

OPINION

No Settling for Second Best – A World Class Education System for Every Child

Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister of Great Britain 31 October 2007

Thank you very much. Can I say first of all what a pleasure it is to be here at the University of Greenwich today, to be here with Tessa Blackstone, who does such a wonderful job, to be able to congratulate all those involved with the university for everything that you have achieved, and to be here with people from all the different parts of the world of education, from students, to lecturers, to teachers, to head teachers, to parents - everybody interested in the future of education.

And I do want to congratulate Greenwich University which was inaugurated as Britain's second polytechnic college many, many years ago, has been an innovator from the start, now a great university with 23,000 students, right at the heart of this local community, going from strength to strength, a great reputation for teacher training, pioneering initiatives to encourage local young people to think about going to university.

And so I believe there is nowhere more appropriate for me to talk about what this government is trying to do, and will try to do in future, to unlock the potential of every child and young person and help every young person in this country make the most of their talents for the future.

My school motto was 'I will try my utmost'. The motto of the school in the next door town to me, which was at the heart of the mining community in my county was 'Rise to the light'. And as I have travelled round the country I have seen just how aspirational and inspirational mottos that schools adopt can actually be. 'No goal is beyond our reach' - that is the motto of the Business Academy at Bexley; 'The best in everyone' - Paddington Academy; 'Achievement Beyond Expectation' - Branksome School in Darlington; 'Excellence through endeavour' - the Kennet School in Newbury; 'To strive and achieve is to succeed' - the Howard School in Medway. And all these school mottos, that they tell us something about the spirit of the age in which they were written they are not in my view simply mementos of the past, they are not just enduring statements of shared beliefs across our communities about the possibilities of progress, they are a declaration of faith in the future, schools saying in their mottos that education should make it possible for young people to bridge the gap between what they are and what they have it in themselves to become. And I believe that these mottos are a promise and a summons, they embody ideals and aspirations and they speak to a guiding belief that I think most of us hold that every child has a talent, every child can learn and so we must nurture and fulfil the potential of all.

Of course some mottos can be misunderstood. Brighton Hove and Sussex Grammar School, its motto was 'Absque labore nihil' which is 'Without labour, nothing'. Funnily enough the school moved to new premises, the old building then became Brighton's maternity hospital and their motto 'Without labour, nothing' was left on the façade.

Now I was fortunate. I went to a school that aimed high, a school that had an ethos of striving, hard work and achievement and that is what I want for every child in the country.

I have said education is my passion. Britain is full of talented people. I believe each young person has talent and potential, each has some gift to develop, each something to give to the good of the community. And the Britain I want to strive for is a Britain with no cap on ambition, no ceiling on hope, no limit to where your potential will take you, how far you can rise, a Britain where the talents of each of us can contribute to the well being and prosperity of all.

And this idea of excellence in education is not just a noble ideal, respecting the search for knowledge, the pursuit of wisdom and the fulfilment of human potential, it is also I think as everybody knows an economic imperative too.

In the past those countries who had the raw materials, the coal or the oil or the basic commodities, or the infrastructure, the ports and the communications, were the ones that had probably the most competitive advantage. Today what matters is who has the skills, the ideas, the insights, the creativity. And the countries that I believe will succeed in the future are those that will do more than just unlock some of the talents of some of their young people, the countries that will succeed will be those that strive to unlock all the talents of all of their people.

Now in the last 10 years we have moved from an education system which was below average in its performance to above average, but we now have to do much more than that. Our ambition must be nothing less than to be world class in education and to move to the top of the global education league, and it is time to say not just that we will aim high but that we can no longer tolerate failure, that it will no longer be acceptable for any child to fall behind, no longer acceptable for any school to fail its pupils, no longer acceptable for young people to drop out of education without good qualifications without us acting.

So no more toleration of second best in Britain, no more toleration of second best for Britain.

And I believe that to achieve that we must confront head on three assertions that I believe have held our country back for too long. The first is an assumption that there is only limited room at the top, that there is no point in educating everyone as far as their talents will take them because the economy simply needs only a few who are trained for the top.

