

Education in England: Policy vs. Impact

Anastasia de Waal, Civitas

Expenditure on education in England has rocketed under New Labour. How good have the government's policies been and what impact has this increased investment had?

Standards

According to the government's performance figures, added investment and New Labour education policies have boosted standards over their time in office. Since 1997 test and exam results have seen an overall, and in some cases remarkable, rise. However, scrutiny shows that higher results are not necessarily indicative of effective policies. Independent and international measures call the rise in performance standards into question, with some evidence actually suggesting that standards have declined. Reasons for this disparity between the government's results and independent data reveal a combination of lowered exam bars – grade inflation – and so-called 'teaching to the test' – cramming.

NEETs

New Labour has also struggled with tackling the high number of young people leaving school without adequate skills and qualifications to get a job. This has contributed to the number of NEETs – youngsters not in education, employment or training – which has risen by 15 per cent since 1997 (The Cost of Social Exclusion: Counting the Cost of Youth Disadvantage in the UK, The Prince's Trust, 2007). A main reason within the education system for this poor record is sub-standard vocational skills' provision: which the new 14-19 Diploma, introduced into schools in September 2008, may – though evidence so far suggests not – manage to address.

Teachers

One thing which investment has had a positive impact on is the number of teachers. Between 1997 and 2007 the number of full-time teachers has increased by nine per cent. (Policy Analysis: Has Labour Delivered on the Policy Priorities of 'Education,

Education, Education '?, McNally, S., Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2007).

A Statistical Overview

- | **Overall expenditure:** Spending on education has risen to unprecedented levels: from 4.9% of GDP in the school year 1997/1998 to 5.6% for the year 2007/2008. (Figure for the **UK**: *Policy Analysis: Has Labour Delivered on the Policy Priorities of 'Education, Education, Education', McNally, S., Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2007; Trends: Expenditure: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008)*

- | **Per pupil expenditure:** Per pupil spending has seen a concurrent increase. In 1997/1998 it was £2,910 per pupil, rising to £5,430 for the school year 2007/2008. (*Excluding LEA 'Block Funding' Time Series, Department for Children, Families and Schools, 2008; Expenditure: Trends in Education and Skills: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008*)/
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/TIM/m002012/NationalSeriesResearchAndStatsNovemberGDPfromPBR041208.xls>

- | **Class size:** Class sizes have fallen only slightly under New Labour, and the number of large infant classes has risen. In primary schools, the average class size in 1997 was 27.5, compared to 26.2 in 2008. For secondary schools, the average class size in 1997 was 21.7, compared to 20.9 in 2008.

What *has* dropped significantly is the percentage of classes taught by one teacher with 31 or more pupils – but only in the primary sector. In primary schools only 10.8% of classes had 31 or more pupils in 2008, compared to 27.9% in 1997. In secondary schools this figure has conversely risen between 1997 and 2008 from 5.9% to 10.4%. (*Department for Children, Schools and Families: Pupil Characteristics and Class Sizes in Maintained Schools in England: January 2008 (Provisional)*)

- | **Pupil absence:** Unauthorised pupil absence has increased over the decade. In the year 1996-1997, 0.48% unauthorised half days of school were missed by primary school pupils, rising to 0.57% by the school year 2007-2008. The number of unauthorised half-days missed by secondary school pupils has also rose from 1.01% to 1.50% in the period from 1997 to 2007, but has slightly fallen to 1.49 in 2008. (*Absence and Exclusion: Trends: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008*)

- | **Teachers:** The number of teachers in service has risen in all sectors of the education system since 1997. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of primary school teachers has risen by 2.8%, the number of secondary school teachers by

14.5% and the number of special education teachers by 17.7%. (*Teaching Population: Trends: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008*)

