



**Launch of Progressive Education Network  
House of Commons  
February 10, 2010**

***“Please No Year Zero”***

**Mike Gibbons – Chair,  
Progressive Education Network**

Please no year zero

Instead, let's develop our education system together, recognising and building on the progress of the last ten years.

Incoming governments are always tempted to portray their new policy regime as ground breaking, radically different and a departure from the 'old order', as if nothing at all has gone before, or at least nothing of any value. The new administration sets its calendar as if Election Day is year zero.

Progressive Education Network asks that whichever party wins the election later this year, they reject this careless approach to schools and education. It is our conviction that what is needed now is to deepen the partnership between schools, government and local communities, not to put it aside and replace it with a complete change in direction.

This is not a naive and self-interested plea to politicians to keep off the backs of schools. Rather, it's a call to recognise the pivotal role that school leaders and teachers have played, and must continue to play, in reforming schools and getting the best out of our education system, for the benefit of all children.

As Estelle Morris wrote recently: 'Politics and politicians are central to education, and their ideologies should shape the system'.

But she went on to question the wisdom of the 'desire to micromanage' that she saw among all political parties, and the risk that during the next Election they will make the historic mistake of competing on policies that prescribe the minutiae of classroom practice.

This paper argues that there is much to celebrate in the reforms since 1997 and their intent: the unprecedented investment; the development of a rigorous 'no excuses' reform strategy; and a relentless focus on standards and accountability. The momentum for improvement continues and it is mainly heading in the right direction, but the next phase must be driven by practitioners, government and local communities in partnership. The Progressive Education Network will bring together school leaders at the top of their game to work with governors, communities and government to build on reform achievements to date and to take the education agenda forward. In a globalising economy no nation can be exempt from the imperative of ensuring the highest standards of achievement in its emerging workforce; there is no alternative.

Since 1945, education has sometimes been higher and sometimes lower on the political agenda, but never has it seen as much prominence, resource - and scrutiny - as during the last 13 years. State education has been consciously and systematically at the top of the Government's agenda and consequently has 'made the weather' for every other political party too. The opposition parties' increasing interest in education is in large part a result of having to respond to the consistent focus on schools and education since 1997.

The drive for reform and improvement did not start in 1997. The previous Conservative administration introduced The National Curriculum, Local Management of Schools, Ofsted, City Technology Colleges and Grant Maintained Status. During that period a vanguard leadership did come into being. The innovative leadership of the fifteen City Technology Colleges, the imaginative use of GM status and the empowering effect of Local Management of Schools stimulated a trend towards strong, confident and highly capable school based leadership. The pendulum of local control swung away from offices in the Town Hall towards the office of the head teacher in their school and, as it did so, a new mindset was formed at the front line. These were important and far-reaching reforms and in many respects they enabled and prepared the ground for the changes that have followed since 1997, particularly through the development of trust schools, academies and executive head teacher leadership.

However, the period 1979-1997 was also marked by an over emphasis on structures; the attempted creation of poorly thought out market mechanisms in areas of entitlement; and, most damaging of all, the wretchedly low levels of investment in both revenue and capital budgets.

For example, the condition of the school estate for much of that period was a national disgrace; by the early nineties many schools had the most dazzling array of containers catching the rain from leaking roofs in buildings that were not fit for their purpose as places where children could learn to the best of their abilities. The political rhetoric of the time about the importance of education rings hollow amongst those who remember the reality on the ground in those days - and how long it has taken to make good the damage done to the fabric and effectiveness of our schools.

So while some important seeds of change were sown between 1979 and 1997, the period since has seen more comprehensive and profound reforms - crucially backed by increased investment.

These reforms have encompassed scrutiny and accountability, workforce and leadership, and early years education - the latter long neglected in this country and now on the way to being entirely transformed. And the last thirteen years have seen recognition, at last, of the need for serious and sustained investment and a relentless focus on achieving good outcomes for individual students of all abilities and talents, and from all backgrounds.

So while acknowledging that the work goes on, the report card over recent years makes encouraging reading:

- Educational investment per pupil up from £3,030 in 1997 to £6,350 today - an increase of 110% (The increase between 1979 and 1997 was £60 per pupil, an average of £3.33 a year)<sup>i</sup>.
- Education investment up from £30 billion a year to £67 billion - 74% in real terms<sup>ii</sup>.

- The teaching recruitment crisis of the 1990s replaced with the best trained teacher workforce of modern times with over 42,000 extra teachers<sup>iii</sup>.
- 212,000 additional support staff appointed, enabling teachers to teach and schools to run smoothly; nearly three times the amount there were in 1997<sup>iv</sup>.
- 4,000 schools replaced or significantly refurbished.
- 3,068 specialist schools – around 95% of secondary schools - as opposed to 221<sup>v</sup>.
- 200 academies now in place as opposed to 15 CTC's.
- An ambitious Building Schools for the Future programme and substantial Primary Capital Programme underway.
- Compulsory training for all new head teachers.
- 3,381 sure start children's centres giving 2.7 million young children a play-based early years education and help for their families too<sup>vi</sup>.
- Apprenticeship starts up from 75,000 to over 240,000 in 2009<sup>vii</sup>.

