5-19 Education

Consultation Paper 92

5-19 education working group: consultation paper

This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of Party policy in relation to 5-19 Education. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the responses generated and on the deliberations of the working group a full 5-19 Education policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate.

The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Cllr James Kempton. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party.

Comments on the paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to: Cllr James Kempton, 5-19 Education Policy Working Group, Policy Unit, Liberal Democrats, 4 Cowley Street, London SW1P 3NB.

Comments should reach us as soon as possible and in any event no later than 30 September 2008.

Contents

Introduction

Liberal Democrats have long recognised that the education of our nation's children is a concern for all of us. Society has a duty to empower every individual to achieve their full potential – through developing their aspirations, skills and knowledge.

Chronic educational underachievement, underdevelopment of skills and a lack of basic knowledge are not just a tragedy for individuals. They also impact on society more widely: including on social cohesion, crime and the success of the UK's economy.

The present link between poverty and educational performance is simply not acceptable. As wealth has risen, social mobility has stalled, meaning that currently an able child born into a poor family – however intellectually gifted – will be overtaken by a child from a more wealthy family by the age of six. This does not represent freedom.

If we aim to build a society in which every child is given the opportunity to fulfil their potential regardless of what their parents do and where they were born, the development of an education system capable of supporting the aspirations of every child has a crucial role to play.

1. *What is the purpose of education?*

2. *What are the key challenges we face on schools policy?*

3. *To what extent do English schools currently prepare all children for the different challenges and opportunities of life?*

4. *How are schools in England currently performing, and how do educational standards in England compare with those in other countries?*

5. *What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current English Schools System?*

6. *Are there any questions or issues that this paper hasn't asked which you think are important and need to be addressed?*

7. *How can parents engage more effectively in their children's education?*

Challenging Educational Inequality and Disadvantage

There is currently a clear link between social disadvantage and academic achievement. Despite some excellent individual examples, only 21% of pupils entitled to free school meals achieved 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths and 40% of 11 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds fail to reach the government's own benchmark in reading and writing. In over half of secondary schools, the majority of pupils did not achieve 5 good GCSEs (including English and Maths).

One tenth of 16-18 year olds is currently a NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and England's post-16 participation rate is one of the lowest in the developed world. The Government currently intends to raise the education leaving age, and there should be debate about how and if this proposed change should occur.

In relation to educational inequality and disadvantage, here are some questions to consider:

8.   *What challenges do schools in England face because of wider problems in English society, such as child poverty and family breakdown, including the particular challenges facing 'looked after' children?*

9.   *How do parents, carers and schools work together to better provide for the child?*

10.   *How can the schools system be used to challenge educational inequality and disadvantage? What are the principal weapons applicable for tackling educational inequality and disadvantage?*

11.   *How could a Pupil Premium in education funding, targeted at disadvantage, be used to help to address the inequalities of outcome? What would be the cost and how would this relate to the rest of the school funding formula?*

12.   *What additional provision is needed for children with English as a second language?*

13.   *Given that there is a performance gap between the sexes and between different ethnic groups, what can be done to reduce such inequalities of outcome?*

14.   *What can be done to improve outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs?*

15.   *What deficiencies are there in the identification, assessment, definition and funding of special needs? What deficiency is there in provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs? How can these issues be addressed?*

16.   *What children's services should be co-located at or managed by schools, and how might children's services work more effectively with schools?*

The School Curriculum, Qualifications Regime, and Testing

The National Curriculum was introduced in 1988 and ensures that all state schools follow a common curriculum. It has been criticised for being over-prescriptive, but its advocates argue that it ensures that all children are taught skills and knowledge to prepare them for later life. It is maintained and developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), a public body, currently sponsored by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Concerns have been raised that this model has led to the 'politicisation' of the curriculum.

Consideration should be given to whether a National Curriculum is a suitable device for ensuring that all schools adequately educate children or whether this is an area in which schools could be given increased freedoms to innovate under a broader 'framework' curriculum model.

Pupils in England are among the most tested in the world. Various studies have also pointed out that England is unique in using testing to control what is taught in schools, to monitor teaching standards and to encourage parents to choose schools based on the results of the tests. We need to consider the role of national tests and reflect upon whether or not they can be an accurate indicator of both an individual child's and a school's performance.

