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Steering the school ship – Reflections

One of the key functions of governors is developing the school strategy. Taking account of the school’s strengths and weaknesses, the educational landscape and the likely developments for the future, many governors spend away-days with senior school staff to shape the future.

Where this exercise is productive, governors keep as their central focus the pupils, their welfare and development, and aim to answer four important questions.

(1) What do we want for the future and where do we wish the school to be in x year’s time?

(2) Why do we want what we want?

(3) How are we going to get from where we are to where we want to be? In search of the answer, what do we need to do and what must we avoid doing?

(4) How long should we be taking to get to where we want to, given that our children have only one chance in life?

The exercise of an away-day gives governors and staff the opportunity of engaging in a modicum of navel-gazing and in so doing, shut out the siren voices of the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for Standards in Education and everyone else. They set out their own agenda to shape what they consider will be the best provision they can make for the children they serve.

To answer the first question, governors and senior staff must agree on the objectives for the school based on what they consider as the purpose of a first class education. Is the purpose wishing to have the school be where governors wish it to be in x years to ensure that it achieves an outstanding rating with Ofsted and rise to the top of the government league table of examination and test results? Or is the purpose providing a well-rounded education in a safe and happy environment? Governors also need to consider whether wanting to be an Ofsted outstanding is complementary to providing a well-rounded education; or are the two objectives diametrically opposed to each other? If complementary, which is to come first – being rated outstanding by Ofsted or providing a well-rounded education in a safe, happy environment?

Finding answers to these questions will become that much easier if governors and staff decide on the fundamental principles on which the school is based. What do we value about education – everything that is measurable or those aspects of provision that are immeasurably invaluable? If we value both, what weighting should we give each?

The problem with good education is that so much of its outcomes cannot be measured. It is like calibrating the air we breathe. Much of it is subjective. As a consequence, central and local government and the public at large interfere with the governance and management of schools. It does not follow that because we have been to school we know how to run it and make it fit for purpose.

Securing agreement on what exactly are the purposes of education and determining therefore the objectives for the school are daunting. Everyone responsible for the school’s success must sign up to the agenda for the future to secure a happy ending.
However, important as purposes and objectives are, the processes of getting from point A to point B are as critical. The mountaineer who climbs Everest knows that she/he wishes to scale the 29,000 feet. However, if the person does not have the right equipment and the expertise to know how well to climb, she/he is not going to get to the top and/or in the process could come a cropper.

Far be it for me to prescribe what makes for good leadership in this article. There are far too many better qualified people to do so. However, what I can say is that governors and the school leadership team should be creating an atmosphere and ethos that raises morale and develops a climate where all in the school community want to learn and succeed. To reach this Holy Grail, governors and staff must determine a shortlist of what not only should be done but also what they should avoid doing, bearing in mind that they are not omnipotent or omniscient. The school they hold is in trust. Being governors does not provide an excuse for “strutting their stuff” or throwing their weight around to make the rest of the school community miserable. The true leader is the servant of all. (Think Mandela.)

For starters, governors have the responsibility of providing the headteacher and senior staff with support and challenge, in equal measure. This stratagem should filter down from head and senior staff to teaching, administrative and support staff, and from staff to pupils.

No one knows it all and just as, in the words of Wordsworth “the child is father of the man”, leaders can learn from followers. Good leaders have the humility to admit mistakes, learn from those on the lower tiers and give them credit. In so doing, they earn respect from the led and increase their credibility as good leaders.

We have, sadly, some examples of governors misgoverning and headteachers misleading and mismanaging: the chair of governors who is a control freak and tries to take over the management of the school from the headteacher; the headteacher, who makes the lives of her/his teachers miserable by observing their lessons to death.

Objectives are worthless unless governors know who will take charge of each and by when they are to be attained. As the school embarks on the journey, the educational landscape could well change. This may require an objective to be adjusted if not deleted from the list and replaced with another. (In this country, education is the subject of constant change, so this is not new territory.)

During the journey, governors will wish to monitor the progress made. At the end of the time-limited plan, governors will, no doubt, find the time to evaluate how well the school has done. However, in a sense, the school is on a constant journey of improvement as there will never be everything that everyone will know and attain and never an “end”. And that’s one of the beautiful features of education. It is a sphere of life where the journey is much more exciting than the arriving.

For any plan to be translated into successful action that improves the life-chances of our children, the governors, head and school leadership (generally) may wish to borrow the technique used to train army leaders of the future at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.

First (according to Alistair Harbison, Major in the Royal Irish Regiment, who wrote in The Times Educational Supplement on 6 December 2013), leaders must come across to followers as being competent – especially in basic skills.

Second, leaders should value the contributions of the staff, pupils and parents, to improve efficiency and gain commitment from the school community.
Third, leaders need to trust those following, and give them space to exercise their initiatives and develop and/or demonstrate expertise.

Chief Inspector sets sight on school governance

I What the Chief Inspector said in his Annual Report

Ofsted released the second annual report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, in the second week of December 2013 based on the findings from inspections carried out in 2012/13. Almost 80% of schools are good or better, higher than at any time during Ofsted’s existence. However, the spread of ‘good’ or better schools is uneven. In the Isle of Wight, 14% of young people attend a secondary school that is ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’; in Bath and North East Somerset 100% do. In Wolverhampton, 56% of primary pupils attend a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ school; in Sandwell, 82% do and in Darlington the figure is 97%. Of the 13 local authorities (LAs) where fewer than half of the pupils attend a ‘good’ school, five are in Yorkshire and the Humber. On the other hand, seven of the nine LAs in which all children attend a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ secondary are in London.

The three prominent (negative) findings in the Annual Report were as follows.

(i) There was too much mediocre teaching and weak leadership.

(ii) There were huge regional variations in the quality of education.

(iii) Many children from low-income families – particularly White children – were underachieving.

Heralding his report, Sir Michael expressed cautious optimism about the future. “Our statistics this year show that more schools are now getting to good at a faster rate than at any other time in Ofsted’s 21-year history. Some 78% of schools are now good compared with 70% last year,” he said. He was convinced that if this trend were sustained, our standing in the next PISA (Programme for International Student Assessments) league table would be much higher.

However, in a rest speech delivered at the Lilian Baylis School in Lambeth when launching his report, Sir Michael dwelt on a significant weakness in our system which could be masked by the improvements seen under his watch so far. He avers that this weakness has caused our educational world to be split into two nations – not of rich and poor, white and black, English and other, but rather lucky and unlucky. “The lucky child is born in the right postcode, goes to the right school and has the widest opportunities,” he said. The unlucky child does not.

The unlucky child is ”born into an unlucky area, where there are more mediocre schools than good ones, where the teaching is uninspiring and the head believes ‘you can’t really do anything with children like him’.”

The unlucky child never really has a chance, he observed. His potential is never realised, his ambitions are never fulfilled. He is really unlucky because the professionals who could and should help him do not. He is unlucky because his school and college and local authority have failed him. “He is unlucky because we have let him down.”
So what are the factors, according to Wilshaw, which make the lucky child lucky?

“The lucky child’s school has governors who hold the headteacher to account, but do not pretend they are the executive. They challenge, they scrutinise and they are interested in the most important aspects of a school: how well children are taught in the classroom and how much they learn and make progress.

“The lucky child is particularly fortunate in his headteacher. Such heads are motivated by potential and not daunted by circumstance. They do not concede to vested interests and they do not patronise poor children by making excuses. They do not measure a pupil’s ambition by sizing up their (sic) parents.

“A professional spirit permeates the whole school. There is little argument and no negotiation about what the school stands for. Children understand the boundaries created for them that may not exist in the home. As a result, teachers teach well and children learn.

“The good headteacher understands that good behaviour underpins everything. Learning is impossible without it. They (sic) know that it is not a question of drawing up a policy, emailing it to staff and leaving it to be implemented by junior colleagues. They (sic) accept that it is ultimately their (sic) responsibility and no one else’s. They (sic) patrol the corridors and respect their (sic) students, but they (sic) never confuse friendliness with familiarity. They (sic) do not call pupils ‘mate’ (sic).

“The lucky child is of course lucky in his teachers. They teach effectively; they are not bound by a narrow prescription of what a good lesson looks like. They capture their pupils’ attention and they make their lessons interesting. They do not confuse a ‘busy’ lesson for a good one. They succeed in imparting knowledge.

“They insist on high standards of behaviour and they don’t allow children to answer back. They buy into the ethos of the school and when they leave, they leave for good reasons. They haven’t been chased out by bad behaviour. On the contrary, the culture of the school supports and protects them.”