Now I think the fast changing global economy has decisively defeated that argument. Even if in the past there might have been national limited room at the top, now there is clearly global room at the top. Indeed there are millions more skilled jobs and opportunities in our country and round the world for people with skills and qualifications. The young people we educate can and often do work anywhere in any part of the world and there is a virtually unlimited global demand for new talents.

The real challenge that we face is not no room at the top, but no room at the bottom. Unskilled jobs are disappearing. We have 6 million unskilled workers in Britain today, we will need only a half million of these 6 million jobs in 2020, 5.5 million fewer unskilled jobs and this disappearing demand for low skills and no skills

and a rising demand for high skills explains why no young person can afford now to leave school without some skill or qualification.

I believe that Britain has often in the past also been held back by a second often heard assertion that 'more means worse', that to educate more and more young people is wasteful because they simply don't have the talent to benefit. And instead of talking of a pool of untapped talent, some people have talked of a pool of tapped untalent.

And each year, even as more young people achieve GCSEs and A' Levels, even as university and college opportunities are expanded, we often hear echoes of this 'more means worse' dogma, the assumption that when you get these results that only some can really achieve high standards and that high achievement in education is by definition limited and exclusive.

And I think this self-imposed limit on the idea about how talent can develop has been an historic curse of the British education system and it does go a long way to explain why too often we fall short of other countries.

Take university access. Other countries are already above 50% for young people going into higher education. Australia claims a graduation rate of 59%, yet many in Britain still say that even to aspire to going up to 50% is a recipe for dumbing down. And the result is that while we have some of the best world class schools and the best world class universities, still too many young people do not get an excellent education. And of course in Britain just 10% of the unskilled workers' sons and daughters reach university and that is an attainment gap that has to be bridged in the modern world.

And if these notions of 'more means worse' are wrong, so too is a related view which is a more fatalist assumption that springs from the denial of aspiration: that there will always be schools that do badly, there will always be pupils who will never do well or even adequately, and when combined with an equally defeatist left of centre assertion sometimes that poor children can never overcome their disadvantage at school, it acquiesces in low expectations and then we put up with coasting and failing schools.

So my argument, and my starting point today, is it is time for Britain to leave behind once and for all this culture of pessimism, any acquiescence in defeatism, any acceptance of low aspirations that holds us back. Poverty of aspiration is as damaging as poverty of opportunity and it is time to replace a culture of low expectations for too many with a culture of high standards for all.

Now that is one of the reasons why in the summer we created a new Department for Children, Schools and Families. We wanted for the first time to be able to support children and young people in the round.

We all know that there are many other influences on our children's development beyond school, and we all know I think that education must look at the whole picture. So since then the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has been laying the foundations for the next stage of the transformation of education: how we will focus on classroom standards, ensure that we monitor exam standards rigorously, reform the qualifications system with announcements he has made for

the monitoring of that to be independent, mobilise universities and businesses behind school improvement so that all contribute to the education of young people.

And it is building upon these changes that have already been made that I want to spell out what that idea of world-class education could mean for Britain in the 21st century. And I also want to show something more, that only by tackling these old prejudices, ingrained culture of low expectations, and by raising our sights for the future, can we make a reality of equality of opportunity for all children in our country.

In other words I think we need not just education reform to continue and intensify, but we need culture change as well. And what do I mean when I say this? For most of the 20th century the fundamental political divide was between a Left that believed that the extension of state action, command and control structures, could solve social problems and reduce inequality, and then there was the Right that believed that the state had to be rolled back for market forces and market incentives and rewards to be unleashed.

And in the social democratic tradition the state supplied services to people, it built schools, hospitals, houses, provided the funding to run services. But let's be honest, we paid less attention to how people used these services than the capabilities people need to make the most of the opportunities available to them. We trusted professionals to deliver services, the public to accept them. People were treated sometimes more as passive subjects than as participants in change. The system was content to limit participation in the shaping and direction of public services to voting at election time. In the words of one historian, Peter Clarke, it was about mechanical reform, social change from above, not from below.

And then for its part the right-wing tradition viewed government as an obstacle to market forces, indeed in many ways it still does, reducing human motivation to self-seeking calculations in the market place, relying on civic virtue for charity in areas from where the state is then withdrawn.

