

UNISON Labour Link

**Submission to Labour Party
Partnership into Power 2012**

Education and Skills



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Submission to Labour Party Partnership into Power Consultation: Education and Skills

UNISON is the largest education union in the UK with over 320,000 members working across the sector. As well as representing education staff, UNISON's 1.4 million members are parents, carers, governors and citizens who use and value education.

UNISON believes that education is the engine of economic success, as well as a major vehicle for tackling equality, delivering social justice and maintaining a stable and fulfilled society.

We welcome the chance to respond to this consultation. The coalition government has set in train an ideological experiment on our education system, with scant evidence to back it up. The next Labour Government should stop this experiment, move to a period of stability and then take an evidence based approach to future policy change.

What is the best way to make our schools democratically accountable?

Whilst there are over 1800 academies in England at the start of May 2012, this still represents fewer than one in ten schools. With around 90 schools converting a month, the vast majority of schools will still be state community schools linked into their local authority, by the start of the next government. The policy document also focuses on grammar schools – yet they remain a miniscule proportion of schools. The danger is that the current government's radical reforms mean that we focus on the minority of schools and the processes for setting them up, rather than designing a system that delivers for all schools.

School based democratic accountability needs to be accessible for parents, affordable for the government and not represent an additional bureaucracy. It should allow for external examination by inspectors and be open to critical challenge by a second tier body.

Governance is key in schools. Yet once more the government focuses on process. Recent government evidence shows that the size of a school governing body does not necessarily have an effect on the quality of a school. Yet the government has recommended smaller school governing bodies using a business model as a basis. UNISON believes that schools and their parents should be able to choose their preferred model, rather than being forced to accept the one size fits all business model currently being pushed.

Currently most schools sit within a range of structures, such as local authorities, sponsored chains, religious organisations or local federations.

Those that sit as individual trusts or academies are being encouraged to link with other structures. This variance in status and governance makes the picture a complex web and the division of responsibilities between the provider and the inspectorate, second tier and central government complicated. There is also a dearth of democratic accountability in some of these structures. Yet there is a need for a democratic accountability that should be encompassing, coherent and consistent for all schools. Government reforms are deliberately diminishing the role of local authorities, yet offer no alternative. The government sees local authorities, the current second tier, as education monopolies compromised by self interest, yet it seems obvious that large sponsor chains one of the government's favoured alternatives are similarly compromised.

UNISON believes that central government should set overall strategic frameworks and be able to intervene as necessary; schools should focus on the direct delivery of education; and issues such as admission codes, support services, capital allocations, school improvement and admissions should be a second tier responsibility.

Alternative second tier structures being suggested seem to have their own problems: appointed quangos or school commissioners do not fit a democratic model and could be bureaucratic and costly. Elected commissioners/bodies could deal with the democratic issues – but their links with other local structures could be problematic (and UNISON believes that joined-up local services are essential). Also recent referenda on mayors have shown that additional structures are not necessarily what the public is seeking. Therefore unless a better model is proposed UNISON believes that local authorities remain the best model for a second tier – albeit one that itself needs to be opened up to transparent inspection and critical challenge.

In a tough financial climate how do we ensure school buildings are maintained, new classrooms built and the need for thousands more primary places met?

The last Labour government invested large amounts in school buildings and we would urge the next Labour Government to continue this. Decisions on how the budget is spent should be made with local authorities who are better aware of local needs. Building Schools for the Future, whilst welcome in its intentions, suffered a number of problems: costs, use of consultants and the general problems of PFI which locks funding into long term contracts, no matter what future demand is. Free schools add an additional complexity and potential extra costs, especially if they set up in areas where they are producing additional and unnecessary places. New builds should only be targeted at areas of growth in population and should be a community decision.

How can we ensure a fair admission code?

Admission codes left to schools with no wider scrutiny are open to manipulation. The current situation, which allows each academy to set its own policy, will create an extra burden for parents who could previously look at one criterion per authority. In urban areas with increasing numbers of academies parents will have to look at a range of admission criteria and work their way through different demands. Therefore a second tier to co-ordinate admissions across a wider area seems sensible and fair.

How do we ensure there are more good schools in areas lacking in quality provision so that children aren't either forced to attend poorly performing schools or to travel long distances to the nearest good school?

No child should be expected to attend a school that does not provide a good education. Often schools that are at the bottom end of league tables are in deprived areas with multiple disadvantages. Children's services and the Every Child Matters agenda were created to take a holistic approach to the welfare of children and young people and should be re-introduced.

Evidence shows that quality of teaching has the biggest effect on quality of provision. Therefore it is necessary to ensure that either the best teachers are directed towards areas currently lacking, or that the quality of teaching quality across the board is increased. A free market approach will not deliver either of these – it will create a competitive environment which will lead to a more polarised system. Autonomy is important but is not the be all and end all – the best education systems allow autonomy within a state framework.