While there are grammatical errors in Sir Michael’s speech, where he confuses the singular with the plural – referring to the “lucky child” and then later talking about “their parents”, mentioning “the good headteacher” and then later on referring to this person as “they”, and “their”, the nub of what he says is worthy of attention and gives us the pointers to good governance which is fundamental to promoting good school leadership.

II Elements of Effectiveness

The key element of ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ leadership in schools is having good governance: “Good governance is crucial to tackling underperformance and supporting improvement. Governance that is weak does not challenge the school about its performance or press the school to increase its aspirations.”

In failing schools, Sir Michael highlighted the following characteristics.

(i) Governing bodies failed to challenge a well-established incumbent headteacher until it is too late.

(ii) There are low aspirations arising from a lack of understanding of how good other schools were, and a failure to understand that ‘the world has moved on’.

(iii) Headteachers fail, for various reasons, to develop their middle and senior leaders.
Schools are unable to handle the transition to new leadership, either because governors have no plan or because there is too little depth in leadership.

In our September 2013 (56th) issue of Governors’ Agenda, we identified nine features of effective governance. Those governors who make a positive difference to a school

(i) carry out statutory duties associated with school education;
(ii) understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school;
(iii) ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction;
(iv) understand and take sufficient account of pupil data – especially in regard to the progress made;
(v) are aware of the impact of teaching on learning and progress in different subjects and year-groups;
(vi) challenge and support leadership in equal measure;
(vii) provide support for an effective headteacher;
(viii) understand how the school makes decisions about teachers’ salary progression; and
(ix) performance-manage the headteacher rigorously.

The National Governors’ Association (NGA) takes this a bit further and describes the eight elements of effective governance (see Governing Matters, November/December 2013), i.e.

(a) having the right people around the table;
(b) ensuring that these people understand their roles and responsibilities as governors;
(c) having good chairing;
(d) having good clerking arrangements;
(e) the prevalence of good relationships based on trust;
(f) members having a good knowledge of the school;
(g) members committing themselves to asking challenging questions; and
(h) members developing the confidence to have courageous conversations in the interests of the children.

III Knowing the School

For governors to discharge their duties well they first need to know their schools intimately (the sixth element of the NGA’s list) – in particular, how well the pupils are doing – both in terms of their progress and achievements – and the quality of teaching and learning. So that the information they garner stands up to scrutiny, it should be
sought in three ways – first-hand, through school visits; second-hand from reports of the headteacher, School Improvement Adviser, parents and pupils; and third-hand, from Ofsted inspections and the objective data on pupils’ progress and achievements that can be accessed in RAISEonline, Ofsted’s dashboard and the Family Fisher Trust’s dashboard. Academia calls this “triangulation”.

Data on pupil progress and achievement must complement information received from the headteacher on audits of teaching and learning and the continuing professional development of teaching, support and administrative staff. Where there is a mismatch – say between pupils’ progress and the quality of teaching and learning, other elements of good governance will be required, like members asking challenging questions and having the courage to engage in difficulty conversations in the interests of the children.

A health warning here would be apposite. Governors are tempted to scrutinise data on pupils’ achievement and progress only at the end of the Key Stages. This is insufficient. All children, in whatever age groups they may be, deserve the very best. As a consequence, it is critical for governors to look at the aggregated progress and achievements of pupils in every age group as well as interrogate the information on any particular category of pupils who are underachieving, finding out the reasons why and taking action to remedy the situation.

Governors are volunteers and many come from non-educational backgrounds (which is not to say that they have not been to school, college and/or university). They spend considerable time attending meetings, recruiting and (sometimes) dismissing staff, checking out best value for money when monitoring the budget and being advocates for the school with parents and the larger community. However, if time can be found, it is well spent when governors visit their schools. More headteachers are now encouraging their governors to accompany them on learning walks to see firsthand how the school operates during a normal working day.

In addition, in accordance with the governing body’s policy on school visits, there would be merit in governors making time to see the school operating outside of these “learning walks”. What precisely would be the purpose of these visits? Where there is a system of link governors – for discrete areas of the curriculum or to oversee year groups, the visits would help the governors learn more about the curriculum and the pupils.

That apart, the answers to some of these questions could be sought during visits, never forgetting that governors are not inspectors and the purpose of visits is to learn more about the school rather than make judgements on it. During a visit, the governor may wish to find the answers to these questions.

1. What is the mood of the pupils? (Are they interested, bored, excited, engrossed, restless, concentrating…?)
2. How are the pupils behaving? (Do they interact well with the teacher and with one another?)
3. Are there sufficient resources in the room for the pupils to carry out the tasks on which they are working? (E.g. books, stationery, equipment, computers, calculators……)
4. What is the condition of the classrooms? (E.g. the standard of decoration and maintenance, the quality of the furniture, floor coverings……)
5. What are the displays around the classrooms like? What can you discover about the topics being covered in the classes from the displayed work?
6. How do the pupils conduct themselves at the beginning, during and end of the lesson?
Such visits then add to the bank of background information governors garner which can be deployed to good effect at meetings of the governing body and its committees when charting a course for future development and improvement.

Governors (individually) have no rights, powers and responsibilities. These flow from the corporate governing body. The headteacher, in a normal school day, is in charge and governors, at all times must respect her/him and the staff that serve at the school when visiting.

Sometimes, inspectors forget that governors are not meant to make judgements on the quality of teaching and learning and the standard of work of teachers. Where inspectors make a negative judgement on governors over this function, they should promptly slap on a formal complaint to Ofsted and follow this up with another to the NGA, who will champion their cause.

IV Being Effective

So what are governors meant to do with the information they have?

To answer this question, we need to ask two other questions: “What are the purposes of education?” and “What outcomes would we like to see for our young people?” There is much disagreement about the answers to these. Ofsted obsesses about pupil progress and achievement in the narrow terms of the core subjects (at primary level) and the gold standard of five good GCSEs and success in the English Baccalaureate.

I do believe that the litmus test for schools is much more than that. It is about enabling pupils to develop themselves to live fulfilled lives and to create a legacy that ensures that when they depart from their mortal coils they leave the planet in a better condition than they found it. The trouble about this purpose is that the most valuable aspects of the kind of education that leads to these outcomes such as character development – fostering resilience, optimism, determination, emotional literacy, well-being and happiness – cannot be measured and if they can only with considerable difficulty.

If we value only those aspects of education that we can measure and ignore what are very valuable areas of education that are immeasurable we do so at our peril. School governors are in the unique position to ensure that the balance is struck and maintained – whatever Ofsted and government think.

V Key Findings in HMCI’s Report

And talking of Ofsted, the key findings in Sir Michael’s most recent annual report were as follows.

(i) Nearly eight in 10 schools in England are now good or better – the highest proportion since Ofsted was founded 20 years ago.

(ii) Around 485,000 more primary school pupils and 188,000 more secondary school pupils attend good or better schools compared with a year ago.

(iii) Nearly a quarter of a million pupils are still languishing in inadequate schools.

(iv) There are only three local authorities where fewer than 60 per cent of primary school pupils attend a good or better school compared with 23 local authorities in 2011/12.
(v) Major concerns remain over secondary school provision in some parts of the country. In 13 local authorities fewer than half of secondary pupils attend good or outstanding schools.

(vi) Inspectors judged teaching overall to be good or outstanding in 65% of schools, up three percentage points from last year.

(vii) There were more English and mathematics lessons judged less than good than in many other parts of the curriculum.

(viii) Much of the weakest teaching in schools was concentrated in the lower attaining sets and in the younger age groups, in both primary and secondary schools.

(ix) The significant growth in the number of academies over the last few years has helped to raise standards in many of England’s weakest schools.

(x) Too few of the new converter academies are using their status to raise standards further.

(xi) Poor White children, by far the largest proportion of children eligible for free school meals, are being left behind. Since 2007, the attainment of this group has improved more slowly than all other ethnic groups.

In the News

I Religious schools criticised for ignoring disadvantaged children

In early December 2013, the Fair Admissions Campaign published research into how religious selection criteria in faith schools unfairly discriminates against the most vulnerable pupils we educate, especially those entitled to free schools meals and others who have a mother tongue other than English, militating against social and ethnic inclusiveness. The research synthesised data from five main sources and hundreds of admissions directories. Researchers then mapped out the hierarchy of areas (see here) where the discrimination exists.

The key findings were as follows.

(1) Comprehensive secondary schools with no religious character admit 11% more pupils eligible for free school meals than would be expected given their areas. Comprehensive Church of England secondary schools admit 10% fewer; Roman Catholic secondary schools 24% fewer; Jewish secondary schools 61% fewer; and Muslim secondary schools 25% fewer.