I think we can say today that both of these positions are inadequate. We need both strong public services and we need a dynamic market economy to have a fair and prosperous society. Arguments about the size of the state and the funding of public services mark important dividing lines in politics, investment in public services in my view is absolutely critical. But we don't believe in a zero sum game in which there is only one winner between state and market forces in advanced economies. Each, markets and government, have their place. Prosperity results from drawing upon the best strengths in each of them.

But that is not the end of the matter. For what those who placed their faith in either state or market too often ignored, is culture: the motivation, the values, the habits that influence us all in our daily lives, that influence our families and our communities. These are the values we share, the aspirations we have, the boundaries we set as communities between what is acceptable and unacceptable.

And I think we can now see that culture change is critical to achieving success in reforming public services, true in almost every area of public policy: preventative local health, to social care, community policing, tackling climate change. When we see that equality of opportunity can work to best effect, when people believe, such

as on the environment, that they can improve things for themselves and are aspirational about what they want to achieve.

Public services can no longer be delivered to people without their engagement in them. Whether we aim to reduce carbon emissions or tackle obesity, or empower those people who are receiving social care, change will always be more effective if people participate and play their part.

So the bad news for the old thinking on both Left and Right is that culture matters. The good news is that cultures can change. And it is by promoting cultural change that we will ensure that many of the values that we share come alive in this 21st century.

So I think our goal must be simultaneously to expand opportunity, not just one chance but second, third and fourth chances for people throughout their lives, to raise the aspirations that people have to grasp these opportunities, that is the key to unlocking talent, and to develop people's capabilities to participate in shaping the future so that services are personal to each but also shaped by people themselves.

On its own, equality of opportunity can never be enough. Opportunities are only meaningful if people have the capabilities, the resources, the aspirations to make the most of them. So inequalities in aspiration and in the capability to benefit from them must be tackled also. Without doing that fairer outcomes, the fairness which will shape the opportunities of the generations to come will not be achieved. But if we can expand opportunity, aspiration and participation together, then outcomes for pupils, parents and citizens will be fairer, the result of the choices we make, the hard work and effort we put in - not imposed by the accident of birth or the brute luck of circumstances. And it is in this way I think we will create a stronger, fairer society with excellence within the reach of everyone and not just the few. Talent nurtured, effort rewarded, the merit of each in the service of all.

Now what does that mean for how we move forward with our schools and our education?

Aspiration matters in every aspect of education: the aspirations of parents for their children from their very earliest years; the aspirations of young people, whether they are going to seize the opportunities available to them; the aspirations of course of teachers, of schools, of local government setting high expectations for achievement; the aspirations of society placing the highest possible cultural value upon learning itself; and of course aspirations of government that sets long term ambitions and matches those ambitions with the necessary investment over the long term to realise them.

Now just consider the evidence. We now know the level of parental engagement in learning is actually more important in determining a child's educational achievement than the social class background, the size of the family or the parent's own educational attainment. A child with a stimulating home environment does better on all the scores of early childhood development.

Conversely we know for example that teenage pregnancy is significantly more likely amongst girls whose mothers have low expectation for their education, even after controlling for other socio-economic factors.

Aspiration matters. But we have barely set out on the journey of involving parents in the education of their children and encouraging high aspirations as an explicit and central goal of policy.

Parents are worried about discipline, about bullying, about schools where children's lessons are disrupted, and where there is not enough of a school ethos for learning to flourish and all children to succeed.

And I share all of these concerns. If we ask parents to get more involved in the education of their children, in the lives of their schools, we have to respond to these concerns, just as parents for their part need to reinforce the expectations for good discipline and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour set by head teachers for their schools.

So let us do more now to involve and engage parents at every stage of the journey of their children's education, spread the best practice of the best schools, more regular real time feedback about their children's progress, regular emails, regular meetings, more parent sessions at schools, to share information and to set goals at key transition points for children.

But it is not just parental involvement that can be expanded, young people's aspirations matter too. In many ways the greater failure is not the child who doesn't reach the stars, but the child who has got no stars that they feel they are reaching for.

And as every teacher knows, you can't educate those you can't easily motivate. But we know sometimes that helping boys in particular to aspire and aim higher comes up against in schools boredom, distraction, disaffection, a sense the classroom isn't for them, the downward pull of peer pressure. So we have also to raise boys' aspirations in education, provide education that can enthuse and engage, provide different opportunities for different kinds of vocational learning as young people prepare for the transition to the world of work.

