

## Policy watch

The Conservatives launch a draft manifesto for schools



Do you remember the slogan '*Are you thinking what we're thinking?*' It was the strap line on the Conservative Party manifesto at the last general election. It's not clear what strap line will feature this time round but one phrase does seem to be cropping up a lot at the moment and that is: '*we can't go on like this.*' It appears emblazoned across the latest Conservative posters on the NHS and it was used again this week by David Cameron when he launched the latest chapter of his party's draft manifesto, this time on schools.

The Conservatives are doing things slightly differently this time releasing their draft manifesto in sections. A couple of weeks ago it was a chapter on the NHS, shortly it will be something on the economy but this week it has been schools and families, a chapter on each and perhaps no coincidence in terms of timing with the government releasing its own promised Green Paper on Families complete with the hotly discussed Dad's Guide at the same time.

There's not much detail in the manifesto yet, little for instance on funding or timescales. Nor is there much that's radically different from what they have been saying for some time generally in the form of pronouncements from Michael Gove. Avid followers will recall, for instance, the series of announcements last summer about beefing up standards through an online database of past exams and even more contentiously, a revamp of school league tables. This was followed up by a powerful Conference speech by Michael Gove promising to give teachers greater powers for dealing with school discipline and "*to put rigour at the heart of the curriculum.*" A couple of months later his keynote speech to the Centre for Policy Studies set out initial priorities for a Conservative programme of school reform.

Virtually all these announcement can be found in this latest chapter in some form. The only significantly new announcement was that to replace the Graduate Teacher Programme with a new, fast-track route into teaching for high-flying young professionals to be known as Teach Now. This is to be modelled on the Teach First programme, an extremely important programme which was launched eight years ago to entice more top professionals into working in some of the country's most challenging schools.

Much of the manifesto, indeed one whole section, is about teachers and Conservative proposals to raise the prestige of the profession. The media may have picked up on the image of the profession as "*brazenly elitist*" but the Conservatives have looked closely at teachers in other countries and believe they can see a strong link between an enhanced profession and enhanced standards. "*Finland, Singapore and South Korea have the most highly qualified teachers, and also some of the best education systems in the world because they have deliberately made teaching a high prestige profession.*" This echoes the conclusions drawn by the hugely influential 2007 McKinsey Report on school performance which noted that the countries with the best performing school systems had managed to get to this position by attracting their top graduates into teaching. This is clearly something the Conservatives want to replicate here.

Other measures proposed in this section of the manifesto include raising the bar on entry to the profession with for instance entrants for primary school training having to have B rather than C grades in English and maths and making it easier for teachers to deal with problems of discipline and exclusion without fear of recrimination. These will play well with parents and with many teachers who remain concerned about the government's current 'licence to practice' scheme but there are carrots and the sticks that may be less popular. One carrot is the promise to introduce a flexible pay reward structure, something that the professional associations have argued against for some time as being divisive. A stick is the promise to help head teachers remove "*poorly performing teachers as efficiently and quickly as possible.*" This has remained a sore subject since the days of Chris Woodhead with both sides disputing the numbers involved and the best ways of identifying under performance let alone how to deal with it.

The other two themes in the manifesto deal with the curriculum and exams and with Conservative proposals to revamp the school system to ensure every parent has access to '*a good school.*'

The section on the curriculum and exams is pretty much centred on standards and academic ones at that though there is brief reference to vocational learning towards the end. The core issue here is how the Conservatives propose to reform school league tables. Few specifics are provided but there are some interesting pointers. For example, the Conservatives seem to be suggesting that modern technology will now allow schools to present data in different and more accessible ways, "*web-based applications can create many new and different sorts of league tables*" and that this may be a better than a sometimes crude points scoring system. Equally, league table reform will not rule out reporting on the "*attainment of the less able,*" another concern for many. Elsewhere this section extols the virtues of the knowledge based curriculum, "*we will ensure that the primary curriculum is organised around subjects,*" promotes the use of synthetic phonics, promises a reading test at age six, opens out the opportunity for state schools to offer "*international exams*" and continues the case for "*academics*" having a greater say in exam standards. As for the vocational side, as expected there is support for apprenticeships and for 14-19 technical schools and also for enabling schools to offer "*workplace training*" where required. Some of this may be on site but it's thought commissioning may be the main vehicle.

Finally, the section on transforming the school system where again many of the proposals are familiar. These include the promise to extend the Academy model into primary schools and a pledge generally to return the Academy concept back to its original ideals. Also the intention to create the much vaunted range of independent state schools that can be run by '*outside providers*' and modelled on the Swedish and American school examples. In addition, some changes to ensure the inspection system focuses on the core elements of teaching and learning.

The Conservatives are expecting a lot back from schools in return for the freedoms and flexibilities they believe they are proposing. They may be wanting to make teaching "*the noble profession*" but as David Cameron put it in his speech, "*in return, we're going to demand greater transparency so parents can hold teachers to account.*" Nobility has its price.

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