With childhood obesity rising, the health of children has become a central concern, and children's diet and exercise habits have become widely debated. As a result, the quality of school meals has received increased attention and a debate has begun on the responsibility that schools should have in relation to the health of their pupils.

In February 2007, a UNICEF report ranked Britain bottom of 21 developed countries for child well-being. It is necessary to consider what role the education system can play in increasing the opportunities available to all children.

In relation to the curriculum, qualifications and testing, here are some questions to consider:

Schooling up to age 11:

17. *How should children learn up to the age of 7?*

18. *Should there be a National Curriculum in schooling for under-11s? What should it contain? Is the existing curriculum fit for purpose?*

19. *What priority should be given to basic literacy and numeracy skills?*

20. *How much freedom should schools have to determine their own curriculum?*

21. *What are the effects of the existing school testing regime up to age 11? What testing and assessment regime is needed in under-11 schools?*

Schooling from age 11:

22.   Should there be a National Curriculum for post-11 schooling? If so, what should its focus be, and what should it contain?

23.   What should be taught in post-11 schools? Is the current teaching proving motivating, relevant and useful to pupils?

24.   What changes are needed to the post-14 system of qualifications and testing? What role does applied learning, vocational education and specialisation have to play in the post-14 system?

25.   Should the government's new Diploma model be supported, or should there be a more fundamental change to the post 14 curriculum and qualifications system?

26.   What advice should be available to young people and parents to allow them to make informed choices? Should this advice be independent of the school and how should it be best managed for each individual child?

27.   Until what age should young people be obliged by law to remain in education?

Testing:

28.   What role should pupil assessment play in the accountability regime for schools and how should modern data systems be harnessed to assess and improve learning?

29.   To what extent should formative testing regimes be set externally to the school and their results be published? What effect would this have on the existence of school league tables?

30.   What targets should be set nationally, locally and by schools in relation to national testing outcomes?

31.   What testing and assessment mechanisms should be used to measure and recognize the achievements of pupils with special educational needs?

32.   What curriculum and qualifications access entitlements should be given to pupils and parents?

General:

33.   What is the right school structure to support children through the different stages of learning and development? Does the current structure offer the best opportunities to the child?

34.   Should disciplines such as modern languages, culture, cooking, and sport be compulsory? If so, from and to what age?

35.   What should be done to improve the health of school pupils? What role should school sport and school meals play in this?

36.   Should schools be obliged to provide a minimum period of lunch break and what should pupils be entitled to do with this time?

37.   *What can be done to extend to all pupils access to school trips to cultural and sporting visits?*

Freedoms, Accountability, Leadership & Structures

Central government retains a tight grip on education policy. Pay scales are set nationally, targets are set centrally and government ministers even produce documents outlining not just what should be taught, but how it should be taught, alongside instructing schools how to liaise with parents and the wider community.

As the party which cherishes localism, Liberal Democrats should consider how a school should interact with the local community and whether there is an opportunity for power to be devolved away from central government to a more local level. We also need to consider what additional freedoms can be given to directly to schools themselves.

Liberal Democrats have previously argued for 'Free Schools', a concept which would allow any suitable sponsor to set up a new, non-selective school which would be under local government oversight but not controlled by the council.

Powers of selection are still commonplace in the English educational system. Specialist schools are able to select 10% of their pupils on the grounds of them having an aptitude in their specialism, whilst other schools operate a banding system, often arguing that it is needed to ensure a fully comprehensive intake.

Governing bodies hold a high degree of responsibility and rely upon people volunteering their free time. Whilst it can be argued that the role of parent and community governors strengthens a school's relationship with its local area, many governing bodies struggle to find enough volunteers to join them. The Government has recently suggested that many governing bodies are too large and are currently considering if they should be reduced in size. Consideration should be given to the role and workload of school governing bodies.

In relation to freedoms, accountability, leadership and structures, here are some questions to consider:

Freedoms and accountability:

38. *What factors make a good school?*

39. *How much freedom should be granted to individual schools in relation to physical assets, staff, opening hours, curriculum and other matters? Should different types schools be permitted to have different freedoms?*

40. *How much autonomy should individual schools have from central and local government? What powers currently exercised by national government could be devolved to local government, school federations, head teachers or boards of governors?*

41. *What is the appropriate role for local authorities? Which powers should be held by local authorities and which by schools? What role should School Improvement Partners have?*

42. *What powers should be exercised by bodies that are independent of politicians, e.g. Ofsted, QCA?*

43.   Which groups should be permitted to provide state funded education, and with what safeguards?

44.   What factors make a good learning environment?

45.   Should schools collaborate or compete? Where, if at all, should new schools be allowed in areas with sufficient provision?