And that lies behind much of what we are doing in diplomas. The very idea of personalised learning is about helping children become more aspirational, that we identify talent, we shape education around the unique needs and aspirations of every child, we engage pupils in their own learning and we give them a thirst for education and knowledge that will stay with them long after they have left school.

So we will expand our Gifted and Talented Learning Programme for children at school. We will give a million of our most talented children the opportunity to benefit from special and stretching tuition, we are boosting activities in those areas which can unlock so many different forms of talent: sport, music, the arts, culture, enterprise. We will continue to increase the number of student ambassadors from universities who work in schools: there are now 7,000 helping promote the benefits of higher education to younger pupils when they are still at school. And we will build on what is called our Aim Higher Programme so we increase the aspiration of many to go to university, just as universities are now encouraged to reach out into the schools and colleges, hold summer schools and other events to help lift young people's sights towards higher education.

And because raising aspirations is at the heart of raising standards we will ask the National Council for Educational Excellence to work with schools and universities, the Sutton Trust and other organisations in this field, to report on how we can increase applications to universities from schools in disadvantaged areas.

So raising aspiration, encouraging the participation of parents and students is at the heart of our approach. But direct action to raise standards and to address failure is also fundamental.

I think we have come a long way in the last decade. Ten years ago there were no children's centres like Sure Start, there were no nursery places for 3 year olds, there was no literacy hour in our primary schools, no guaranteed sports, arts and modern languages, no extended schools, no trust, specialist or academy schools in every area. There were no educational maintenance allowances so young people found it difficult in some areas to stay on in education beyond 16. There were few new school buildings which now today stand as beacons of aspiration, particularly in low income communities.

Now all of this, and more, has been achieved. But now as we develop what will be our 10 year Children's Plan we need to move to the next stage in the transformation of standards in education in Britain, rising to the challenge of world class excellence.

Across the globe, as everybody knows, education standards are rising. Other countries will not stand still and are pushing forward and they are pushing forward the frontier of what a 21st century education can offer. Take Canada, or Finland, or Hong Kong. Almost all the children there achieve the required standard of literacy by 11. In Finland every teacher has to have a Masters Degree and 10 people apply for every place on a teacher training course. In South Korea only the brightest and the best are selected to enter the teaching profession. In Chicago, Boston and New York education leaders are now taking a systematic and relentless approach to tackling failing schools.

So the world is moving at this restless pace to transform education. And what appears to be world class now will soon of course appear to be second class in 10 or 20 years time. And that means that the strategic choices that we make today are going to be critical for our long term prosperity.

So I want us to learn all the lessons of excellence from round the world, that the very best education systems start with high quality affordable daycares and early learning, as in Scandinavia where children start school ready to learn because they have had excellent and highly professional pre-school care and development.

But as Michael Barber has shown, the best education systems recruit the best people into teaching - the top 5% in South Korea, the top 10% in Finland, the top 30% in Singapore and Hong Kong. In excellent schools the teachers receive continuous training and professional development to update their skills and expertise, and there is always strong leadership from head teachers with the autonomy to lead their schools. World class education, we know, achieves high standards for 100% of the children when there are systems of accountability, funding and pupil tracking that leave no child behind and personalised learning is tailored to the unique potential of every child with one-to-one tutoring and support. That world class education depends on a systematic intolerance of failure and a preparedness of public

authorities to intervene and to innovate to eradicate failure; and in leading economies of course participation in learning or education is near universal up to the age of 18, skills investment is high and rising, and in all successful countries entry to universities and colleges is rapidly increasing.

So we must renew our ambitions also. And we will build on the improvements we have made in early years by extending entitlements to free nursery education, we will improve the quality of childcare and early learning, we should aspire to match the excellence we know exists particularly in the Scandinavian countries in early learning and daycare.

And then we will raise still further the status and standards of teaching. Everybody remembers an inspirational teacher, everybody knows that a good teacher makes all the difference, and there are many good teachers here this morning. And that is not just my personal experience but the personal experience I find when I talk to many people.