(2) There is a clear correlation between religious selection and socio-economic segregation: Church of England comprehensives that don’t select on faith criteria admit 4% more pupils eligible for free school meals than would be expected, while those whose admissions criteria allow full selection admit 31% fewer.
(3) Altogether, 16% of schools select by religion but they are vastly overrepresented in the 100 worst offenders on free school meal eligibility and English as an additional language (EAL). They make up 46 of the worst 100 schools (and 67 out of 100 if we exclude grammar schools) on FSM eligibility and 50 of the worst 100 (55 if we exclude grammar schools) on EAL.

(4) The most segregated local authority as a result of religious selection is Hammersmith and Fulham. While 15% of pupils nationally are eligible for free school meals, the segregation between the religiously selective schools and other schools is almost double that (27 percentage points) in this local authority.

The Fair Admissions Campaign group estimated that 16% of places at state schools (or 1.2 million) are subject to religious selection criteria. This compared with 5% of secondary places in grammar schools and 7% of all places in independent schools.

The Chair of the Accord Coalition for Inclusive Education, Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE, said, ‘This new research exposes the hypocrisy of those who claim religiously selective schools serve the community at large. It reveals that they not only further segregate children on religious and ethnic grounds, but also are skewed towards serving the affluent at the expense of the deprived. Crucially, the research also shows that the more a school is permitted to select children by faith, the greater the extent to which it is likely to socio-economically segregate. The data poses some very awkward questions for the state funded faith school sector, especially as many people of faith are appalled that schools that should focus on the poor have become so elitist.’

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association, remarked: ‘The findings make clear like never before the devastating effects that faith-based admissions have in segregating communities along socio-economic and ethnic lines. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said, however, that Church of England schools were moving away from religious selection. Copson’s riposte was that ‘we have yet to see if this is true, but at the same time believe it cannot come true soon enough. In any case, the scale of the problem demands not voluntary effort by religious groups but legislation – government should act now to make these divisive effects impossible by removing the possibility of religious selection in state-funded schools.’

Professor Ted Cantle CBE, who chaired the working party that carried out an inquiry into the 2001 race riots, and founded the Institute of Community Cohesion, commented, ‘This research clearly demonstrates the increasing balkanisation of our school system, with children growing up in separate communities with little chance of learning about others. It shows that education has done nothing to break down the “parallel lives” I described in 2001, rather they have been reinforced.’

Jeremy Rodell, Chair of the Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign, who last year took out a judicial review against two proposed Catholic schools in the hope of establishing more inclusive admissions policies, observed: ‘The evidence presented by this new data is very clear. We already knew that it is unfair for state-funded schools to discriminate on the basis of religion. But we can now see that the unfairness is compounded because it also disadvantages children who are already disadvantaged. Perversely, those who are the strongest advocates of choice in schooling are apparently happy to defend admissions policies that give some parents far more choice than others simply because of their religious practices, genuine or otherwise. Surely no government, of any political complexion, should allow this to continue.’

In the meantime, a survey by the social mobility charity, the Sutton Trust, revealed that 10% of professional parents admitted to having attended church and other religious services only so that their children could attend the local faith schools.
II Free School Meals for Infant Pupils

On Thursday, 5 December 2013 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, confirmed in his autumn statement that there will be extra “financial resources to fund the expansion of free school meals to all school children in reception, year 1 and year 2”, as previously announced by the Deputy Prime Minster, Nick Clegg. (See here.)

The government will be providing the Department for Education (DfE) £450 million in 2014/15 and £635 million in 2015/16 to fund this commitment. This will be new money in the DfE budget. The government will also make £150m of capital available to ensure that schools can build new kitchens or increase dining capacity where necessary.

Before the announcement, concerns were raised about the source of this ‘additional’ funding. The government has now declared that £70m of the capital allocation will be new money from the Her Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) and around £80m will be from unspent DfE maintenance budgets.

The full statement can be viewed here.

On a visit to a primary school in Lambeth, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said: “Early on I made it very clear that universal free school meals would be my personal priority in this Autumn Statement and I’m proud that we are now delivering it. From the start of the next school year, every single infant school pupil will be able to sit down to a free school lunch.

“Today, I can announce that we’re providing more than £1 billion to ensure children get a healthy meal in the middle of the day. We’re also making sure that schools are not left out of pocket by putting £150 million on the table to fund new kitchen and dining facilities where they are needed.

“Every child deserves the best possible start in life, and at the same time we are doing all we can to help ease the pressure on household budgets. This not only encourages positive eating habits and helps improve concentration and performance in the classroom, but this will also mean significant savings for families.

“Providing universal free school meals will help give every child the future they deserve, building a stronger economy and a fairer society.

“Universal free school meals for primary school pupils were a key recommendation in a recent review of school food produced independently for the DfE. The School Food Plan, published by Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent in July this year, recommended that the government embark on a phased roll out of free school meals for all children in all primary schools.

“The School Food Plan presented evidence that this would lead to positive improvements in health, attainment and social cohesion, and help families with the cost of living:

(a) the average school meal costs £437 per child per year and

(b) many children on low incomes are not eligible for free school meals: approximately four out of 10 children (from all age groups) living in poverty are not eligible.”
III Plans to establish “Career Colleges” receive the green light

On 15 October 2013, Lord Kenneth Baker, Margaret Thatcher’s secretary of state for education who spearheaded epic reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, unveiled plans to establish pioneering “career colleges” for 14-to-19-year-olds that had the approval of Matthew Hancock, the skills minister. The colleges will offer vocational training in a range of subjects including digital technology, construction, catering and healthcare. These will build on his network of successful university technical colleges (UTCs) which specialise in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects.

Lord Baker wrote in the Independent: “By starting at 14, youngsters have a head start in preparing for the world of work as they do in Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands, where youth unemployment is much lower.”

He added: “We have one million young people unemployed and we are issuing visas to people from overseas who have the skills that are needed – it is about time that we filled the skills gap with our own young people.”

The first such career college is scheduled to open in Oldham, Greater Manchester, later this year and will focus on giving its students the skills to work in the digital economy.

One of its partners will be the University of Salford, which specialises in degrees connected to the media, very useful given that the BBC has moved into its neighbourhood.

There are 17 University Technology Colleges (UTCs) already operating in Britain, with 27 more in the pipeline and proposals for a further 15 being assessed by the Baker Dearing Educational Trust (set up by Lord Baker and the late Lord Dearing, former senior government adviser on education).

The JCB Academy in Staffordshire, the first to be established, achieved great success in its GCSEs last year with all of its students gaining five or more A* to C grade passes, including in engineering.

The new career colleges will be set up on the sites of existing further education colleges but operate as separate institutions. Lord Baker is anxious to persuade more principals of further education colleges to embrace the idea.

In recent years Lord Baker has been campaigning to establish the UTCs as a feature in every town and city, and has chaired the Edge Foundation, which aims to improve vocational education options for pupils.

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1 UTCs are sponsored by universities, but also work closely with industry and further-education (FE) colleges. The JCB Academy attracted the interest of Cambridge University for its excellence in engineering. The difference between UTCs and today’s “career colleges” is that the former are all housed in new buildings and set up from scratch, whereas the latter are free-standing institutions but linked to existing FE colleges.

Many large companies – such as the engineering firm Arup, British Airways, Ford, Jaguar Land Rover and Sony – are among the sponsors of today’s UTCs.

Those now open include the Silverstone UTC – which will train the back-up staff needed for Formula One racing – and the Elstree University Technical College, which has links to the nearby television studios and will train the technical-support staff necessary for the world of television, theatre and musical events.
Baker’s proposals come at a time when the careers service is under fire for failing to deliver adequate advice to pupils after taking over the responsibility from schools. An Ofsted report in September 2013 said thousands of teenagers were being denied the careers advice they desperately needed to find a job.

It added that three out of four schools visited by inspectors were not delivering adequate advice. Inspectors said there was too much focus on pursuing an academic future rather than giving advice about vocational options.

Graham Stuart, the Conservative MP and chairman of the Commons Select Committee on Education, remarked: “The transfer of responsibility for careers advice to schools last year was regrettable.”

At the JCB Academy last year, on the other hand, not a single student left who was not in employment, education or training (i.e. a NEET). The latest government figures show there are more than 200,000 16-to 18-year olds who fall into this category.

IV Bar raised for the Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Tests

Even the more heavyweight papers carried “alarming” headlines of doom and gloom when announcing the Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Test results. “More than 700 primaries fail Gove’s tough new test” boomed The Times when lamenting that “hundreds more primary schools have slipped beneath the minimum of test results”. The actual number is 767. The Department for Education has threatened that it will impose on those primary schools that have fallen below the floor level “new leadership and governance from academy sponsors”.

