this scheme further, working with the schools sector and the RNCSF.

Getting more of our most vulnerable children into great independent or boarding schools, by permitting money that would be spent on them anyway to go towards private or boarding fees, is a no-brainer. It has almost zero net cost to the taxpayer, and would very quickly makes huge savings in terms of future public spending. And it would encourage more giving by wealthy individuals and charities.

These young people deserve the best we can give them. This mechanism can help make that happen.

27 Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation, ‘Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children’, July 2023, page 13

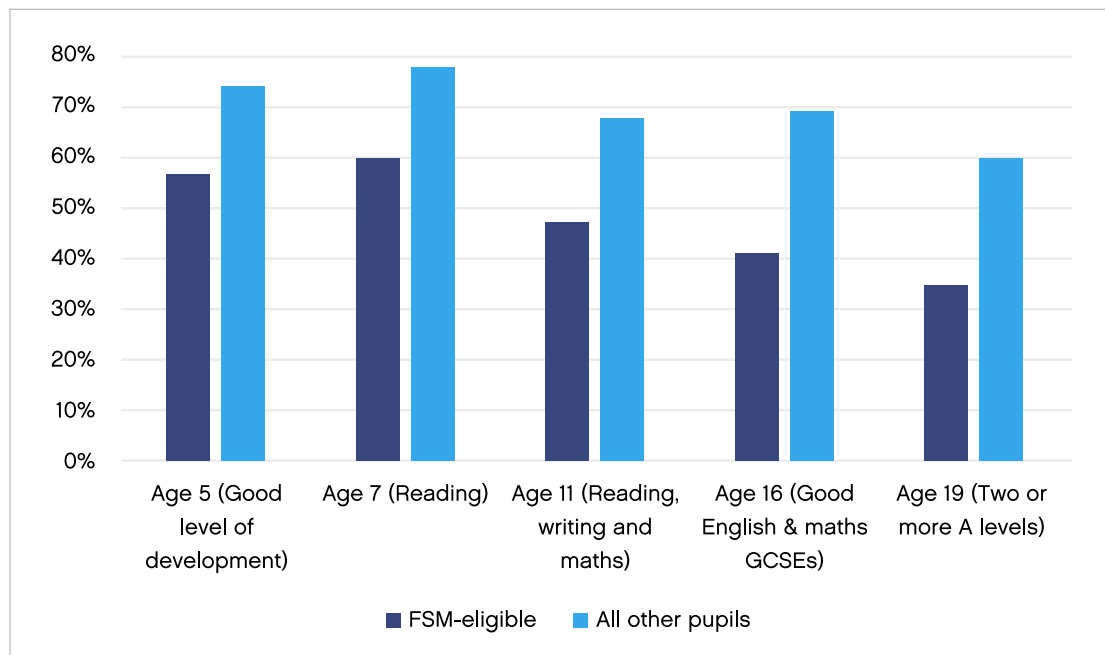


Catching Up Via a Parent Premium

It is a sad fact that the poorer a child's household is, the less well they will usually do at school.

The gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers starts early and remains large throughout school.

For example, the Phonics Screening Check, taken by six-year-olds at the end of Year 1 to see how fluently they can spell and read, shows that 14% fewer children eligible for free school meals achieve the pass mark.²⁸ This chart from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) shows the difference in outcomes at other key points.²⁹