And research is absolutely conclusive about the importance of teaching standards. If you take a group of 50 teachers, a child taught by one of the best 10 will learn sometimes at twice the speed of a child taught by one of the worst 10. Teaching quality is that important.

Ofsted say we now have the best teachers ever in our schools today and they should be valued and applauded for their work. And now our goal should be even bolder, to have a world class teaching profession for all our pupils within a generation.

So we will do more to raise the quality of recruits into teacher training, we will expand routes into training for talented people in mid and late career with 'Teach First' followed by 'Teach Next' so that people can move into a teaching job later in career. We will build on these reforms with the aim of raising still further the status of teaching in Britain. We will match the rigorous selection of the brightest and best into teacher training that other countries are achieving and we will promote graduate opportunities for teachers to undertake professional training and development linked to performance assessment.

And this is my belief: that world class performance comes from consistent brilliance from teachers in every classroom, professionals who always seek continuous improvement; who teach better lessons tomorrow than they did yesterday because they are learning all the time; who when a pupil falls behind don't assume it is a lack of ability but instead ask: how could I teach that material better to enable my pupil to master that?

And that is the challenge, we know, for the best teachers and we will assist them in rising to it.

But we should also work on the principle of social justice for all, that no child should be left out or lose out, that as we raise standards we also narrow the social gap attainment in education and that every child should be given the best chance to progress as far and as fast as they can.

And we have improved standards of schools in disadvantaged areas, but we have not made enough progress in closing the gap between individual pupils from different backgrounds. A 'no child left out' education system must work for 100% of the pupils 100% of the time, and that is a major undertaking for this generation.

So what accountability there is and what progress targets we have must prioritise success for all.

Now in primary education every child should reach the expected level in literacy and numeracy. If the best in the world can do it now, so should we. For those who say it is not possible, I say visit West Dunbartonshire, one of the most disadvantaged parts of Scotland. Ten years ago it took the decision to eradicate illiteracy in primary schools. In 2001 almost 1 in 3 left primary school functionally illiterate. Last year only 6% did so. Through sustained ambition, intensive intervention at every level it is on track to wipe out pupil illiteracy this year after a decade of raising standards for children.

And if West Dunbartonshire - one of the poorest parts of the country - can do it, so can the rest of the country. It means one-to-one catch-up in the 3 Rs to every pupil who needs it, with early intervention, 'Every Child a Reader', 'Every Child Counts', the new programme that Ed Balls has just introduced, 'Every Child a Writer'.

And it means better school-based social and behavioural support for children with extra needs, building on the 'Every child matters' agenda.

And then for secondary school it must mean all pupils making good progress with setting by ability, stronger classroom discipline and real commitment to personalised learning. More one-to-one tuition, small group teaching, a personal studies tutor for secondary schools, more support for innovative teaching and learning strategies.

And we all know that the best schools already achieve superb results with personalised learning, the best schools are well led with innovative ideas, they increasingly operate as networks that link schools together and they spread best practice from school to school. And our goal must be a service that has the capacity and space to innovate and to personalise learning.

And as we start to move to personalised testing we must keep assessment under review to ensure it supports learning and achievement, and does not dominate teaching.

Every child is entitled to a decent school and a good education. So we must also put an end to failure. We have cut the number of failing schools dramatically in the last decade. In 1997 over 600 secondary schools had less than 25% of children getting 5 or more good GCSEs. Now instead of over 600, 26 do. But the latest figures still show that there are 670 schools where less than 30% of pupils get 5 A star to C grades at GCSE, including English and maths, and while that is down from 1,600 in 1997 there is still much to do.

So we must go further to end failure. And the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has challenged local authorities to use new powers and this is a critical strategic role and challenge for local government.

In the next 5 years we will work to get all schools above 30% A star - C grades at GCSE, including in English and maths. And let's be clear, many of these schools below this threshold are already improving, many have strong and determined leaders, many face the toughest challenges in our education system and we have to use the right mix of intervention and support to raise standards.

So we have put in place now a systematic plan of ever tougher measures for eradicating failure. It will start with annual improvement targets for all schools that are falling below the required threshold. There will be new incentives for the best teachers to teach in the toughest schools, including expanding the 'Teaching First' and 'Teach Next' programmes to have the best possible teacher intake for these schools.

