



BRIEFING

# Room for improvement

ippr's response to the schools white paper

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## About the author

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The government's schools white paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, heralds some of the most significant reforms to our schools system in many years. The government proposes to make substantial changes to how teachers are trained and recruited; to reform school funding to channel more resources towards the poorest pupils; to introduce a new 'English Baccalaureate' to be awarded to pupils who attain A\*-C GCSEs in English, maths, science, a humanity and a modern language; and to initiate a wide-ranging reform of the national curriculum.

These changes follow on from legislation which has opened up the supply side of our school system, by admitting new providers to compete with existing schools, and allowed high performing schools to become academies, free from local authority control.

This paper focuses specifically on how the measures outlined in the white paper address the attainment gap that exists between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children from wealthier families. This is a deeply entrenched problem which has scarred the English schools system for far too long. The impact of these reforms on the life chances of the most socially disadvantaged children is a litmus test of the Coalition government's claim to be a progressive administration committed to tackling social injustice.

As well as being a matter of fairness, tackling the attainment gap is a crucial step towards raising educational standards overall and is therefore vital to the country's economic future. The international evidence on school performance shows that the best way to improve standards overall is to close the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds (McKinsey & Co 2007).

To address this, we focus on four relevant parts of the white paper:

- First, we discuss the government's reforms to the teacher workforce.
- Second, we analyse the impact of the changes to school funding and assess whether the new pupil premium will really help the poorest children.
- Third, we explore the government's changes to how schools are held to account for their performance, and in particular the measures to tackle poor performance at the bottom of the attainment league tables.
- Lastly, we examine those proposals for curriculum reform that are most pertinent to the question of narrowing the attainment gap.

## 1. Improving teaching

There is a growing body of evidence that the highest performing school systems are best distinguished by the quality of their teachers (McKinsey & Co 2007, OECD 2008, Hargreaves et al 2010). Detailed data from the United States has identified that variation in teacher quality has a major impact on outcomes (Kane et al 2007, Aaronson et al 2007, Clotfelter et al 2006, 2007). This is true for England as well – ippr has shown that the difference between having an 'excellent' and 'bad' teacher is equal to one GCSE grade, all other things being equal (Margo et al 2008).

ippr therefore supports the government's measures to get the best teachers into our schools. The fact that the white paper is titled *The Importance of Teaching* represents a welcome shift away from an almost exclusive focus on structural reform in the first months of this administration. We will never close the attainment gap nor get our schools up to the standards of the best in the world unless we recruit and develop high-quality teachers.

The best school systems in the world recruit their teachers from the top 10 per cent of graduates, whereas in England teaching attracts the top 30 per cent of graduates (ippr 2008). Ministers are therefore right to insist that teachers have at least a 2:2 university degree and to improve initial teacher training (ITT). The fact that currently only 1 per cent of trainees fail their ITT – a far lower proportion than in other countries – suggests that too many poor candidates are being allowed to enter the profession (ippr 2008).

We also welcome the expansion of the successful 'Teach First' programme. This was one of the most successful educational reforms of the previous government and has managed to get some of the best graduates in the country teaching in some of the most challenging schools. It has helped to bridge the chasm that has existed for far too long between our best universities and our most disadvantaged schools.

But improving recruitment is insufficient, simply because this ignores the vast bulk of the existing teacher workforce. Indeed, research shows that professional development in post is crucial to improving teacher quality (Slater, Davies and Burgess 2009). ippr has found that only 3 per cent of teachers' time is spent on continuing professional development in England, compared to over 100 hours a year in Singapore. We have also found that only 25 per cent of teachers report they are regularly observed in classroom practice, despite this being a key way to drive improvement (ippr 2008).

The government is therefore right to designate 'Specialist Leaders in Education' who will support the work of their colleagues, observing how they teach and helping them to evaluate their own work. The introduction of a new national network of Teaching Schools could be a major step forward in providing support for teachers to develop over the course of their careers. Greater flexibility in pay to reward excellence should also be welcomed, as should the proposals to simplify the regulations on addressing poor performance.

The government's proposals would be strengthened by the following measures:

- Teachers' performance records should be kept so that this information is not lost when a teacher changes school.
- Some of the resources currently spent on teaching assistants should be redirected towards the professional development of teachers. There is no clear evidence that we need as many teaching assistants as we currently have in English schools in order to raise standards.
- The transition from ITT to classroom should be strengthened. Teachers should retain links with their ITT provider, such as by way of regular mentoring sessions.
- Professional development should be included in performance management and thereby linked to prospects for promotion.
- Teachers who are underperforming should be obliged to undertake extra training and, where performance does not subsequently improve, removed more rapidly from the profession.
- More support should be provided for schools to put their staff through the new Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL), which started last year, and to ensure the course becomes a critical part of teacher development in the first five years after they have entered the profession.