In the last 20 years, there has been an emphasis on adults in the classroom rather than just teachers, acknowledging the growing role of teaching assistants and higher level teaching assistants. Investment in their training and appropriate deployment and the fostering of education team practice would pay dividends, especially in areas where a holistic approach to the child is of paramount importance. Such an approach should include the maintenance of a professionally-run school library and a school food policy committed to universal take-up of a lunchtime meal which meets the statutory nutritional standards.

How do we ensure that all families have access to quality early years education?

The best quality early years education is found in school nurseries, which regularly perform best in Ofsted inspections compared to other providers. The current private sector nursery market has failed with over a third of providers failing to make a profit. If there was money to be made then larger providers would have moved in, leading to a smaller number of dominating chains. Of the other main early years providers, nannies provide good quality – but their cost means they are limited to better off parents, whilst the numbers of childminders represent a cheaper option, is declining. The last Labour

Government began a programme of improving qualifications in the workforce, introducing the Early Years Professional Status; we are encouraged by early evidence that suggests that EYPs have an impact in those workplaces where they are correctly used.

Therefore investment in school nurseries and/or in improving qualifications for early years professionals and ensuring that private nurseries use them will have the best effect on quality.

How can we adequately fund further and higher education while keeping it accessible and affordable to all?

The government's freeing up of regulatory frameworks and license to privatise will see market-driven institutions and lead to services out of the reach of many students. Adequate is a scaleable word. The last Labour Government rightly expanded HE provision and sought to open access to a wider audience. However it did so by promoting HE as the most important form of tertiary education; whilst vocational education and FE were improved but left somewhat in the shade. Some in the new government appear to recognise the importance of vocational and FE but have limited funding to tackle it and a misguided view that the market will deliver alone.

This government has also abolished the EMA and hiked up HE fees – this makes HE appear daunting to poorer students who do not view impending debt lightly. UNISON would prefer that both HE and FE were free at the point of access.

We also have concerns at the opening up of the student market for students achieving AAB which creates a two-tier HE system. This linked in with the restricted 'Core and Margin' funding, will lead to a two tier market. We also believe that whilst FE provides a valuable role in delivering some areas of HE, such as foundation degrees, academic and support services in FE such as libraries are poorly resourced compared to HE.

How can we ensure that all careers advice offered to young people is of good quality and face-to-face?

Firstly amend the statutory guidance to state this. Ensure that there is a minimum accepted qualification for careers advisers and force schools to provide face to face guidance.

How do we make careers advice affordable to schools with smaller budgets?

Good schools recognise that excellent careers advice is essential and will provide it anyway. The others need to be persuaded to do so. The danger of allowing schools the freedom to choose services themselves will mean that

some will go for a cheap and poorer quality option. The next Labour Government should fund a centralised national careers service to which all schools are by default signed up to. This central service will mean economies of scale compared to the thousands of individual systems being commissioned by schools. However it could be possible to allow schools to access alternative provision if they can show the service they are getting from the National Careers Service (NCS) is inadequate and they can provide a plan to show that they can access equivalent/better provision from other providers that meet national standards and use fully qualified careers staff. As part of its general inspection Ofsted would check to ensure the NCS is delivering quality provision.

How do we ensure children at risk of becoming NEET are identified early and supported early and encouraged to stay in education and training?

The systems set up under the Connexions service, linking with schools and local authorities, would have been adequate if they had been properly funded. There were many excellent programmes designed by Connexions services which could be identified as good practice and shared. Additionally moves from the government to require later attendance in school/education will have some impact, although there is a concern that keeping reluctant young people in school could be disruptive for other pupils. UNISON believes that expanded access to FE is more likely to be productive for those young people who find the schools system overly academic and regimented.

How should secure high quality Special Educational Needs education be provided?

The coalition government was right to review the SEN system; however their initial proposals, such as tightening the rules that define SEN and proposing personal budgets, look more like a cost saving exercise than a coherent policy.

Recent evidence has shown that Teaching Assistants are not being properly deployed when dealing with pupils with SEN. Better planning and use of TAs would improve the quality of education for no increase in costs. The provision of additional training for TAs would cost very little but could make a significant improvement in quality.

How can we offer parents more support and limit the lengthy and costly appeals process of court cases and judicial reviews?

Greater clarity is required regarding the legal right of parents and children with statements of SEN, particularly in relation to seeking places in academies and free schools. Urgent action needs to be taken to prevent academies from refusing to admit children with SEN statements and to ensure that the First-Tier (SEND) Tribunal is able to hear appeals from parents in these cases.

How can we make accessing SEN simpler and more efficient for families?

It is essential to protect local authority SEN services to ensure that the most vulnerable children, including those that are the disadvantaged, have access to support. There is a growing risk that the severe cuts to Children's Centres will reduce the level of successful early intervention for children with SEN and disabled children. Also, the expansion of the academies programme, combined with the possibility of personal budgets and a greater role for the third sector, will decrease the services which are provided by local authorities, reducing the level of specialist care and support that is available and increasing the pressure on schools.

While UNISON welcomes the government's proposal to require every local authority to publish a 'local offer' of support to parents, this can only be achieved if local authorities are properly funded and retain oversight and scrutiny of all local SEN services.

