



### **State or private sector?**

**With today's 'education by post-code' system, it can be difficult to see the way forward...**

The aspirational elements of the Government's latest White Paper on education are laudable in many ways. Looked at objectively, however, the main thrust of *'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All'* begs the question: why is state-sector education in need of such a radical overhaul?

The answer would appear to lie in part with the myth of parental choice. Ask any parent with school-age children about their concerns for this aspect of the system and their conclusion would likely focus on the fact that education for children of all but the wealthy is dictated by where you happen to live – so-called 'education by post-code'.

Anyone of sound mind can spot the inequity in this, not least in the way it perpetuates the cycle of deprivation in our most run-down areas. Improving educational choice is one of those doctrinal clichés of the type beloved by governments.

Who would argue that this type of well-meant social engineering will in theory confront the twin horrors of social exclusion and educational under-achievement head-on? Unfortunately, like the aims set out in the White Paper, the reality for many is – and will continue to be – starkly different.

The truth is, Britain is a country where ‘post-code education’ favours those middle-class parents who know best how to beat the system. This is fine if you’re prepared to pay a hefty premium to buy a house near one of the better-performing schools.

Of course, not everyone wants to up sticks, even when they can afford it. And why should they disrupt the family unit because of shortcomings in government policy?

When state-school teachers start to send their own children to independent schools rather than to the comprehensive allocated by their local councils, then you know something

is wrong. An astonishing one in four state-school teachers would educate their children privately if they could afford to, according to a poll of 700 teachers in the Times Educational Supplement (TES).

Commenting on those figures, Alan Smithers, Professor of Education at Buckingham University, said:

“Teachers know the school system best. If they are thinking it is not good enough for their children, then that is an indication that something is seriously wrong.”

To offset the problem of ‘sink’ schools where exam results are poor and pupils continually get away with disruptive behaviour, the Government is planning changes to the admissions system designed to make it harder for middle-class parents to ensure they win places in the best schools.

Barry Sheerman, MP, who chaired an Education Select Committee on secondary school admissions pointed out that in the state sector unlimited choice in school places is not a realistic possibility. This may be fairly obvious, but real problems begin as a result, “not least,” he says, “because the way one family exercises its choice is going to have an impact on the choices left for other children.”

Which brings us back to the argument that it's the middle-class savvy types – including teachers! – who know their way round the system and who may, or may not, have the financial wherewithal to do something about it.

“We have a consumer culture,” says Barry Sheerman, “where the education system faces a revolution in rising expectations.”

In reality, there must be a lot of frustrated parents out there who simply cannot meet their own expectations and, more importantly, the expectations they rightly have for their children.

This is borne out by the state-sector school teachers who are voting with their feet. When their average salary is £32,000 and the cost of a day-school place in an independent school can be a third of that, this will involve considerable financial sacrifices.

According to a survey last year, as many as half of parents fail to get their child into their first-choice state-sector school. One teacher in the TES poll admitted on their website:

“My daughter has been offered a place at our last-choice school (which also happens to be our nearest school). We

didn't even look around it as the 18% GCSE pass rate says it all. Thank God she passed the exam for the nearest 'indie' school, even if it means a re-mortgage for her to go there."

It is not known how many teachers in the state-sector send their children to private schools, but the numbers are likely to be substantial.

Andrew Boggis, Headmaster of the independent Forest School in Snaresbrook, east London and Chairman of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference said:

"We have a number of teachers' children in this school. Like all parents, they are pragmatic about the choice of school."

The issues of course go beyond league tables and exam results. No parent wants their child to go to a school where drugs and bullying are rife, and where unruly kids appear to get away with murder.

As one of the other parents on the TES web-site said:  
"There's no way I want my child consorting with what is often euphemistically called 'a cross-section of society'. I only want him to experience the sector of society that I approve of. Very politically incorrect. But there it is."

To an extent, this is a natural attitude for parents to have. Education is an issue which affects them directly. It's not something that's 'out there' which may otherwise warrant a typical liberal indifference.

The schools inspectorate, OfSTED has identified those factors which make a school successful. These include smaller groups, a strong individual ethos and greater freedoms to run themselves.

So when parents cannot identify these qualities at the nearest comprehensive allocated by their local council, it is small wonder that many are turning to the independent sector.

Typical of the type of smaller independent school which both parents and their children find attractive is Ramillies Hall School in Cheadle Hulme near Stockport. The emphasis at the school is on smaller classes in a caring environment which emphasises the development of all aspects of the student – exactly the sort of school which the Government sets as its ultimate paradigm.

“We value academic achievement of course,” says Headteacher (Ellen Xxxxx), “but not at the expense of

setting unrealistic targets. At Ramillies Hall, our aim is to prepare children not just for examinations, but for life.

“Whether in the classroom, on the sports field or in the arts, we encourage children to develop their natural talents so they can find out where their real strengths lie.”

As J B Priestley said: *“To develop curiosity and a love of life is more important than any amount of book learning.”*

ENDS

[http://www.buzzwords.ltd.uk/education\\_sector\\_copywriter.htm](http://www.buzzwords.ltd.uk/education_sector_copywriter.htm)