And what is the floor level? Well, not only have the goalposts moved on this but also narrowed. This year, at least 60% of pupils in a school were required to attain level 4 and above in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. Last year, 60% were expected to attain level 4 and above in English (per se) and mathematics. At the time, a pupil may have attained level 5 in reading but only level 3 in writing – averaging out to level 4. She/he would have been deemed to have met the target required. Not so this year.

As a consequence, in 2011/12, 521 primary schools were below this threshold, having improved on the picture in 2010/11 when 1,310 failed to do so. Were the same benchmarks used in 2011/12 as have been deployed this year, 834 would have failed. The press would benefit from reflecting that it depends on one’s perspective when making a judgement about whether the nation’s primary pupils are improving or “going down the pan”.

The actual results were as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%age achieving level 4 and above in reading, writing and maths</th>
<th>%age achieving level 4B and above in reading, writing and maths</th>
<th>%age making expected progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England - all schools</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England - state funded schools only</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A DfE spokesman told The Times: “The floor standards we introduced were tougher and performance is improving. Heads, teachers and pupils deserve credit for meeting the challenge head on.” Then he added the “killer” remark. “Schools with a long history of underperformance and who are not stepping up to the mark will
be taken over by an academy sponsor. The expertise and strong leadership provided by sponsors is the best way to turn around weak schools and give pupils the best chance of a first-class education.”

There is only one little problem with what the DfE is planning to do. Several sponsored academies have also fallen below the floor level. What plans is the government hatching to have these academies also taken over and who will do the job?

V National Funding Formula: Radical changes in the offing

The government is set to introduce a new national funding formula by April 2015 which will be very much a curate’s egg, good in parts but diabolical in its effects on some schools.

Historically, inner-city areas – mainly in Labour-leaning parts - have been extremely favourably funded when compared to those in the shire counties, especially those that contain pockets of the well-heeled parts of society from where many Conservative MPs are elected. The aim is to shift funding from the former to the latter sections of the country.

Altogether £35 billion are spent on our schools. This funding has been frozen since 2010. After the 13 years of plenty, this is painful. However, it could have been much worse as, along with the NHS, education spending has been protected and spared the detriment other areas – such as Defence and Works and Pension - have had to endure.

When the present coalition came into power, Michael Gove, secretary of state, made an attempt to introduce a national funding formula, which was to be equitable, especially when he learnt that a typical rural secondary school receives £4,200 per pupil annually while an Inner London one might secure anything up to £9,500. The difference between a rural and inner-city primary school can be as much as £3,000 (i.e. rural - £3,000 and inner-city - £6,000).

However, without an injection of extra resources, the change is bound to cause suffering – especially in the inner city areas. This is the reason why Gove and the Deputy Primary Minister, Nick Clegg, are submitting earnest pleas to the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the Chancellor, George Osborne, to sanction a big rise in spending on schools to soften the blow on the putative losers.

A Whitehall source told The Times, “We are very conscious that we want to do this very, very carefully and minimise disruption.” We will know for certain only much later this year (i.e. 2014) whether Gove will have his wishes granted.

Pupil Premium Increases in Value and Importance

I Introduction

Schools’ accountability for the attainment of disadvantaged pupils has grown like Topsy. As a consequence, how schools use the Pupil Premium has become more important than ever.

In July 2013, John Dunford, former general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), was appointed Pupil Premium Champion by David Laws, the Minister of State for Schools in the Department for
Education, and Minister of State in the Cabinet Office. He said at the time, “The Pupil Premium is one of the best policies in education we have seen for many years. It’s something I personally was advocating as far back as 1995 – that schools should be given additional money to recognise the greater size of the task of educating disadvantaged young people.” His job is now to advise schools about the most effective ways of using the extra money. He will also share with ministers and civil servants the thinking of school leaders on the subject. The appointment is one of a few new measures announced in July by David Laws designed to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

From the start of the new academic year, schools are being held to account by Ofsted for the attainment of their disadvantaged pupils and the progress they make, with particular emphasis on closing the achievement gap with other pupils.

In addition, schools judged by Ofsted as ‘requiring improvement’ and those about which the inspectorate have concerns about the attainment of disadvantaged pupils will take part in a pupil premium review. They will be supported by experienced headteachers from other schools with the aim of developing strategies for using the Premium more effectively.

II How much is the Pupil Premium Worth?

Since the Premium was introduced in April 2011 it has grown substantially in value. All schools now receive an additional £900 per disadvantaged pupil with the criteria based on eligibility for free school meals (FSM).

The Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, announced in July that the Premium in primary schools would rise to £1,300 per eligible child and David Laws announced in September 2013 that the Premium in secondary schools would increase to £935, both from September 2014. In October 2013, the Children’s Minister, Edward Timpson, announced that a looked-after child would attract an increased Pupil Premium – i.e. £1,900 (£900 per child in 2014/15) from 1 April 2015. Also, funding will be based on the number of children looked-after from the first day of care rather than after six months or more. Other children included are those adopted (having been in the care of the local authority) under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and those children who leave care under a special guardianship or residence order.

III Mind the Gap

The additional money is linked with proposals to set higher floor standards – with primary schools required to get at least 85% of their pupils – except for those with particular special needs – to reach a good level of attainment at the end of key stage 2.

The good news is that schools are not being held to account for how they spend the Premium but on the impact that they make with the extra resources available. That gives considerable latitude to schools, according to Dunford.

The size of the task schools face in closing the achievement gap is clear from the latest attainment figures. In 2012, 68% of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium achieved level 4 or above at the end of key stage 2. The comparative figure is 84% of all other pupils – a gap of 16 percentage points.

The gap widens considerably by the time pupils take their GCSEs, with only 38.5% of pupils eligible for the Premium achieving five A* to C grades in 2012, compared with 65.7% of their peer group – a staggering gap of 27.2 percentage points. “One of the most interesting statistics is that disadvantaged children do best in schools where there are either very few disadvantaged children or very many. It’s a U-shaped graph,” says Dunford.
“The picture is very variable across the country. London schools have made considerably more progress than those elsewhere. For example, the gap of 5 A* to C grades including English and Mathematics, between Pupil Premium children and the rest is under 20% in London, whereas in West Berkshire and Wokingham, the gap is 40%.

“The gap on average is less in city areas than elsewhere and that is because of the pressure there’s been to raise attainment over the last 10 years. You can’t raise attainment in cities unless you improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, because the proportion of disadvantaged pupils is much higher,” said Dunford.

The introduction of the Pupil Premium has focused the attention of both policy makers and school leaders on identifying effective intervention strategies to help disadvantaged pupils catch up with their peers.

In 2012, a new online toolkit (see here) was developed by the Education Endowment Foundation and the Sutton Trust to help school leaders identify the most promising and cost-effective ways to target their Pupil Premium money. The toolkit identifies ‘effective feedback’ as the highest-impact strategy for low cost. It provides guidance to schools on how best to use the Pupil Premium to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and asks serious questions about high-cost strategies that produce little or no impact.

As part of the government effort to provide leadership support for schools struggling to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) undertook a closing-the-gap action research project (published April 2013). The project, led by a group of national leaders of education (NLEs) focused on the most effective strategies employed by teaching school alliances.

In autumn 2013, a major two-year research project involving over 750 schools and 190 teaching school alliances began to test six of the most effective interventions described by the action research project. The chosen interventions will focus on three themes: numeracy, literacy and leadership. Each will be tested in participating schools and then measured against progress in schools not using the intervention to determine its effect.

The Closing the Gap: Test and Learn project (see here) has been billed as the biggest randomised controlled trial ever held in schools. The programme is run by Centre for British Teachers (CiBT) in partnership with Durham University, Oxford University and CUREE, the Centre of Expertise in Evidence-Based practice in Education

IV Publishing Data

At a fundamental level, Ofsted inspectors will need to be convinced that each school is making good use of its Pupil Premium (PP). Every school is required to publish on its website how much PP grant it has received annually, how it has spent it and what the impact has been.

When the inspectors call, it would be useful for governors to have available a grid for each of the last three financial years set out in the following manner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of FSM pupils</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of FSM pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium</td>
<td>@£488</td>
<td>@623</td>
<td>@ £900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of looked after pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium</td>
<td>@£488</td>
<td>@623</td>
<td>@£900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of service children eligible for the Pupil Premium</td>
<td>@£200</td>
<td>@£250</td>
<td>@£300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similar grids should be established setting out where the achievement gaps (between those entitled to free school meals, looked-after and service pupils and the rest) have been in the last three academic years and for each demonstrate how they have (or have not) been narrowed. This should be done at secondary level for students in each of the year groups – ranging from year 7 to year 11. At primary level, an analysis should be set out in the documentation for pupils in years 1 to 5.