- | **Information Technology:** Pupils have gained much better access to computers under New Labour. The ratio of computers per pupil has shrunk from 19.0 pupils per computer in 1996 to 6.2 computers per pupil in 2006. In secondary schools the computer/pupil ratio has gone down from 9.0 pupils per computer to 3.6 pupils per computer. (*Use of Information and Communication Technology: Trends in Education and Skills: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008*)
- | **Higher education spending:** Between 1997/1998 and 2007/2008 expenditure on higher education has increased from £4,737 million to £9,550 million, a real terms increase of 59%. (*HM Treasury, 2008*)

Standards: Pupil Performance: Government Figures

All levels:

- | **Key Stage 2 results (tests taken in Year 6):** According to government figures, standards amongst 11 year-olds have risen significantly. The percentage of pupils achieving the expected level or higher (Level 4 plus) has risen from 63% to 81% in English, from 62% to 78% in maths, and from 69% to 88% in science between 1997 and 2008. (*Departments for Children, Schools and Families: Statistical First Release: National Curriculum Assessments at Key stage 2 in England 2007/2008 (Revised, 2007/2008)*)
- | **Key Stage 3 results (tests taken in Year 9):** Standards amongst 14 year-olds have risen considerably. In English the number of pupils reaching the expected level or higher (Level 5 plus) has gone up from 57% to 73% in English, from 60% to 77% in maths, and from 60% to 77% in science between 1997 and 2008. (*Departments for Children, Schools and Families: Statistical First Release: National Curriculum Assessments at Key stage 3 in England 2007/2008 (Revised), 2007/2008*)
- | **GCSE results:** GCSE results have shown a steady rise. Since 1997, the number of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C grades has risen from 46.3% to 65.3% in 2008. The number of pupils gaining 5 A*-C *including maths and English* has risen from 37% to 47.6% during the same period. (*Department for Children, Schools and Families: GCSE and Equivalent Results in England, 2007/08 (Revised)*)
- | **A-level results:** A-levels results have risen consistently over the decade. Since 1997, the number of A-level passes has risen from 87.2% of all A-level entries, to 97.2%. The number of A-C grades at A-level has risen from 55.7% to 73.9% between 1997 and 2008. During this period there has also been a rise in the number of A grades awarded: from 15.7% of entries in 1997 to 25.9% of entries in 2008.

(Department for Children, Schools and Families: GCE/VCE A/AS and Equivalent Examination Results in England, 2006/07 (Revised), 2008)

Independent Indicators and Comparisons

Primary Level: Key Stage 2:

- | **Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS):** has found that England dropped from 3rd place to 19th place between 2001 and 2006. *(Twist, L., Schagen, I. and Hodgson, C., Readers and Reading: the National Report for England 2006 (PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), National Foundation for Educational Research, Slough, 2007)*
- | **David Jesson, York University:** has found that 1 in 6 pupils achieve a higher level in their Key Stage 2 tests than their teachers think they merit. *(Unpublished paper, David Jesson and Anthony Farrell, Cornwall 2006, cited in Warwick Mansell, Education by Numbers, Politics, London: 2007, p.43)*
- | **The Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM), Durham University:** have found in their own tests that between 1997 and 2002 there was no evidence of improvement in literacy and only meagre improvement in maths, despite significant rises in Key Stage 2 test scores. *(CEM, Durham University, Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) Project: Standards Over Time 2002 and also the Middle Years Information System (MidYIS)*
- | **National Foundation for Educational Research:** has found no improvement in standards despite rising Key Stage 2 scores. The NFER standardises the test scores for Key Stage 2 tests. If actual standards are rising the tests have to be re-standardised so that all the scores do not shift upwards. However, despite four years of raised Key Stage 2 test scores, by 2002 the NFER found no need to re-standardise. This indicates no genuine change in achievement. *(Cited in Peter Tymms, 'Are standards rising in primary schools?' British Educational Research Journal, Vol 30: 4, 2004)*
- | **Michael Shayer, King's College, London University:** found that a backdrop to rising primary test scores is a historic low in children's cognitive abilities. This casts doubt in particular on Key Stage 2 science results. *(<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1693061,00.html>)*