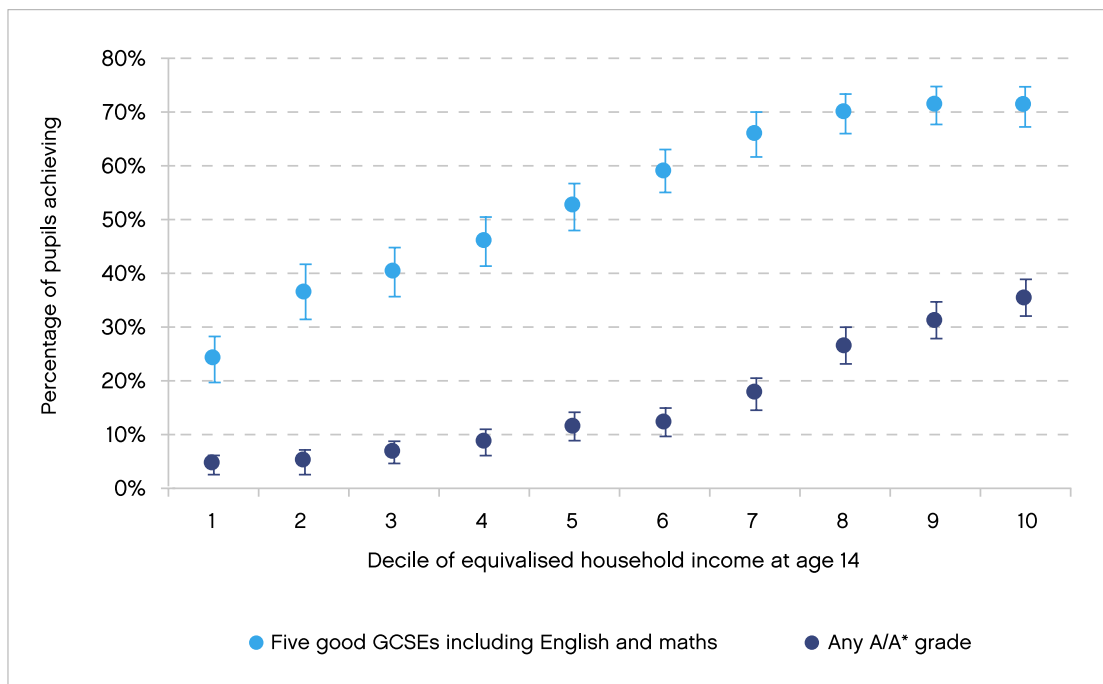
Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, [link](#)

As that chart shows, these disparities in outcomes reinforce themselves over time, resulting in the gaps getting larger and larger. Here, for example, is the IFS's breakdown of GCSE outcomes, mapped against income deciles.³⁰

28 Department for Education, 'Phonics screening check and key stage 1 assessments: England 2019' (Sept. 2019)

29 I Tahir, 'The UK education system preserves inequality', Institute for Fiscal Studies (September 2022)

30 ibid



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, [link](#)

To help schools address this gap, the National Funding Formula ensures that a significant proportion of their budget incorporates measures of deprivation – including eligibility for free school meals and the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).

Currently, the NFF allocates just over 10% of all its funding to deprived pupils – not far off £6 billion.³¹ In addition, children eligible for free school meals now or any time in the past six years, or who are looked after by the LA or who have been, attract further ‘Pupil Premium’ funding to the school, totalling nearly £2.9 billion.³²

It is clear, then, that schools are given significant financial firepower in addressing barriers to learning faced by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Sadly, however, it does not appear to have made much difference to the attainment gap – and what little progress there had been was blown out of the water by Covid.

Here is the gap for Key Stage 2 assessments since 2010, when the Pupil Premium was introduced.³³

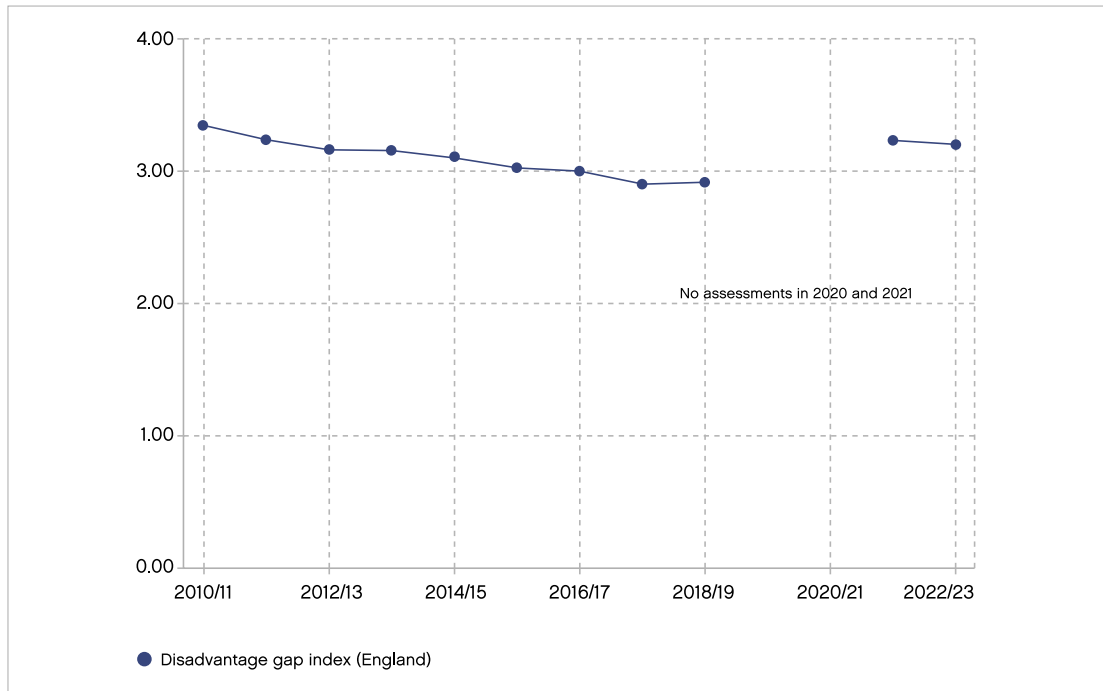
31 Department for Education, ‘The national funding formulae for schools and high needs’, July 2023, p22

