Key Events in education reform 2016

Richard Banks

Sections 1-14 of the ***2016 Education and Adoption Act* (16 March)** sought to make it quicker and easier to convert maintained schools into academies; Section 15 concerned the functions of local authorities in relation to adoption.

The White Paper ***Educational Excellence Everywhere***, published by the **DfE in March 2016**, proposed:

* Great teachers - everywhere they're needed
* Great leaders running our schools and at the heart of our system
* A school-led system with every school an academy, empowered pupils, parents and communities and a clearly defined role for local government
* Preventing underperformance and helping schools go from good to great: school-led improvement, with scaffolding and support where it's needed
* High expectations and a world-leading curriculum for all
* Fair, stretching accountability, ambitious for every child
* The right resources in the right hands: investing every penny where it can do the most good (DfE 2016a:1-2)

In its report, ***Training new teachers*, published on 10 June 2016**, the Commons Public Accounts Committee was critical of the DfE. It began by observing that:

Training enough new teachers, of the right quality, is central to the performance of our schools and the life chances of pupils. We are, therefore, disappointed that the Department for Education has missed its targets to fill teacher training places four years running, with significant shortfalls in some subjects. There is a lot of good teaching delivered by teachers who do excellent jobs day in, day out, in classrooms across the country. One consequence of shortfalls is that a significant proportion of lessons in some important subjects is being taught by teachers without relevant post-A-level qualifications (CPAC 2016:3).

The Committee was aware that some of the measures proposed in *Educational Excellence Everywhere* - 'if implemented effectively' - could address some of the problems but, it warned, 'for the moment the challenges, and our conclusions, remain unaddressed' (CPAC 2016:3). 

**Into the abyss**

David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, in an attempt to placate the right wing of the Conservative party, ended in disaster. Following the narrow victory for the 'Leave' campaign, he resigned as Prime Minister on 13 July 2016 and was succeeded by Theresa May (1956- ) (*pictured*).

Justine Greening replaced Nicky Morgan as Secretary of State for Education on 14 July.

**May's grammar schools**

On **9 September 2016, May gave her 'great meritocracy'** speech, **announcing an end to the ban on new grammar schools.** Three days later, the DfE published ***Schools that work for everyone*,** a consultation document whose main concern was the creation or expansion of schools which were specifically *not* for everyone. It proposed that:

* independent schools should sponsor academies or free schools, and should offer free places to 'those who are insufficiently wealthy to pay fees' (DfE 2016b:14);
* universities should be required to sponsor schools as a condition of charging higher fees (DfE 2016b:20);
* existing grammar schools should be encouraged to expand, new grammar schools should be permitted, and existing comprehensive schools should be allowed to become selective (DfE 2016b:24); and
* the 50 per cent cap on faith-based admissions should be abolished (DfE 2016b:33).

Shadow education secretary Angela Rayner (*pictured*) was vigorous in her condemnation of the proposals, and hoped that Conservatives who were sceptical about them would join her:

If there are Conservatives, and I genuinely feel there are, who believe this is not going to help our children - and it won't - then they need to speak out and do the honourable thing (quoted in *The Guardian* 9 September 2016).

A week later, the **Education Policy Institute (EPI) published research showing that grammar schools had no 'significant positive impact' on social mobility**. David Laws, Chair of EPI and a former schools minister, said

It is clear from our analysis that creating additional grammar schools is unlikely to lead to either a significant improvement in overall education standards or an increase in social mobility. Indeed ... the total attainment gaps between poor children and richer children could well increase (quoted in *The Guardian* 23 September 2016).

Angela Rayner commented:

This report demonstrates, once again, that grammar schools only take a tiny number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. **The truth is that results and performance in every school, not just in grammars, have far more to do with a child's background than anything else. That's why we need an education policy for all our children, not just a tiny minority in grammar schools (quoted in *Schools Week* 23 September 2016).**

The day after the EPI report was published, Jeremy Corbyn launched a national campaign against the government's grammar-schools policy. Rayner said

We will not let Theresa May get away with segregating children by creating new grammar schools. **Labour is united against her plans to provide a privileged education for the few, and a second-class education for the rest (quoted in *Schools Week* 24 September 2016).**

**By March 2017 there was widespread hostility to May's plans.**