## 2. School funding and the pupil premium

The government is making a number of changes to school funding that are intended to help channel resources to disadvantaged young people. We strongly support the decision to end the funding disparity between FE colleges and school sixth forms: currently an FE student is funded by £280 a year less than a student in a school sixth form (DfE 2010).

The government is also to introduce a new pupil premium, which means that schools will be given additional funding for each pupil who is eligible for free school meals (FSM). The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates the pupil premium to be valued on average at £2,410 per FSM pupil. The exact amount given to individual schools will vary depending how local authorities calculate their existing funding formulae (Chowdry, Greaves and Sibieta 2010).

ippr supports the new pupil premium because it allocates funding intended for disadvantaged children in a more transparent and consistent way. However, we are concerned that schools will not spend these funds on the children for whom they are intended. Under the government's plans, additional funds will be paid to a school for every FSM pupil but schools can spend this money as they please. The policy includes no mechanism to guarantee funds will provide additional support to the particular children who need it.

Indeed, other government reforms to qualifications and school league tables make it less likely that the pupil premium will get to children from low-income families. Under the new system, schools will be held accountable by way of league tables indicating how many pupils have earned the proposed 'English Baccalaureate' (DfE 2010: 44). Pupils will be awarded an 'English Bac' if they attain GCSE grades of A\*–C in English, maths, science, a modern language and a humanity.

The English Bac is intended to be the government's 'gold standard' against which schools will be judged. This means that schools will have an incentive to focus extra resources on children who are likely to do well in those subjects, rather than on children receiving free school meals. The government admits in the white paper that only 4 per cent of FSM pupils would have gained an English Bac this year (DfE 2010: 44). In effect, placing the English Bac at the heart of the new accountability framework will provide incentives for schools to divert resources *away* from FSM pupils.

ippr recommends instead that the pupil premium should be properly allocated to children who receive free school meals, through a pupil premium entitlement (PPE). The extra funding should be used for activities such as extra catch-up or small-group tuition, or one-to-one teaching to stretch the most able low-income pupils. Under this scheme, local authorities would set out a menu of approved activities upon which the money could be spent. The child's parent and the lead teacher would have to agree at the end of each school year how the following year's PPE would be spent. This would encourage the development of an individual learning plan for each child and would act as a lever to engage parents, which we know is an important factor in a child's learning.

The government argues that it will 'make sure that schools are held fully to account for using the pupil premium to raise the achievement of eligible children' (DfE 2010: 68). Yet although they will make this data available in the performance tables it will not be the main criteria by which the government judges school performance. This will be the number of children attaining the English Bac and the number getting 5 A\*–C GCSEs including English and maths. In the next section we propose an alternative method for holding schools to account which provides real incentives to narrow the attainment gap.

### 3. Performance and accountability

The accountability framework proposed in the white paper lacks sufficiently strong incentives for schools to narrow the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their classmates.

Currently, school performance is judged by the proportion of their pupils attaining 5 A\*–C GCSEs including English and maths. We know that this has created incentives for teachers to focus on pupils on the borderline between a C and a D grade rather than on those who are further behind. The introduction of the English Bac creates a further distortion, with schools likely to focus on increasing the number of their pupils doing well in those 'core' academic subjects.

To compel schools to focus on improving the attainment of children from lower income families, a comprehensive school report card should be published for each school. This would show raw pupil attainment data but would also cover other aspects of a school's performance. This would include pupils' progress variables, which are much better indicator of performance than raw attainment: a school which takes a child from a D to a B is doing better than a school that keeps a child at a B. Crucially, the report card would specifically measure schools' success at raising the attainment levels of children eligible for free school meals.

A composite overall score would then be awarded that much more accurately reflects school performance and that creates incentives to narrow the attainment gap. This score would allow parents to make comparisons between schools on a much more robust basis. Such a scheme already exists for schools in New York State (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/>).

In terms of how to improve standards, ministers have in the past implied that competition between schools would be sufficient to raise attainment: if schools are failing then parents will be able to set up new free schools. In fact, this policy would likely leave many pupils stuck in failing schools that are gradually being abandoned by those parents with the skills to play the system.

The white paper marks a welcome recognition that the best proven way of turning around poorly performing schools is direct intervention by the government. The white paper proposes to continue Labour's policy of having a minimum or floor standard above which all schools will be expected to perform. For secondary schools, this minimum standard will be set at 35 per cent of pupils achieving 5 A\*–C grade GCSEs including English and maths, as well as a measure of whether pupils make the national average rate of progress between key stage two and key stage four.