32 Department for Education, ‘Pupil premium: overview’, April 2023

33 Department for Education, ‘Academic year 2022/23 – Key stage 2 attainment’, September 2023



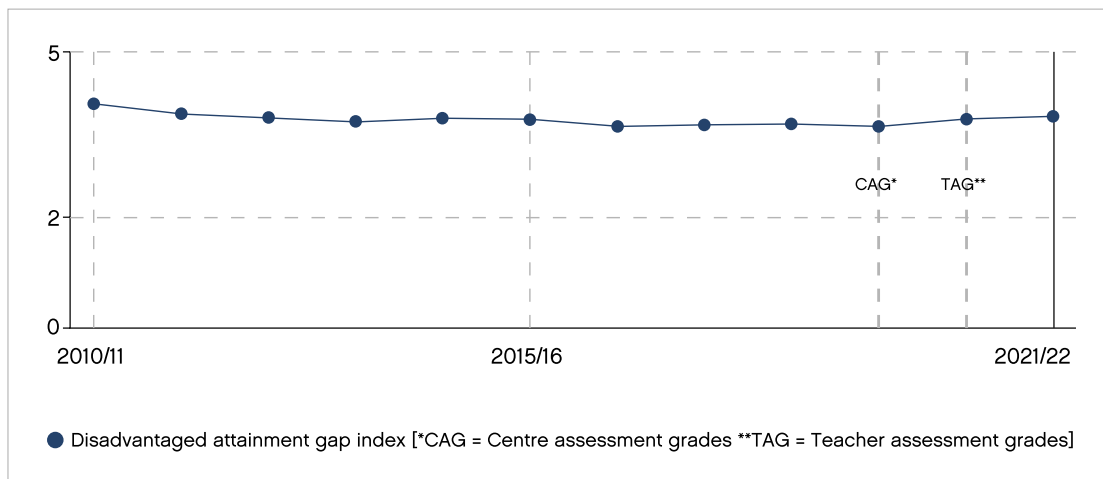
Disadvantage gap at Key Stage 2 (England, state-funded schools)



Source: Gov.uk, [link](#)

And here is the same at Key Stage 4 – GCSEs and equivalents.³⁴

Disadvantage gap at Key Stage 4



Source: Gov.uk, [link](#)

The pattern is similar – slight improvement over time, reversed by Covid.

The stubborn persistence of the attainment gap isn't for want of trying by government or schools. Huge amounts of money, time and effort have gone into raising standards generally and narrowing the gap in particular.

34 Department for Education, 'Academic year 2021/22 – Key stage 4 performance', October 2022



Recently, for example, the ‘National Tutoring Programme’ was created as part of the Covid recovery efforts, to enable schools to offer one-to-one or small group tuition to children that they felt had fallen behind as a result of the pandemic. Schools received a fixed amount of money for every Pupil Premium-eligible child on their books, to put towards the cost of tuition. (The tuition need not be limited just to children eligible for the premium, but the intention was to ensure these were disproportionately targeted.)

More than £1 billion was allocated to deliver six million courses of tuition over four years. Unfortunately, as the Centre for Policy Studies warned in its prescient report ‘Lost Learning’, the programme has been something of a disaster.³⁵ In particular, schools have struggled to spend the money they’ve been given.

