

School improvement: the impossible dream?

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Through the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s I was reviewing on average a couple of books a week for the Times Educational Supplement, initially delivering copy to Fleet Street by hand on my way to school. Murdoch's infamous move to Wapping meant I had to meet an earlier deadline in order to post in the reviews.

Looking along my bookshelves, formative titles of the time I reviewed included *Outcomes of Education*, *Building A Literate Nation*, *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* and Beverley Shaw's powerful-for-me *Comprehensive Schooling: The Impossible Dream*.

Starting in Inner London primary schools in 1973 in Brixton and subsequently teaching in Pimlico School in its heyday, I believed passionately in making the comprehensive vision a reality. Shaw's 1983 book stopped me in my tracks with its questioning of my assumptions.

By the time I was appointed by Sir Tim Brighouse to lead a secondary school in Oxfordshire in 1986, one had to be careful with the 'c' word as the media had begun to discredit it. The 1998 Education Act was soon upon us with its league tables and the gradual dismantling of the 1944 Act's vision - the rest is history.

I mention this personal history because I still believe in the great comprehensive school which serves a wide range of families and affords them a free, memorable education. When we look around the country, from Cornwall and Hampshire to Yorkshire and Cumbria, we can see that original comprehensive vision alive today.

Suffice to say that accomplished leaders over time have created the best comprehensives. But those accomplished leaders and their kind have not always been drawn to serve in some of the more disadvantaged areas of the country, nor have they been persuaded to reach out routinely from their centres of excellence. Altruism and self-interest have not collided. There are notable exceptions.

The stark truth of what we have today in our school-led, some would say 'fractured' system is a growing division between schools where we would be happy to send our own children, and others to which we would not entrust family

members. Of the 8.9 million children and young people in England's schools, up to a quarter of a million languish today in unsatisfactory provision, a figure unchanged this century. I visit some of these schools.

And it is the academy movement as a change agent for school improvement which is perhaps emerging as today's 'impossible dream'.

The much heralded trust-led landscape may not be assisting sustained school improvement for all; the jury is out. The under-attainment apparently baked in to a number of schools in rural, urban and coastal areas is unacceptable. The Regional Director's Offices, with legal oversight of academies, are sometimes slow to tackle this chronic position. And it can be the case that local authorities do not use the intervention powers they have in legislation.

Further: important for public and political audiences it might be, but it is to deceive ourselves to quote what percentage of schools are judged good or better as compared with five years ago. In the same vein, most primary schools nationally have reading judged 'good' by Ofsted, yet 25% of eleven year-olds cannot read in line with their actual age.

What lies ahead? I am signalling to the system an ambition for excellence in educational provision through the following collective actions:

1. To commit primary and secondary schools to 85 - 90% of all students achieving expected standards at 11+ and 16+ in English and maths by 2027.
2. To challenge the offices of the Regional Directors to intervene where academies are clearly failing to achieve good standards for their students.
3. For local authorities to exercise intervention powers in those maintained schools where they have jurisdiction.
4. AND, for the great comprehensives to reach out and create formal or informal partnerships dedicated to transform the under-achieving schools.

I set out the above against the backcloth of HMCI writing in her [2022 Annual Report](#) of the many challenges in the system, not least of which is recruitment.

No school or school system is better than its teachers and its leaders. This we know. And the absence of high quality teacher recruitment might derail the above ambitions.

But we must beat on.