- | **Anne Watson, Oxford University:** found that Year 6 booster classes temporarily raised pupils to level 4 in maths but that this rise could not be sustained six months to a year later. (*Watson, A. presentation at BERA Mathematics Symposium, 2002*)

- | **The Statistics Commission:** discredited the rise in national test scores between 1995 and 2000 as substantial overstatement attributed to external factors, including 'teaching to the test'. (*Statistics Commission (2005) 'Measuring Standards in English Primary Schools: Report by the Statistics Commission on an article by Peter Tymms' Research Report 23 London: Statistics Commission*)

- | **Alf Massey et al.:** attributed more than half the gains at literacy at Key Stage 2 between 1999 and 2002 to easier questions. (*Massey A, Green S, Dexter T and Hamnett L (2003) Comparability of national tests over time: Key stage test standards between 1996 and 2001: Final report to the QCA of the Comparability Over Time Project Cambridge: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate*)

- | **Mary Hilton, Homerton College, Cambridge University:** found that as Key Stage 2 literacy scores increased between 1998 and 2000, reading tests had become easier. (*Hilton M., 'Are the Key Stage 2 reading tests becoming easier each year?' Reading, 2001, pp4-11*)

Secondary Level:

Key Stage 3:

- | **OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA):** PISA results provide evidence that whilst government exam scores have been rising, standards have sunk in recent years. Between 2000 and 2006 there has been a 28-point decline (from 523 to 495) in reading amongst UK 15 yr olds: a decline from 23 points above the OECD average, to just 3 points above average. This is a drop from 7th to 17th place in PISA's international rankings. In mathematics there has been a 34-point decline (from 529 to 495) between 2000 and 2006: a decline from 29 points above average, to 3 points below average. This is a drop from 8th to 24th place in PISA's international rankings. (*OECD: Programme for International Student Assessment 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World, 4 December 2007*)

GCSE:

- | **Robert Coe, The Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM), Durham University:** Dr Coe found that using the Year 11 Information System (YELLIS), taking an average of 26 subjects, pupils of the same YELLIS standard could generally expect to achieve approximately half a grade higher at GCSE in 2006 than they could in 1996. This means that a higher proportion of pupils could

achieve A*-C without an increase in pupil standard. (Coe, R., 'Changes in Standards at GCSE and A-Level: Evidence from ALIS and YELLIS', CEM, Durham University, 2007)

Further Education:

A-level:

- | **Robert Coe, The Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM), Durham University:** Dr Coe used the Test of Developed Abilities (previously ITDA) to compare the actual attainment of pupils from year to year with their paper qualifications. Taking an average of 40 A-level subjects, he found that those scoring 50% on the ITDA test in 1997 would tend to achieve low C grades, but by 2006 were achieving low B grades. This means that pupils could achieve a better grade without a rise in pupil standard. (Coe, R., 'Changes in Standards at GCSE and A-Level: Evidence from ALIS and YELLIS', CEM, Durham University, 2007)

- | **Background (Civitas research):** From 1996 to 2006, the number of A-level entries increased by 95,000. However, this increase has not been reflected in more traditional subjects. In fact, many have a declining number of entries: physics, French, German and mathematics have all registered reductions of between 3,000 and 11,000 over the last decade. By contrast, psychology has increased by 30,000; media and film studies by 16,000; ICT by 12,000 and PE by 10,000. (Source: Department for Children, Schools and Families: GCE/VCE A/AS and Equivalent Examination Results in England, 2005/06 (Revised), 2007). In addition, overall grades can now be bolstered considerably by repeatedly re-taking AS modules (normally taken in the first year of the course) until they make up for any weaker performances in the more demanding A2 modules.

Anastasia de Waal, July 2009
©CIVITAS: Institute for the Study of Civil Society