Addressing a few reflective questions would not go awry.

(1) To what extent are the strengths and priorities suggested by this data clearly evident in the school’s self-evaluation and improvement plans? If any are missing, set them out and add them to the improvement plan or use separate planning and evaluation.

(2) Which strengths are not reflected in your self-evaluation?

(3) Which priorities are not reflected in the school improvement plan?

(1) **Governors’ knowledge and awareness**

Under discrete headings, Ofsted asks searching questions of governors as they prepare for inspection.

(i) Have leaders and governors considered research and reports about what works to inform their decisions about how to spend the Pupil Premium?

(ii) Do governors know how much money is allocated to the school for the Pupil Premium? Is this identified in the school’s budget planning?

(iii) Is there a clearly understood and shared rationale for how this money is spent and what it should achieve? Is this communicated to all stakeholders including parents?

(iv) Do governors know how the school spends this money? What improvements has the allocation brought about? How is this measured and reported to governors and parents via the school’s website? (This is a new requirement.)

(v) If this funding is combined with other resources, can governors isolate and check on the impact of the funding and ascertain the difference it is making?

(vi) Do governors know whether leaders and managers are checking that the actions are working and are of suitable quality?

(2) **Leaders’ and managers’ actions**

(i) Do the school’s improvement/action plans identify whether there are any issues in the performance of pupils who are eligible for the Pupil Premium?

(ii) Do the actions noted for improving outcomes for Pupil Premium pupils

   (1) give details of how the resources are to be allocated?

   (2) give an overview of the actions to be taken?
(3) give a summary of the expected outcomes?

(4) identify ways of monitoring the effectiveness of these actions as they are ongoing and note who will be responsible for ensuring that this information is passed to governors?

(5) What will be evaluated at the end of the action and what measures of success will be applied?

(iii) Is the leader responsible for this area of the school’s work identified?

(iv) How do governors keep an ongoing check on these actions and ask pertinent questions about progress ahead of any summary evaluations?

(v) Are the progress and outcomes of eligible pupils identified and analysed by the school’s tracking systems? Is this information reported to governors in a way that enables them to see clearly whether the gap in the performance of eligible pupils and other pupils is closing?

(3) Pupils’ progress and attainment

(i) Does the summary report of RAISEonline show that there are any gaps in performance between pupils who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not at the end of key stages?

(ii) Do the school’s systems enable governors to have a clear picture of the progress and attainment of pupils who are eligible for the Pupil Premium in all year groups across the school, not just those at the end of key stages?

(iii) If there are gaps in the attainment of pupils who are eligible for the Pupil Premium and those who are not, are eligible pupils making accelerated progress – i.e. are they progressing faster than the expected rate – in order to allow the gaps to close? (Even if all pupils make expected progress this will not necessarily make up for previous underperformance.)

(iv) Is the school tracking the attendance, punctuality and behaviour (particularly those who are excluded) of this group and taking action to address any differences?

Overall, will governors know and be able to intervene quickly if outcomes are not improving in the way that they want?

National Curriculum, Tests and Exams Set to Morph

In September 2013, Michael Gove published the new national curricular framework, following consultations. Some aspects of this will come into force on 1 September 2014. From 1 September 2015, the new national curriculum for English, mathematics and science will take effect for years 2 to 6. English, mathematics and science for Key Stage 4 will be phased in from September 2015. Background information on the review, including details of previous publication, can be found here.
The new mathematics GCSE (see here) will require a deeper and broader mathematics understanding. It will provide students with coverage on ratio, proportion and rates of changes and there will be an expectation that students will provide clearer arguments for their answers. All students who fail to reach a C grade will be required to continue studying mathematics post-16.

The English Language GCSE (see here) will, according to Gove, provide all students with a robust foundation of reading and good written English and with language and literary skills. Altogether, 20% of the marks will be awarded for accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Where students take English Literature, they will engage in “high-quality texts across a range of genres and periods” – including Shakespeare, the works of nineteenth century novelists and poets of the Romantic era. The new English Literature GCSE will build on this foundation and encourage students to “read, write and think critically”.

(1) Publication of Information

Meanwhile, the government will require secondary schools to publish core information about how well the pupils are doing and have done on their websites in standard format, using four key measures:

(i) pupils’ progress across eight subjects, so that a parent will see whether pupils at a school typically achieve one grade more than expected, or one grade less;

(ii) the average grade a pupil achieves in these same ‘best eight’ subjects to show, for example, that pupils in a particular school average a high B grade or a low D grade in their GCSEs;

(iii) the percentage of pupils achieving a C grade in English and mathematics; and

(iv) the proportion of pupils gaining the English Baccalaureate, which will continue in its current form.

The government intends to include a destination measure to show the percentage of pupils who move on to further study or employment - including further training.

(2) Floor Standards

David Laws, the Schools Minister, announced that the government is bringing in an important change to floor targets to deal with schools that underperform. Rather than the 5 A* to C GCSE threshold measure, the government will use a new progress measure.

Pupils’ Key Stage 2 results, achieved at the end of primary school, will be used to set a reasonable expectation of what pupils should achieve in their GCSEs. Schools will get credit where pupils outperform these expectations. Children who get As when they are expected to attain Bs, or Ds when they are expected Es, will score points for their school.

Coasting schools will no longer be let off the hook. Equally, headteachers will no longer feel penalised when they have actually performed well with a challenging intake but attainment levels are below the national averages.

Pupils’ progress and attainment will be assessed in eight subjects: English and mathematics, three further EBac subjects (i.e. history, geography, the sciences and a language), and three other high-value qualifications. This final group can include further traditional academic subjects, subjects such as art, music and drama, and vocational
subjects, such as engineering and business. English and mathematics will be double weighted to reflect the importance of these subjects.

The government intends to define the new floor standard as progress half a grade lower than reasonable expectations. So, if pupils at a school are expected to average a B in their eight subjects, the school will be below the floor if they average fewer than 4 Bs and 4 Cs.

At present, there are 195 schools below the floor standard. Using existing figures, the estimate is that around twice as many schools would be below this new floor standard.

However, as schools adjust their curriculum to the new framework the actual number could be significantly lower than this.

(3) Employers’ Reactions

The Confederation of British Industry’s (CBI’s) reactions to Gove’s reforms have been unfavourable. John Cridland, the head of the CBI, remarked that the excessive focus on examination results risks squeezing out a rounded education.

Business leaders want schools to pay more attention to creativity, curiosity, tenacity, self-confidence and good manners, in addition to high academic standards. Cridland was critical of the government’s post-16 vocational reforms as a “fog”. He added that he was confused by Gove’s intentions. However, he praised the GCSE and A level plans which sought to add to add tougher content and the more challenging end-of-course examination.

What he thought was conspicuous by its absence was the failure to link this to the broader “rounded and ground” qualities which business seeks of young people. The CBI wanted a bigger emphasis on character-building to foster qualities such as determination, optimism and emotional intelligence. The reforms risked causing schools to move away from sport, the performing arts, trips and clubs.

Cridland said: “When I walk into a really inspirational institution there is a whole educational experience and all the components of that school contribute to that educational experience.” He criticised the government for removing the requirement on schools to offer work experience for pupils at 15 or 16 and for making them responsible for career guidance without extra funds or support to do it well.

He wants Ofsted to judge schools more broadly taking account of students’ extra-curricular experiences rather than focusing chiefly on exam and test results.

He thought that it would be invaluable for teachers to have broader experiences, with the prospect of being seconded into industry. “It would help if more teachers and headteachers had experience outside the classroom. We should try to encourage that so they don’t go from school to university to teacher training, back into the classroom without having stepped out of the education world into the world they are helping to serve.”

However, he praised the government for trying to improve technical education with plans for a Technical Baccalaureate at 18, combining a vocational qualification, extended mathematics, a project and work experience.

(4) Closing Thoughts

There is much to commend the measures that Gove is taking to raise standards in the country. In his attempts to make that delicious and well-garnished educational omelette, it will be inevitable that he will have to crack a few
eggs and upset some egg-heads. The examination reforms are part of the change agenda. I have three reservations, notwithstanding.

(a) First, Gove is deciding in haste. Bringing about educational change requires pilot studies. We then learn from them, fine-tune, implement and finally embed good practice. The Secretary of State is not bothering to do that and operates like a man in a hurry. One can understand. The next elections are fewer than 18 months away. But then, will he repent at leisure and leave the nation’s schools and his successor to pick up the pieces?

(b) Second, the United Kingdom is renowned for being a world leader in Music, Art, the Performing Arts, Design and Technology. In the curriculum that Gove is setting out, these either hardly feature or when they do are given much less prominence than the dominant core subjects of English, Mathematics and the Sciences. The weighting given to the core subjects makes for a lopsided, education seesaw.