This minimum standard can largely be seen as a continuation of the National Challenge introduced by Labour in 2008, which set a target of no school having less than 30 per cent of pupils achieving five A\*–C grade GCSEs including English and maths by 2011.

We believe that the new target is insufficiently ambitious. Analysis of the existing trends of improvement in school performance suggests that the previous government was more or less on track to achieve its target by 2011.

**Table 1**  
Number of schools failing to reach the minimum standard, 2004/05–2007/08

Year	Number of schools where fewer than 30% of pupils achieved 5+ A*–C GCSEs including English and maths	Reduction in schools where fewer than 30% of pupils achieved 5+ A*–C GCSEs including English and maths
2004/05	912	
2005/06	783	129
2006/07	631	152
2007/08	440	191

The pace of reduction had started to increase significantly last year – the first year National Challenge was in operation. By next year, it seems likely that very few schools – if any – will fall below the 30 per cent threshold. In this light, a commitment to have no schools below 35 per cent is insufficiently stretching, particularly when there is no date set by which all schools are expected to surpass the attainment threshold. A more ambitious minimum standard would be to have 40 per cent of pupils in every school achieving five or more A\*–C GCSEs including English and maths by 2015.

As well as lacking a timetable, the white paper contains no resource commitment comparable to the successful National Challenge initiative. National Challenge came with £400 million of investment, which paid for targeted help for teaching and learning, and support through a dedicated advisor to develop strong leadership. The white paper is vague as to what measures will be taken to address underperformance although, like National Challenge, it says that ultimately a school could be re-launched as an academy if it continually fails to reach the minimum standard.

ippr also welcomes the higher minimum targets for primary schools: primaries must ensure that over 60 per cent of their pupils are achieving basic standards of level four in both English and maths and that more pupils than average make the expected levels of progression at key stage one and two. For primary schools, a national improvement programme is not appropriate simply because there are far too many to make this effective. Rather, local authorities should be responsible for supporting these primary schools to rise above the minimum standard. This support could include changing the leadership at underperforming schools and placing such schools in chains, linking them to support from the most successful primaries in the area.

We are concerned that there is no mention in the white paper of proven successful schemes to improve basic literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts provided specialist teachers to work in inner city schools to improve basic standards. Independent evaluations have shown that children involved in both schemes significantly outperformed their peers who had not gone through the programmes. We can only assume that these improvement schemes will now cease, which would be a mistake. In order for schools to use their pupil premium funding to help the children who have fallen behind in these areas, the government needs to provide the infrastructure – such as specialist literacy teachers – which schools can then access.

#### 4. Curriculum reform

The white paper takes a number of important steps in the area of curriculum reform. Crucially, the government has accepted that we need to improve our schools' standards in comparison with our competitor countries. Ministers want to see England reverse its decline in international education rankings such as the OECD's 'PISA' assessment. As such, the white paper proposes benchmarking our exams against those of top-performing countries such as China, Singapore, South Korea and Canada. This is vital in an increasingly globalised world, where competition for jobs, knowledge and skills extends beyond national borders and where education is a key ingredient for economic success.

ippr also welcomes the government's recognition that 'vocational education has been the poor relation' in our education system for far too long (DfE 2010: 47). ippr has long argued that the only

way to resolve this issue is to properly integrate vocational education alongside academic study, as was proposed by the Tomlinson Review (Delorenzi and Robinson 2005). Despite setting up another review on this issue, it is unlikely that the current government will grasp this nettle.

Indeed, some of the reforms announced in the white paper could actually worsen the academic/vocational divide. First, it does too little to address the problem of young people disengaged from the educational system – the NEETs (Not in Education Employment or Training) – as its focus on highly skilled apprenticeships schemes is unlikely to help this group. Second, the new emphasis the English Baccalaureate places on traditionally academic subjects only widens the divide between the academic and vocational routes.

## Conclusion

ippr welcomes the broad thrust of the white paper. The focus on teacher quality is long overdue and the measures announced should help to raise teaching standards in our schools. The decision to benchmark our qualifications against the best in the world should help, over time, to lift performance in our schools to meet that of the high-performing systems internationally. The introduction of the pupil premium should help to make the distribution of funding more consistent and transparent and provides the basis for a fairer allocation of resources.

Nevertheless, the government has done too little to address the educational attainment gap. We remain unconvinced that schools will spend the pupil premium on providing extra support for the children for whom it is intended. The new performance framework is not robust enough in holding schools to account for what they do to help children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. And the measures to address failing schools lack sufficient muscle and the resourcing required to maintain the pace of improvement.

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