‘ Schools as a whole seem unable to do much to help poorer pupils catch up, even when provided with huge amounts of funding to do so ’

There have been a number of reasons given by way of explanation – the need to find top-up money from elsewhere, the bureaucracy of the programme, etc. But the hard facts are that across 2020/21 and 2021/22, a third of money allocated to schools was not spent.³⁶ In the 2022/23 financial year, that rose to nearly half – 43%.³⁷ Indeed, in a somewhat bitter irony, much of the extra money for the record-breaking pay rise for teachers this academic year came from the NTP underspend. So money meant to help deprived pupils catch up, which teachers didn’t get around to spending on them, went towards their own pay rises.

Introducing the Parent Premium

We have a situation where schools as a whole seem unable to do much to help poorer pupils catch up, even when provided with huge amounts of funding to do so. The solution? To harness parent power, and creating a ‘Parent Premium’ alongside the Pupil Premium.

By this I do not mean further changes to the National Funding Formula. Instead, the government should ring-fence money for poorer pupils who are eligible for the Pupil Premium at school – but give it to their parents or carers, via dedicated accounts, to spend on activities or resources that support their child’s learning.

They might spend the allowance on tuition, or resources like textbooks, or subscriptions to educational apps or websites. Or they might fund after-school or holiday clubs with an educational focus.

Crucially, the Premium should be constructed such that families can pool their budgets to make it go further – for instance, hiring a tutor for multiple children, or bulk-buying sets of books. Parents might also club together to enable after-school or other enrichment activities that need a minimum number of participants to be viable, like sport or drama clubs.

It should also be possible for families to spend their Premium through or at their child’s school, for example if there is already an after school club happening that their children want to join, or tutoring available that they wish to top up.

35 Rachel Wolf, Jonathan Simons & Gabriel Milland, ‘Lost Learning’ (Centre for Policy Studies, June 2021)

36 BBC News, ‘School tutoring: One third of £594m post-lockdown cash unspent’

37 Schools Week, ‘Tutoring programme underspend ramps up to £240m’



However, even where the funding ends up going to schools, allocating the premium to the family in the first instance will make them more responsive to parental preferences, as heads will need to make the case for it to be given to them to spend. We should trust families to focus on the things that will make the biggest difference to their child – after all, they are the ones who have their interests most at heart.

Of course, there will need to be rules and processes to control how the money is spent, to avoid fraud and reduce deadweight loss. Exactly what families could spend the premium on would be a policy decision for the government, to ensure the most impact and best value for money. It might be that the money could only be spent via tuition and other providers on a quality-assured list. Or it could be left to parents to decide who was good enough. Similarly, it might be that only specific resources that had been validated by the DfE were eligible for premium spending. Or, again, it could be left for families to decide what was best for their child.

‘ There is already a precedent for the government providing families with a budget to spend on a specific kind of service ’

None of the above requires a massive new bureaucratic process and infrastructure to be built. There is also already a precedent for the government providing families with a budget to spend on a specific kind of service: Tax-Free Childcare (TFC) accounts.

For TFC, families apply to set up an online account into which they can pay money and then receive a government top-up. Only approved childcare providers can receive money from TFC.

Significantly for our purposes, TFC can already be spent on a range of activities beyond pure ‘childcare’ – after school and holiday clubs, but also tutoring providers. In other words, the government already has a process that allows families to spend money that it has given them. For example, you can drop your child off at the ‘Explore Learning’ centre in your local supermarket and leave them to learn while you shop in peace, subsidised through government childcare support.³⁸

The precedent and infrastructure is there. It needs the money and willpower to make it happen.

How can the Parent Premium be paid for?