(c) Finally, when Gove took up the reigns of office, he trumpeted that he was going to frame an agenda that would allow schools the freedom to take initiatives and innovate, plough their own furrows and by so doing, strive for excellence. In fact, state schools are becoming increasingly constrained by the diktats of government. Even academies and free schools, which are not required to follow the national curriculum, do so to save their skins when inspected by Ofsted or putting their children through their paces in preparing them for the SATs and GCSEs. The freedom Gove has given schools is the length of a solid iron chain tied to a sturdy post sited in Sanctuary Buildings.

**Academies**

**Where and what next?**

I. The general picture

Schools continue to apply to become academies. The Department for Education provides useful guidance on how this can be achieved. However, the pace of conversion appears to be slackening. In October 2013, 36 applications were in the pipeline. Over that month, 22 were approved and 35 new academies opened. In the country as a whole, there are now 2,481 sponsored and converter academies from a total of 3,254 applications received. At the time of writing, 441 applications for academy status have been approved but the schools still need to convert.

The thrust for conversion continues to be dominated by the secondary schools, which, because of their larger sizes, have a greater capacity to manage their financial and business affairs than smaller primary schools. However, fewer than one in eight schools in the country is now an academy.

On a tangential issue, as of 1 September 2013, 94 free schools classed as independent state schools – which are not unlike Academies – were opened in the country.

The rationale for establishing academies and free schools is to liberate school leaders from local authority constraints with a view to enabling them to take initiatives, be creative and develop conditions where children flourish and achieve better. There is evidence to suggest that some local authorities have not provided the
leadership that schools deserve, which has caused the latter to escape their yoke and become academies. And many have done well.

However, the picture across the country is not what the coalition would like it to be, albeit the government is determined to follow the lead of the Secretary of State Michael Gove.

Susan Rankin-Reid, acting headteacher of Churchill Gardens Academy in Pimlico, Central London, in the Future Academies chain, resigned. Some of her friends and colleagues aver that Rankin-Reid, who is herself an Ofsted inspector, was bullied by academy managers, following a takeover by Future at the start of the school year. The Future chain was created by Lord Nash, the Schools Minister, and his wife and oversees four schools. Lord Nash was a former venture capitalist, who made his fortune from government contracts.

Future Academies have their own curriculum development centre, which focuses on a knowledge-based curriculum – influenced by Ed Hirsh, the American academic.

(Dr Hirsch is the founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation and professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia. Hirsch developed his groundbreaking concept of cultural literacy—the idea that reading comprehension requires not just formal decoding skills but also wide-ranging background knowledge. In 1986, he founded the Core Knowledge Foundation, and a year later, published Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know.

For nearly three decades, in books, articles and lectures, Dr. Hirsch has passionately argued that schools should teach a highly specific curriculum that would allow children to understand things writers and speakers take for granted and to fully participate in democratic life. “We will achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared knowledge to communicate effectively with everyone else,” Dr. Hirsch submits.)

Churchill Gardens was forced into academy status following an Ofsted inspection which ruled that it “required improvement”.

Annaliese Briggs, 27-year-old headteacher of Pimlico Free School, who had no teaching qualifications, resigned shortly after the academic year and only three weeks in the job.

In the closing days of 2013, we learnt that one of the first 24 Free Schools to have opened in September 2011 will be closed after two failed inspections. Michael Gove, Secretary of State, has sanctioned the closure of Discovery New School in Crawley, West Sussex, when inspectors reported that it was making insufficient progress after it was placed in special measures. This is the first Free School to be shut. Parents now have to scramble around in the next three months to find an alternative school for their children.

The school, housed in a Grade II listed villa, cost the DfE £2 million to establish. The school was run in accordance with the educational philosophy and principles of Maria Montessori, the Italian educationist who believed that allowing children practical experiences to make their own discoveries was the best way to promote development.

In Derby, the Al-Madinah Free School, which opened in September 2012, had a damming report from Ofsted following a visit from inspectors. Ofsted demanded of the governors that they cease immediately “practice and procedures that have as their reason, cause or effect that women and girls are treated less favourably than men and boys”.

Following his visit on 29 November 2013, Wayne Norrie, HMI, wrote to the Chair of Governors:
“There are no signs of improvement in the school. Insufficient action has been taken to address the numerous failures in leadership and teaching. In addition, the uncertainty around governance and leadership has contributed to the school being less stable than it was at the time of the last inspection. This school remains in chaos.

“The school is not improving because relationships between school leaders, at all levels, are destructive and deteriorating. ..The interim Principal is currently absent and governors have asked the willing, but inexperienced, vice Principal to lead the school during this period of absence. She does not, however, have the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure the school makes rapid progress.

“The school’s plans are not good enough; they lack clear targets and actions. Teaching staff are not given clear messages about what has to be done. School leaders are not holding teachers to account for the quality of teaching, which remains inadequate and, more worryingly, is not showing any signs of improving.

“Governors have worked hard to ensure that pupils are now safe. (But) They do not monitor the work of senior leaders effectively as they are too involved in the day-to-day running of the school. Governors do not have the necessary understanding, experience or expertise to make decisions about how the school should operate.

“The trustees have written a statement of action but this does not indicate how the school will tackle the weaknesses identified in the inspection. As a result the trustees have not communicated a clear strategy which will ensure that the quality of leadership and teaching improves.”

The government may give the school breathing space to demonstrate that it has the capacity to turn away from disaster, as governors have taken action to ensure that the pupils are safe.

However, while the school has been censured by Ofsted, it has also come under fire from two opposing forces – secularist and local Muslims complaining that the school wasn’t sufficiently Muslim.

II  What does an “Academy” really mean?

The dictionary definition of an academy is “a place of study or training in a special field”. Examples of these are military and dance academies, where a rigid discipline focuses on particular objectives.

At the turn of the millennium, the then Labour government introduced the term to describe sponsored schools that had been struggling to exist. As a consequence of bringing in business troops with additional resources and injecting considerable government funding, the struggling schools became, at the government’s behest, academies. They were rebranded and designed to impress the public with a new disciplined and academic focus that pervades the independent, public school sector.

In 2010, the term, “academy”, morphed. Gove opened up the academy gates to all good and outstanding schools. A number of former independent schools also converted, especially as they, like the country, were going through difficult financial times and were keen to receive state funding.

III  How successful are Academies?

In its full report, Unleashing Greatness, the Academies Commission, chaired by Professor Christine Gilbert, former Chief Inspector of Schools, looked at research. While the members of the Commission discovered examples of success, they did not find that many shining exemplars of transformation. The Commission commented that several local authority schools in disadvantaged areas had performed “just as well as those which embarked on the academy route”. These views were shared by Dominic Cummings, Gove’s former adviser, who,
in an article in *The Guardian*, stated that “academies are no panacea and the successes of a small number of brilliant organisations are not necessarily scalable”. He added that many academies were badly run and, like other schools, probably played the league table games under pressure from Whitehall.

Professor Stephen Gorard of Durham University stated in his [recent research](#) that academies, especially the converter ones, were strongly linked to levels of socio-economic segregation. He observed: “The risk that this poses for societal cohesion and social justice is being run for no reason.”

There is an allied concern. Top schools which have become academies were meant to support underperforming ones. However, a cross-party group of MPs warned that this was not happening. The Commons Education Select Committee said: “During this inquiry, we received overwhelming evidence that converter academies are not living up to this expectation and pulling their weight when it comes to supporting other schools.”

Despite this situation the government continues to engage in dubious practices. Where a school has been given a notice to improve or is in special measures, the DfE sends in its commissars to compel it to link with an outstanding academy with a view to converting eventually to academy status. The legislation requires schools that are failing to link with outstanding institutions whatever their status.

There are several examples of both, successful and unsuccessful schools resenting being compelled into this type of ‘alliance’. A recent example is that of an outstanding infant school in Surrey that was told to link with the (failing) junior school with which it shares the site. However, before doing so, the DfE wanted the infant school to become an academy. A DfE representative met the headteacher and chair of governors urging the infant school to go down this avenue, which was the route that the junior school was having to take. The governors had no wish to do so because of the considerable amount of extra paperwork that would involve, which would detract from its core purpose of providing that outstanding education for which it had been recognised by Ofsted.

The DfE representative then informed the infant governors that if they did not become an academy, officials would have to go to another outstanding academy and establish the link with the junior school. Given that 95% of the infant children move to the junior school, the governors were concerned. Following further reflection, they have now decided to join the converter academy brigade.

Situations such as this are quite extraordinary, given that Michael Gove bleats about how he has increased choice for schools.