46.   What powers should schools have to select?

47.   How can schools best engage with local communities?

48.   What should the community role of school governors be?

Leadership:

49.   How can school leadership teams and school governance be improved?

50.   What should be the role, responsibilities and size of school governing bodies?

Structures:

51.   How effective is the current schools' inspection framework? How could it be improved?

52.   Do inspection agencies have a function to also provide advice, support and mentoring to schools?

53.   What effect have School Federations and Specialist, Academy, Trust and Foundation Schools had? What should be their future?

54.   What role should there be for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust?

55.   How, if at all, should the idea of 'Free Schools' be developed?

56.   Does school choice raise standards or widen inequalities? What role should choice play?

57.   What is the effect of Grammar Schools? What should our policy be on Grammar Schools?

58.   What role is there for sponsorship of maintained schools?

59.   What should be our policy on Independent Schools? What should be the relationship between maintained schools and the independent sector?

60.   What should our policies be on school size, rural schools, and class sizes?

School Workforce Issues

Traditionally a successful school is one with a good head teacher supported by a strong governing body and a motivated staff. However, recruiting school leaders is difficult and over the next ten years, three quarters of current head teachers are due to retire. Consideration needs to be given to how a younger generation can be encouraged to become school leaders.

Concerns have also been raised about the shortage of properly qualified teachers in key subjects. Despite increased incentives, the current Government continues to miss its own targets to recruit more teachers to 'shortage subjects' such as Modern Languages, the Sciences and Maths.

In relation to school workforce, here are some questions to consider:

61.   *Which routes into teaching should be available in order to attract and channel the highest quality of staff into the teaching profession? What qualifications should be required in order to become a teacher?*

62.   *Has the increased use of support staff to supplement qualified teachers proved successful? Is this the best way to manage the limited resources available?*

63.   *Can more be done to maximise the contribution made by non-teaching staff?*

64.   *What training should be included in initial teacher education? Should there be provision for all new teachers to learn about child development, teaching pupils with special needs, how to work constructively with parents and carers, as well as curriculum management?*

65.   *Are the pay and conditions of teaching staff set at appropriate levels in an appropriate way? Who should be responsible for setting them?*

66.   *What can be done to tackle teacher shortages in key shortage subjects, such as sciences and modern languages?*

67.   *Why is there a lack of male teachers in the profession, does this pose a problem, and, if so, what can be done to change it?*

Creating Safe, Secure, and Green Schools

In order for schools to thrive, they must be safe, calm places in which pupils and teachers feel comfortable and happy. Superficially, the quality and design of school buildings is important, but wider issues including the structure of the school day and the ability of a school to instil good discipline are also important.

Over 9,000 children are permanently excluded from school each year and around 3% of the school population is excluded for a fixed period of time, normally for less than a week. Questions have been raised about the aim of such punishments and whether there are more suitable alternatives to dealing with disruptive pupils. Parents may appeal the decision of the school to exclude a pupil and, of appeals heard, around a fifth are determined in favour of the parent.

In relation to creating safe, secure and green schools, here are some questions to consider:

Discipline:

68.   *How can schools best be supported in dealing with unacceptable behaviour and discipline? What facilities should there be for pupils with the most challenging behaviour?*

69.   *What appeal rights should be available to the parents of excluded pupils?*

70.   *What policies can be used to reduce truancy and unauthorized absence?*

71.   *What co-operation can be reasonably expected from parents in dealing with school discipline and attendance issues?*

72.   *How can teachers be protected from intimidation and false allegations?*

73.   *What policies should be available to reduce bullying in schools?*

Buildings:

74.   *What improvements are required to England's school capital stock? What priorities should there be when allocating money for school capital programmes?*

75.   *Considerations about our impact on the environment should be at the forefront of everything we do – how should the UK ensure that school buildings are designed with the environment in mind and that schools are green and fit for the future?*