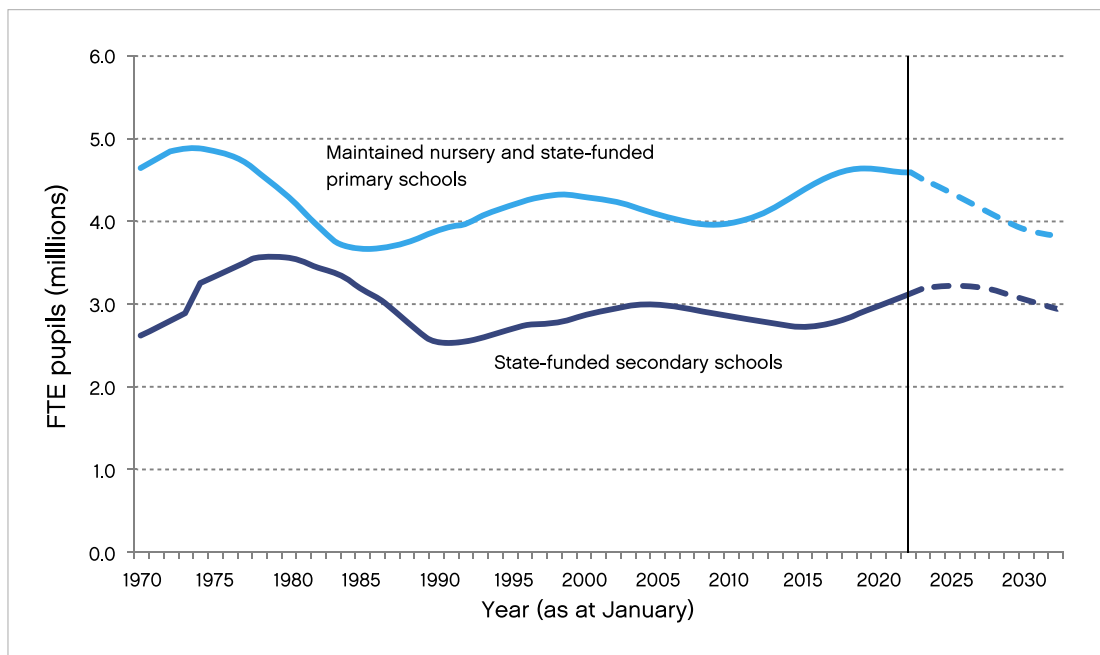
Given how tight public finances are, and the compelling claims by schools for more funding, it would normally be difficult to find significant additional money for a Parent Premium.

However, because of the demographic changes currently working their way through the school system, it should be possible to fund a premium out of the core schools budget.

The baby boom of the 2000s and early 2010s is now in the process of becoming a baby bust. By 2030, the pupil population is forecast to fall from 7.86 million to 7.12 million, a decline of 9.4%.³⁹ Primary schools are due to see numbers drop even more – from 4.53 million today to 3.92 million in 2030, a fall of 13.5%.

38 Explore Learning, ‘Financial Support’ (accessed October 2023)

39 Department for Education, ‘Reporting year 2022 National pupil projections’ (July 2022)



Source: National Pupil Projections, [link](#)

Given that the vast majority of the schools budget is allocated by the NFF according to pupil-driven factors, one might expect funding to fall alongside the school population. This will doubtless be popular with the Treasury – but less so with schools and parents.

However, that falling school population gives us an opportunity to skim off money from the ‘spare’ cash freed up. It could be divided between higher funding for schools, savings for the Treasury – and cash for a Parent Premium.

Empowering parents through real education spending power would not just benefit schools through greater parentally driven support. Linking Parent Premium eligibility to Pupil Premium eligibility will give families a massive incentive to make sure they claim free school meals, as this will be the trigger for both entitlements. Currently, schools often struggle to get eligible families to register for FSM, and so miss out on Pupil Premium money. The chance to access money for their child directly should incentivise more families to register. This will obviously increase total spending, but it will ensure that funding reflects deprivation more accurately.

Overall, a Parent Premium for disadvantaged children would be impactful, affordable and the right thing to do. In a recent essay for the CPS, its former Head of Education Mark Lehain proposed a system of personal learning budgets for children, with a suggested budget of £300. This could be the level at which the Parent Premium was set – or, if we wanted to be more generous, we could move it closer towards the £2,000 a year offered for Tax-Free Childcare,

Children need all the help they can get with their education, and schools clearly need more support in narrowing the gap. Empowering parents with real spending power is a straightforward way to do this, and puts those who know children best and care about them most at the heart of the decisions about their future.



Parent Power for Failing Schools

Everyone wants every school to thrive and do well by its pupils, families, staff and communities. No one wants to see a school fail an Ofsted inspection – not even Ofsted itself. That is why so much time, effort and money are put into ensuring that every school meets a minimum standard in terms of things like health and safety, behaviour, and of course the quality of education itself.