“We want you voluntarily to opt to become an academy,” pronounces the civil servant.

“Do we have a choice?” ask the governors.

“No, not really,” replies the official.”

“All right, then we will opt to become an academy!” respond the governors.

### IV Unintended consequences

The government faces two other challenges, unless the current legislation is changed.

1. Firstly, the pupil population, which is 8.2 million, is set to rise by 700,000 by 2020. Local authorities, who once led the creation of new schools to cater for these bulges, are proscribed from doing so without first inviting the community at large to express a desire to establish academies or free schools in their areas. The fear is that, with the influxes recently experienced in inner city areas, school expansion will
occur haphazardly and in an untimely manner. Several Free Schools have opened but not necessarily in places where there is an under-capacity of provision.

(2) Secondly, where academies and free schools are not doing as well as they should, there is nothing between these institutions and the government to sound the warning bells and/or provide the necessary assistance. This, previously, was the duty of local authorities.

Even Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, whom Michael Gove, the Secretary of State, described as “My hero!” is concerned. This is the reason why he has created the posts of eight regional inspectors to monitor the attainments of pupils in schools across the maintained sector but especially academies and free schools.

V A possible way forward

It would be futile, I believe, to turn the clock back. There was never a golden age for education. However, if the present system is to work better, new arrangements have to be put in place to ensure that educational provision develops on the basis of considered research and reflection and free-for-all situations are ended. The market – we learnt in 2008 – has to have control mechanisms. They are not the cure to all our woes. The same applies to education.

The Academies Commission, which published its report in January 2013, must have the last word on the subject. The members stated that the Commission “strongly supports the aspirational vision that lies behind the academies programme. They added: “There have been some stunning successes among the individual sponsored academies and academy chains and these have achieved even in the most deprived areas. But it is increasingly clear that academy status alone is not a panacea for improvement.”

The Commission made the following recommendations to strengthen the governance in academies.

(1) The DfE should act to increase understanding of the pivotal role of governors in the academy system, which should include a focus on their responsibilities not only as company directors of charities but also for wider school improvement.

(2) Using the National College for Teaching and Leadership, the DfE should take steps to support the capacity of governing bodies, and in particular, the Chair.

(3) Schools should advertise the appointment of new Chairs as part of an open recruitment approach and involve at least one independent person in the appointment process.

(4) Using the National College, the government should find more ways to increase school-to-school collaboration across governing bodies to encourage capacity building through development and training and to secure better value for money through shared procurement.

(5) To encourage engagement and to support local accountability, academy trusts should publish annual reports and provide forums for open discussion with their stakeholders.
UK students' progress in [PISA]
the Programme for International Student Assessments frozen

(1) What is PISA?

In December 2013, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published the Programme for International Student Assessment’s (PISA’s) fifth survey based on a battery of tests carried out in 2012. PISA assesses the competencies of a cross-section of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, science and problem-solving. The focus this time was on mathematics.

PISA charts the extent to which 15-year-old students have acquired key knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies. The assessment in the four areas does not just ascertain whether students can reproduce what they have learned but also examines how well they can extrapolate from what they have learned and apply that knowledge in unfamiliar settings, both, in and outside school. This approach reflects the fact that modern societies reward individuals not for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know.

Paper-based tests were used each lasting two hours. In a range of countries and economies, an additional 40 minutes were devoted to the computer-based assessment of mathematics, reading and problem solving.

Test items were a mixture of questions requiring students to construct their own responses and multiple-choice items. The items were organised in groups based on a passage setting out a real-life situation. Altogether, 390 minutes of test items were covered, with different students tackling variously combined problems.

Students answered a background questionnaire, which took 30 minutes to complete, that sought information about themselves, their homes and their schools and learning experiences.

(2) The Participants

Altogether, 510,000 students from 65 countries participated - 34 OECD member countries and 31 partner countries and economies, representing more than 80% of the world economy. The students represented 28 million 15-year-olds globally.

They took paper-based tests that lasted two hours. The tests were a mixture of open-ended and multiple-choice questions organised in groups based on a passage setting out a real-life situation.

Students took different combinations of different tests. They and their school principals/headteachers also answered questionnaires to provide information about the students' backgrounds, schools and learning experiences and about the broader school system and learning environment.
(3) The Findings

Students from the United Kingdom came 26th in this international league overall - 26th in mathematics, 23rd in reading and 21st in science. Fifteen-year-olds in Singapore, Estonia and Slovenia shot ahead despite UK spending more than the average on education. The results reveal that since 2009 our position in this league table has flat-lined.

UK's average score for maths was 494. In reading it was 499. Both these results were broadly the same as the OECD averages for the subjects and placed the country on a par with nations such as the Czech Republic, France and Norway.

In science, UK's teenagers scored 514 points, above the OECD average and similar to results in Australia, Austria, Ireland, New Zealand and Slovenia.

However, the results leave the UK lagging far behind leading nations including Shanghai and Hong Kong in China, Singapore, Korea and Japan.

Shanghai-China had the highest score in mathematics, with a mean of 613 points – 119 points, or the equivalent of nearly three years of schooling, above the OECD average. Singapore, Hong Kong-China, Chinese Taipei, Korea, Macao-China, Japan, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and the Netherlands, in descending order of their scores, were the nine other countries/economies that made up the top ten performers in mathematics.

Of the 64 countries and economies with trend data between 2003 and 2012, 25 improved in mathematics. Between 2003 and 2012, Italy, Poland and Portugal increased their share of top performers and simultaneously reduced their share of low performers in mathematics.

Boys performed better than girls in mathematics in 37 out of the 65 countries and economies and girls outperformed boys in five countries.

Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Japan and Korea were the five biggest hitters in reading. Of the 64 countries and economies with comparable data throughout their participation in PISA, 32 improved their reading performance.

On average, 8% of students were top performers in reading (Level 5 or 6). These students could handle texts that were unfamiliar in either form or content and conduct fine-grained analyses of texts. Shanghai-China had the largest proportion of top performers – 25% – among all participating countries and economies. More than 15% of students in Hong Kong-China, Japan and Singapore were top performers in reading as were more than 10% of students in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Ireland, Korea.

Between the 2000 and 2012 PISA assessments, Albania, Israel and Poland increased their share of top performers and simultaneously reduced their share of low performers in reading.


Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Japan and Finland were the top five performers in science in PISA 2012. Between 2006 and 2012, Italy, Poland and Qatar, and between 2009 and 2012, Estonia, Israel and Singapore increased their share of top performers and simultaneously reduced their share of low performers in science. Across OECD countries, 8% of students were top performers in science (Level 5 or 6). These students
could identify, explain and apply scientific knowledge and knowledge about science in a variety of complex life situations.

UK spends more on education - £59,889 per student between the ages of six and 15 - than the average across OECD countries, which is £50,951. According to the PISA report, the expenditure per student can explain about 30% of the difference in average maths results between countries. However, in broad terms, the moderate or high spending per pupil does not automatically equate to particularly high or low performance in the subject.

On the credit side, one in eight (12%) of UK teenagers were considered "top performers" in maths scoring the highest results. This is a similar proportion to the OECD average. In the UK, around 9% were top performers in reading and 11% in science.

On the debit side, 22% were "low performers", compared to the OECD average of 23%. This means that, at best, these youngsters can solve simple maths problems. Around 15% were low performers in reading, along with 15% in science.

The results also showed that students from an immigrant background in the UK perform as well in maths as other students, whereas in many other OECD countries they score significantly lower.

(4) Commentary

PISA results tells a story about what is possible in education by demonstrating what students in the highest-performing and most rapidly improving education systems can do. The findings are intended to allow policy makers around the world to gauge the knowledge and skills of students in their own countries in comparison with those in other countries, set policy targets against measurable goals achieved by other education systems, and learn from policies and practices applied elsewhere.

(a) Out of the mouths of PISA’s officials

According to Angel Gurria, the OECD Secretary-General, “More and more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient policies and practices. Indeed, in a global economy, success is no longer measured against national standards alone, but against the best-performing and most rapidly improving education systems.

“Over the past decade, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, has become the world’s premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems. But the evidence base that PISA has produced goes well beyond statistical benchmarking.

“By identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts.”

Mr Andreas Schleicher, the deputy director of Education at the OECD and the creator of PISA, said that the latest results could not be used to judge the Coalition Government's education reforms. "You couldn't possibly see anything of what's been done in the last couple of years."
(b) The blame game

Notwithstanding, following the publication of these results, our politicians did not waste time to engage in the blame game.

Education Secretary Michael Gove said: "These poor results show the last government failed to secure the improvements in school standards our young people desperately need. Labour poured billions of pounds into schools and ratcheted up exam grades - yet our education system stagnated and we fell behind other nations." He added that the performance "underlines the urgent need for our reforms".