Of course, some commentators are sceptical as to whether we have seen sufficient return for this investment, and it is right to question whether the additional resources available since 1997 have always been used as wisely by schools and by Government as they could have been. Nonetheless, the evidence that school standards have seen a dramatic improvement is irrefutable, and it is equally clear that these advances have depended in large part on greatly increased public funding:

- In 1997 the number of schools below the National Challenge benchmark (30% of pupils achieving 5 A\*-C grade GCSEs including English and Maths) was approximately 1,600. The 2009 GCSE results show that 247 schools now fail to reach this level – a reduction of around 85% and on track to be zero by 2011<sup>viii</sup>.
- 80% of 11 year olds now get Level 4 in English and 79% in Maths and the percentage achieving this grade in both English and Maths has risen from 53% to 72%<sup>ix</sup>.
- OECD figures now show the country to be in the 'high spend, high achievement quartile' along with the best educated countries in the world.

So, the report card shows good national progress, but the right conclusion to draw for the future is 'much done, much still to do'.

How do we build on this dramatic improvement in our education system to create a truly world class offer for all our children and young people? In Progressive Education Network

we say the only credible answer is by a radical realignment of the best front line leaders with government and local communities.

The last ten years have produced an impressive new cadre of school leaders and teachers with the skills, the confidence and the drive to take forward the next stage of educational reform, and to do so as the instigators of change - not the objects of change. These men and women have demonstrated their willingness and their suitability to take on this responsibility and the next Government must allow them to do so.

Centralised programmes that are overly burdened by bureaucracy and that lack any real sense of front line or community ownership will not work. Yes, the State must retain its right to intervene as the final guarantor of acceptable school standards for every child and young person in the event of school failure, but it must also make much smarter use of its best people in the field to take every aspect of our education system to the next level.

For evidence of the change that is both necessary and possible we have only to look at the National Challenge Programme. What started out as a centrally driven initiative, largely mistrusted by schools whether they were 'in' or 'out' and perceived as the heavy hand of the State, has evolved into one of the most effective and successful drivers of school improvement ever seen in this country. How has this transformation come about? Because National Challenge capitalised on the skills and expertise of our best school leaders and teachers, backed it with additional investment and trusted them with the responsibility for achieving real change. The lesson for policy makers is clear: this generation of teachers and school leaders is up to the job.

Progressive Education Network acknowledges the success of much of the educational architecture of recent years. It recognises the need for a strong and permanent framework of scrutiny and accountability. It also accepts that a decade or more ago the system needed central direction and intervention and would not have made the progress we have seen without it. However, that approach now needs serious modification.

We want to see a direction of travel that guarantees personalisation, individual tuition, extended schooling, access to technology and effective safeguarding for pupils - all within a school estate that is modern and fit for purpose.

An exciting new educational landscape is evolving and it could be the springboard for a powerful coalition between educators, families and government. We have a generation of front line school leaders and teachers with much to offer the education system as well as their own individual schools; a group of professionals who see no conflict between the two and who are motivated by a broader vision. We are clear that their joint leadership with government of the system is the route to create world class schooling in this country.

The potential of locally driven collaborative trusts, chains of schools, executive headships that span several institutions and efficient business models for groups of schools,

answerable locally and nationally, are only just beginning to be appreciated; these hugely promising approaches must be developed further. Sustained investment is essential if their benefits are to be fully realised, but a strong moral purpose is ultimately the most important element of all. For Progressive Education Network that purpose is to ensure that positive changes to our schools and education system not only come about, but that they also benefit all our children and young people.

**Progressive Education Network wishes to support and enable an education system which builds on recent reforms to:**

- Offer access for all children.
- Provide high quality provision for all children.
- Deliver good outcomes for all children.

**We believe that education and our children's futures demand that we place the partnership of our frontline school leaders with government at the heart of policy making. We cannot afford a retreat to the old style politics of division and the domination of the 'expert' and the powerful. Building, nurturing and giving a real voice to such a coalition is core to how Progressive Education Network will be different and distinct in its work.**

The network's energy and impetus will come from articulate and successful education practitioners and from the communities which they serve. If you agree with our purpose, we urge all school leaders and school practitioners to engage with the debate by joining the Progressive Education Network at [www.progressive-education-network.org](http://www.progressive-education-network.org) and in particular to comment on the following:

- 1. What do you think has made the greatest contribution to improving standards in schools generally in the last 10 years and what has had the greatest impact in your own school?**
- 2. What achievements are you most proud of in your school and why? What strategies are priorities for us (i.e. practitioners) to promote to continue to improve our schools?**
- 3. What has the investment in Education in recent years enabled you to do and in what ways has it contributed to raising standards? How would you and your school wish to contribute to making the next stage of reform work well for all students?**

## References:

---

- <sup>i</sup> DCSF Expenditure Limit (DEL) table in the Departmental Annual Report (the 2009 table was 8.4).
- <sup>ii</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>iii</sup> DCSF Statistical First Release: School Workforce in England (including Local Authority level figures) January 2009 (revised)
- <sup>iv</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>v</sup> The Designation Team, Specialist Schools Unit, DCSF
- <sup>vi</sup> Together for Children's December 2009 monthly report
- <sup>vii</sup> BIS Statistical First Release: BIS post-16 Education and Skills: Learner Participation, Outcomes and Level of Highest Qualification held – December 2009
- <sup>viii</sup> DCSF Statistical First Release: GCSE and Equivalent Results in England, 2008/9 (Revised)
- <sup>ix</sup> DCSF Statistical First Release: National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England 2008/9 (Revised)



This document is available to download from  
[www.progressive-education-network.org](http://www.progressive-education-network.org)

Follow us on twitter: <http://twitter.com/ProEdNet>

Facebook group: [progressive education network](https://www.facebook.com/progressive-education-network)

©Progressive Education Network Limited (2010)