As a result, the proportion of England's 22,000 state-funded schools, nurseries and alternative providers that are judged 'inadequate' is much smaller than it used to be. There are currently only about 300 state-funded primaries and 170 secondaries judged to be 'inadequate'.⁴⁰ These represent 1.9% of primaries, 5.4% of secondaries, and about 2.5% of schools overall – about one in 40.

**‘ There are currently only about
300 state-funded primaries and 170
secondaries judged to be ‘inadequate’ ’**

However, while the numbers are small, the impact on the children and staff in those schools, and the communities they serve, is huge. Fixing such schools is therefore vitally important.

Until around 20 years ago, if a school was deemed to be failing its pupils, it was down to the local authority to remedy the situation. Some were quite good at school turnarounds, but many were not.

The introduction of parental preferences into the admissions process, and of per-pupil funding, drove up standards overall. But it made things worse for many schools that were struggling. Parents (understandably) tried to avoid sending their children to the bad schools, pupil numbers and funding fell, and the schools became trapped in a cycle of decline.

With the introduction of City Academies by the Blair government, a new means of turnaround was created. Failing schools could be shut down and replaced by new 'academies'. These received their funding directly from central government, and were overseen by an 'academy trust' instead of the local council.

For the first time in England, we had a mechanism for dealing with failing schools if the local authority was unable to improve things.

As academisation spread, a new group of school improvement bodies came into being: multi-academy trusts (MATs), which ran not one but multiple schools at the same time. This enabled money, resources, expertise and people to be pooled and shared between schools to better raise standards.

⁴⁰ Data for any inspection framework, as at 10/10/2023 on <https://www.watchsted.com/analysis>



But it also meant that we had a new group that could be given responsibility for failing schools. ‘Rebrokering’ – the transfer of struggling schools from one academy trust to another – came into being, and with it a vital instrument in the school improvement toolkit.

It should of course be pointed out that not all school transfers happened due to failure. Some took place simply because a trust or council realised that a school would be better off under different management. There might have been other local schools already working together that the academy could slot in with, or the existing trust was geographically distant. In such cases, the transfer came from a good place – the recognition that a school could do even better if supported by others.

‘When a school is taken over due to poor management, there is no clearly defined role for the parents of the pupils affected’

But the principle was also established that rebrokering a school was a vital mechanism for school improvement – and the key sanction for failures of leadership and delivery.

Over time, the strictness of this regime has changed, depending on the attitude and priorities of those at the DfE. There have been periods during which schools who were judged ‘requires improvement’ (RI) were under pressure to academise and join a trust, or change their trusts. On other occasions, this happened only if they had received that rating twice or more. Until recently we were back in a world where schools that were judged downright ‘inadequate’ were pushed towards transfer, but since last year double ‘requires improvement’ verdicts have again been a potential trigger.

But whatever the exact criteria, one thing has remained constant: when a school is taken over due to poor management, there is no clearly defined role for the parents of the pupils affected.

Compare this to the situation when a maintained school moves to become an academy. In such cases, a consultation has to take place. As part of this, parents and others have the opportunity to have their say, although exactly how the consultation works varies.⁴¹

Significantly, this consultation does not give respondents the right to veto the decision. But those running the process do have to show that they have looked at the responses and explain why they have taken a different view, if that is the case.

This makes complete sense. Generally speaking, parents and families are not educational experts, nor should they be. They cannot be expected to know what is required to turn a school around and raise standards. Nor should we expect them to consider issues beyond their own children’s experiences.

But there is an incongruity here. The system expects parents to express a preference when choosing a school in the first place. We know that families take this seriously, and that they have preferences over things like school culture and behavioural approaches, the curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities offered, who the head teacher is, and so on. Likewise, if their school moves from council control to become an academy. Or indeed if an academy makes ‘significant changes’ to its offering,

⁴¹ Department for Education, ‘[Information note for academy trusts about academy transfer](#)’



such as increasing or decreasing the number and type of places, or moving to a different site.⁴²

And yet if a school changes trust – and with it potentially many of the aspects of the service it provides, such as behaviour policies or extra-curricular opportunities – the current process does not require parental preferences to be taken into account. It also does not give parents any say in which trusts are lined up for consideration. Indeed, the guidance is clear that pretty much any kind of governance change – including academies moving between trusts, or trusts expanding, merging or changing sponsor – is a matter for the DfE and its regional directors, rather than counting as a ‘significant change’ that requires consultation.