On the other hand, shadow education secretary Tristram Hunt said: "The PISA report is a big wake-up call. Eastern dominance centres on the importance that these high performing education systems place on the quality and status of the teaching profession as the central lever for driving up standards.

"This report exposes the failings of this Government's schools policy: a policy that has sent unqualified teachers into the classroom and prevented effective collaboration between schools."

However, the finger-pointing of who is responsible for our stagnant results is not confined to the politicians. There is another spat going on between academia and PISA. Academics are now questioning the credibility of the world’s most influential international education study. Researchers uncovered thousands of cases of identical information being submitted for different schools taking part in the last edition of PISA.

German and Canadian academics stated that their trust in PISA’s data was “heavily compromised” by what they found in the results of its school background questionnaires. But the OECD insisted that the data it used was “high quality”.

In July 2013, The Times Educational Supplement published claims from other academics that the statistical model used to calculate PISA’s headline rankings meant they were “useless”, “meaningless” and “utterly wrong”.

The research looked at 71 of the 74 countries that participated in PISA 2009. The researchers could only find 16 countries where the data they examined appeared to be of high quality. They did not analyse actual test results, but examined the information collected that was used to put the results in context and draw wider conclusions in the PISA reports.

Ten countries were highlighted in the research for having particularly “questionable” data. Three of them were extreme cases, where the academics suggested that the responses to school questionnaires had actually been fabricated by the national research institutes gathering PISA data.

The researchers spotted hundreds of examples of schools where principals had ticked the questionnaire boxes in such an implausibly uniform way that they doubted the accuracy of the data.

They looked at three sections of the questionnaires, covering “school climate” - issues such as levels of teacher absenteeism and student disruption, resources levels, and management practices. For each question, principals were asked to tick a multiple-choice box to indicate the extent to which the problem affected the school. But the researchers discovered hundreds of examples of school leaders ticking the same box for every question.

“Being the guardians of the school’s image and reputation, the principals would be torn between providing factual and school-enhancing responses,” the researchers said in their paper. It also suggested that principals may not have had enough time to give considered responses and may not have trusted the survey’s anonymity.
Countries with significant examples of such “questionable” data included the UK and the US.

The study’s co-author Professor Jorg Blasius, from Bonn University in Germany, said the school information provided by principals was crucial if the PISA data was to be robust enough for the wider evaluations for which it was used.

Gabriel Sahlgren, research director at the UK’s Centre for Market Reform of Education, said: “This suggests that many conclusions from the PISA report are invalid, and a lot of academic research that has been based on the data from PISA is also called into question.”

Andreas Schleicher, made a robust riposte. “PISA data, both from the test and the questionnaires, (are) validated to high standards. This includes analysis to detect response biases in the questionnaires.

“Pending a more thorough review of the analysis in the unpublished research paper, our assessment is that the response patterns highlighted are in fact quite plausible and do not present evidence of falsification or cheating.

“It is also important to note that the school principal questionnaire responses are used in the analysis of the PISA test results; they do not have any bearing on the test results themselves.”

Writing in the TES, Rebecca Wheater, Research Manager for the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) and UK’s national project manager for PISA 2012, contested the academics’ criticism in her support of Schleicher. “Our evidence suggests that leaders in the UK take participation in PISA very seriously....A number of checks are made to ensure accuracy. The responses of the headteachers and students to questions about similar issues are compared in England, Wales and Northern Ireland reports and tell a similar story....The vast majority of questions in the school questionnaire are multiple-choice, so it does not seem surprising that a number of headteachers might answer sections of the questionnaire similarly,” she wrote.

_Can We Trust Survey Data? The Case of Pisa_ by Jörg Blasius and Victor Thiessen is expected to be published later in 2014.

(c) **What can we learn from these results?**

The question that UK readers will want answers to is: “What more can we do to improve our own international standing in the educational league table?” Tony Blair made “Education, Education, Education” his priority during his 12-year tenure as Prime Minister. Michael Gove is bringing in dramatic reforms to ensure that young people are literate, numerate and have life skills by the time they leave school, with the measures being taken to change the curriculum and testing and examination systems.

However, a fundamental difference between regions and countries on the Eastern seaboard – like Shanghai and Hong Kong in China, Singapore and South Korea - and the UK and US is that education is a very much more valued commodity there than in the West. Families are ambitious for their children and know that if they are to succeed, it (education) is the passport to a fruitful life. In the UK, the welfare system, which is envied by the rest of the world, appears to have been detrimental to the aspirations of families who have come to rely on it and take the benefits for granted.

On the other hand, research into the lives of many youngsters in China, South Korea and Japan reveal that they live mainly to work, study and succeed in their examinations. Critics aver that they miss out on their childhood. Even play is seen against the backdrop of winning and coming first. Recently, we read the case of a bright 13-year-old student in West Beijing, who was told off by his teacher for not producing a good piece of work. He
returned to his single bedroom flat that he shared with his mother - depressed and dejected. His mother was not in. Laying down his satchel, he went to the top of the block, flung himself over the parapet and committed suicide. When his mother discovered that he had taken his life, she was speechless and distraught; his teacher was devastated. The 13-year-old had been a star pupil who felt that the only way out of temporary failure was death.

There could well be other factors responsible for the successes. In China, families are smaller (with the one-child policy). Parents rely on their children succeeding at school, are ambitious for them and prepare them for a time when these children will look after them in their old age. It is also the key that opens the door to the room of affluence. It is unsurprising, therefore, that youngsters in the Far East work much harder than those growing up on our shores.

According to Ann Mroz, the editor of the *Times Educational Supplement*, “East Asian and Chinese children score well regardless of socio-economic status. Think less Tiger mother and more an ambush of tigers.....” The flip side of this is that these children have to endure a heavy workload: all-day school with private classes after school.

In Shanghai, there is considerable rote learning and 50 to a class. The education is discharged in a monolithic political and cultural milieu. Children are unable to question and think for themselves and they have little or no time to play and enjoy their childhood. Is this what we want for our children?

The next PISA survey in 2015 will bring in significant changes. Many more regions in China (rather than simply Shanghai and Hong Kong) will be participating so that there will be one score for that country as a whole. The inclusion of the results of Chinese students from the provinces could lower the scores. Shanghai is atypical of the rest of China. Tom Loveless of Harvard University, writing for the think tank Brookings Institute, states that 84% of high school graduates in Shanghai move on to university. Also, the per-capital Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the city is more than twice that of China as a whole. This wealth enables parents to spend more on private tuition than the China average.

China has other characteristics worth noting. Even when PISA is taken by schools in the provinces, the results could be questionable because in some rural areas the attendance rate at secondary level is very low, i.e. 40%. Those who remain at school come from ambitious families and strongly committed to education.

Love it or hate it, PISA is with us to stay and should be used as a valuable benchmark to improve the provision we make for our youngsters, whatever our standing is in the international league table. Sir Michael Barber, chief education adviser at Pearson (the publishers) and co-author with Saad Rizva of the *Incomplete Guide to Learning Outcomes*, identifies five learning points.

(i) We must provide our schools with both, autonomy and accountability. These must not be disentangled.

(ii) We must invest in good teaching. We have to recruit those who have the greatest academic and pedagogic talent from our universities. Further, the best teachers should be encouraged to go to our most challenging schools.

(iii) We need to give equal attention to the above average, average and below average students.

(iv) Providing pre-school education for our children is an investment for the future, not an expense.

(v) We have to persist and not moan and groan every time we falter at a hurdle. Success is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration. (My words and not Sir Michael’s.)
PISA’s global reach has had an impact on not just the students of the 65 participating countries, but also those beyond. The international tests have influenced Gove’s educational reform in England, and been responsible for the benchmarking to which our schools are subjected.

**Glossary**

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<th>ASCL</th>
<th>Association of School and College Leaders</th>
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<td>CBI</td>
<td>Confederation of British Industry</td>
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<td>CfBT</td>
<td>Centre for British Teachers</td>
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<td>EAL</td>
<td>English as an additional language</td>
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<td>FSM</td>
<td>Free School Meals</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td>HMCI</td>
<td>Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector</td>
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<td>HMI</td>
<td>Her Majesty’s Inspector</td>
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<td>NCTL</td>
<td>National College for Teaching &amp; Leadership</td>
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<td>NEET</td>
<td>Not in employment, education or training</td>
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<td>NFER</td>
<td>National Foundation for Educational Research</td>
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<td>National Governors’ Association</td>
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<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
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<td>Times Educational Supplement</td>
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<td>UTC</td>
<td>University Technology College</td>
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