Good schools will be brought in to help poorer schools under improvement networks that will be run by schools for schools, as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust motto puts it. Warning notices to trigger intervention powers will include new interim executive boards to take over school management where there is failure. Complete closure or takeover by a successful neighbouring school in a trust or federation or transfer to academy status, including the option of taking over by an independent school will be an available power.

And there will be 150 more academies in the next 3 years, on route to our target of 400; more universities working with us to set up academies; more local authorities doing what Manchester, Birmingham, Oldham and others are doing - putting academies at the heart of their local school improvement plans; more independent schools setting up academies to take over failing schools.

And this is therefore a determined and systematic agenda to end failure that we will see through and we will not flinch from this task.

And our final goal for world class education for young children will be 100% success for young people to make the transition from school to college, to university or to skilled work. And every young person should know that they have something to aim for in their education. So at age 18 or 19, each should graduate from school, college or an apprenticeship with good qualifications or a certificate on the way.

We have set out in the last few days a new vision for diplomas, designed alongside and with universities and businesses to meet the needs of the new century. And alongside the diplomas, as they grow in excellence we plan a radical overhaul of apprenticeships too. A new matching service, rather like the UCAS university service, so that young people in any area can be matched up with businesses that are wanting and offering apprenticeships in every area of the country; a widening of the number of employers who now join the apprenticeship programme and we build on the 130,000 employers in all parts of Britain who have signed up for apprenticeships; we make the public sector a better partner, which it hasn't always been, in apprenticeships, including changes in Whitehall itself; and we place a legal duty on the Learning and Skills Council to provide sufficient apprenticeship places in every area so that we can end a situation in which there can be only 95 apprenticeships completed in Hackney but over 2,500 today in Hampshire.

And to drive aspirations up we will ensure that all those reaching 18 or 19 who want to go on to an advanced apprenticeship or further education and training have the resources they need.

Just as from this year two-thirds of university students will be able, under changes that we have announced, to apply for grants of up to £3,000, so too advanced apprentices will have a credit of at least £3,000 through a Skills Account to pay towards their costs. And from this year we are paying the college fees of young people up to the age of 25 studying the equivalent of A levels and giving access to an adult learning grant of £30 a week.

And all of this is possible against the backdrop of the legislation to extend training or education to the age of 18 by 2015 to bring us in line with the rest and the best in the world. We will offer financial support for those who could not otherwise afford to stay in education. We will not insist that young people stay in the classroom. They will be able to choose from clear pathways into the future: further study at school or college, an apprenticeship or work with time off for training.

And in the coming week the Secretary for Children, Schools and Families will bring forward his action plan to ensure that all young people are in education, jobs or training and we will offer new rights to young people matched by that new duty to be in education until 18.

And because we cannot afford to leave any young person behind outside work or study, and because we owe it to them to equip them for the world they are growing up into, this will be a priority of the government that every young person is offered a route forward in education as they grow from their teens into their 20s.

I make no apology therefore for saying that education is the best economic policy, and I make no apology for wanting every child and young person to be able to read, write and add up. But as we all know education has always been about more than exams, more than the basics, vital as they are and will continue to be. To educate, as we know, is to form character, it is to shape values, it is to liberate the imagination, it is to pass human wisdom, knowledge and ingenuity from one generation to the next, it is a duty and a calling.

As was said by one of the ancient philosophers, the mind is not a vessel to be filled, it is a fire to be kindled. And that is why we have such high ambitions. Not just because education is a matter of national prosperity, it is certainly that, it is because education is the great liberator, the greatest liberator mankind has ever known and the greatest force for social progress.

That is why it is my passion. That is why I want to see a Britain where every child can go to a world class school, supported by high aspirations and surrounded always by excellent opportunities. And that is why I want to see a Britain where every family has the right to participate in the education of their child and is encouraged with every chance to do so. And that is why too I want a Britain where every young person can see ahead of them a goal in life, the support they need to get there, and it is a Britain therefore where effort is rewarded, ambition fulfilled, potential realised, a Britain of high aspirations and a Britain of all the talents. And I ask all of you to enlist in this cause.

Thank you very much.