‘In Holland Park, some parents strongly opposed the DfE’s choice of new trust and threatened to take the decision to a judicial review’

It is therefore unsurprising that some academy rebrokering has led to bitter and high-profile parental campaigns against the DfE’s chosen trust. For example, last year Holland Park School was judged ‘inadequate’ after a whole series of issues came to light.⁴³ Some parents strongly opposed the DfE’s choice of new trust and threatened to take the decision to a judicial review.⁴⁴

Ultimately the school did join the preferred MAT – United Learning, the country’s biggest trust, and one of the best performing ones too. But the process left many unhappy.⁴⁵

Giving parents a voice on failing schools

Successful and sustainable school turnarounds are an immense task. To pull them off requires the recipient trust to have the right track record and expertise, financial and operational resilience, and high-quality staff.

Even just a few years ago, in any given area there would probably have been only one or maybe two realistic options when it came to finding a new trust for a struggling school. The ‘shortlist’ would normally be so short as to be singular.

We now have quite a different situation. Recent years have seen a big shift towards schools being in multi-academy trusts, and the average size of these MATs has risen too. More than 85% of academies are now in a MAT,⁴⁶ with the average MAT running seven schools.⁴⁷

Bigger is of course not guaranteed to be better. But a cadre has emerged of large trusts with the resources, experience and blueprint to turn around failing schools with impressive consistency. The evidence is clear that moving struggling schools into such strong trusts has done well at dealing with the ‘long tail’ of underperformance.

42 Department for Education, [‘Making significant changes to an open academy’](#)

43 T. Belger, [‘Holland Park rated ‘inadequate’ as Ofsted slams behaviour and ‘disharmony’](#), *Schools Week* (10/06/22)

44 C. Lough, [‘Parents seek legal action over school joining academy chain’](#), *Evening Standard* (18/07/2022)

45 J. Phillips, [‘Parents furious as Holland Park school joins academy chain after protests’](#), *MyLondon* (23/08/2022)

46 M. Lehain, [‘Passing the Test’](#), Centre for Policy Studies, 2023, p10

47 N. Plaister, NFER, [‘The size of multi-academy trusts’](#) (18th May 2022)



Bearing this in mind, I believe that parental preference can now sensibly be incorporated into the rebrokering process. I therefore propose that when the Department for Education is considering the transfer of a school from one 'responsible body' to another, it should:

- Create and publish a shortlist of acceptable academy trusts that the school could be transferred to, with its rationale for why these have been chosen
- Organise a process whereby families of affected pupils – those in the school and likely to attend it within a few years – can formally identify their preferred trust(s)

This process could involve public meetings or 'beauty parades' as well as other community activities. Families should be engaged and persuaded as passionately and effectively by trusts as they were originally by schools when picking one for their child. And it should culminate in families being able to express their preferences through a ballot that is easy to participate in.

‘ Families should be engaged and persuaded as passionately and effectively by trusts as they were originally by schools when picking one for their child ’

Importantly, however, I believe that while the DfE should take the ballots' results into account when making its decision, it should not necessarily be bound by them. As with the original process of academy conversion, due diligence, expert input or a wider perspective may throw up good reasons to pick an alternative trust. However, officials should still explain how parental preferences were taken into consideration in making their ultimate decision. Indeed, provided the initial shortlist of trusts is made up only of organisations that the DfE believes could do the job well enough, it should be a rare occasion when its final decision deviates from the parent body's preference.



Conclusion

The reforms to the education system in England in recent years have delivered genuine and substantial improvement. But there are still too many children who are being left behind – let down by the failures of their schools, suffering from the traumas of family breakdown, or simply from families that are unable to devote the same resources to their education as those higher up the economic ladder.

‘ The proposals in this report are all driven by the same principle – giving control and responsibility to those closest to the children concerned ’

The proposals in this report differ in terms of their scale, their target audience, and the cost to the public purse. But they are all driven by the same principle – giving control and responsibility to those closest to the children concerned, and those who love them most.

Whether it is enabling looked after children to benefit from world-class education, greater security and structure, and a genuinely transformational impact on their life changes, or letting poor parents choose the activities and support that would help their children close the attainment gap, this is a deeply conservative agenda for helping those who need it most. I sincerely hope the government gives it the attention it deserves.



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