

Artificial Achievement:

“Blair's School Legacy is a Sham”

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‘Blair has given education a status and priority in government it has never had before and its pre-eminence is now accepted across the political spectrum.’

Michael Barber, former Head of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit¹

When Blair proclaimed his top three priorities to be ‘education, education, education’ he meant it. For his own three terms in power, education policy has taken centre-stage. Across the board this elevation has been acknowledged as a triumph.² Yet, the tragic irony is that it is precisely this huge political investment in education which has eventually led Blair to abandon genuine improvement in favour of at best superficial, and at worst manufactured, success. Ultimately, the very political impetus which made Blair the redeemer of education, has made him a deserter from the ranks of learning.

For Blair, school improvement has been much more than a response to inherited low standards. Education was the centrepiece of the election campaign which put him – and kept him - in power and from day one the plan has been that it would be within education reform that his personal legacy would lie. To say that Blair’s vision was ambitious is an understatement. His original goal was also highly admirable. Seeing education as the panacea for social inequality, he pledged to improve the life chances of even the most deprived by turning the education system from third class to ‘world-class’.³ In this pursuit, Blair adopted the formula: *higher test and exam performance equals greater life chances*. The route to securing his legacy - and leadership - therefore, was for Blair to ensure constant quantifiable achievement. The problem is not the formula itself, but Blair’s dogged determination to make it add up – even when it didn’t.

Armed with determination, targets and league tables rather than effective policies, instead of proving himself, Blair has proved only that higher test and exam performance are no guarantee of higher standards. Indeed in this instance, the reverse has frequently been the case. Better results in our schools give no assurance of better-educated pupils; they often signify *worse* educated pupils. Teacher numbers have

¹ *The Guardian* June 12th 2007 (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2100440,00.html>)

² Alan Smithers, director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, described by Schools Minister as ‘a prominent critic of the government’ (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6223760.stm>): *The Guardian* May 11th 2007 (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/comment/story/0,,2077692,00.html>); Geoff Whitty, director of the Institute of Education, University of London: Epolitix: Stakeholder Response: IoE, 10th May 2007 (<http://www.epolitix.com/EN/ForumBriefs/200704/9885736d-c411-4a30-9ccb-5d269971d475.htm>)

³ Tony Blair, speech: ‘Our aim is a world class education system’, September 2000, cited in Smithers, A., ‘Education Policy’, in Seldon, A., *The Blair Effect*, 2001, London: Little Brown, 2001

increased (although a head teacher crisis continues)⁴, as have support staff.⁵ But if school staff are forced to drive up improvements in results at any cost, their ability to offer actual learning is severely constrained.

The truly depressing part is that the original aim of Blair's project, to close the achievement gap between the privileged and disadvantaged, has in many respects been realised by loosening the link between achievement and *learning*. Those teachers under the greatest strain to rapidly and consistently raise test and exam scores, as proof of the beneficial impact of school reforms, have been those teaching in deprived areas.⁶ In these areas children's life chances really do hinge on what they do at school. However, the coupling of poorly conceived policies with the conflicting pressure to demonstrate their value, has led to too many instances of results attained at the expense of learning. It is of little wonder, therefore, that schools in disadvantaged areas are the least able to retain teachers. The theory is that the pupils' difficult backgrounds make teaching conditions hard. The greater reality seems to be that it is the conditions which the government set which do the demoralising.⁷ But under the auspices of 'zero tolerance' for underachievement, the government does not entertain this possibility. It is of no surprise then, that so many secondary pupils struggle with the basics that were never secured in primary school, and that the number of 16-18 year-olds who are neither in education nor employment has risen by 40% under New Labour.⁸

In the latter days of his school project, Blair has moved away from his "standards not structures" mantra to '...realising that school structures could affect standards'.⁹ 'Specialist Schools', 'Academies' and 'Trust Schools' have now become his favourite flavours in education reform. Yet, just as with standards, the superficial presentation of structural change has ultimately superseded true transformation.¹⁰ The 'bog standard' comprehensive is allegedly becoming a dinosaur, with the majority of

⁴ *The Guardian* 10th October 2006
(<http://education.guardian.co.uk/primaryeducation/story/0,,1891240,00.html>)

⁵ *BBC News Online*, 14th May 2007, (BBC News online, 22nd June 2007)
(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6564933.stm>)

⁶ For example, SATs targets were set of close to double existing scores in Lambeth, Tower Hamlets
(<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/league.html>)

⁷ See Smithers, A. and Robinson, P., 'Factors affecting teachers' decisions to leave the profession', DfES Research Report, 430, 2003; Barmby, P. and Coe, R., 'Recruiting and retaining teachers: findings from recent studies,' CEM, 2005
(<http://www.cemcentre.org/Documents/CEM/publications/downloads/CEMWeb014%20BERA%202004%20Recruiting%20Retaining%20Teachers.pdf>)

⁸ *Sunday Telegraph* 3rd June, 2007
(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/06/03/nedu03.xml>)

⁹ Tony Blair, speech at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust Conference, November 30th, 2006

¹⁰ See also 'City Academies 'fail to deliver' on innovation', (http://www.ft.com/cms/s/073881f2-2062-11dc-9eb1-000b5df10621,dwp_uuid=34c8a8a6-2f7b-11da-8b51-00000e2511c8.html)

secondary schools now ‘Specialist Schools’.¹¹ But scratch beneath the surface and each Specialist School is a comprehensive with all its persisting problems, and just a little extra funding. Add a single substantial grant and a state-of-the-art building and you have an Academy.¹² Blair still wants their achievements to be measured by results. With half of all academies amongst the bottom 200 worst performers in 2005, this £5 billion programme does not appear to be paying off.¹³

There is nothing secret about this anti-learning approach to success; the evidence is out there in the open, familiar to every teacher and pupil – and member of government.¹⁴ But the phenomenon persists. Teachers who complain about test and exam pressures are smeared as trying to wriggle out of accountability to parents.¹⁵ Critics who complain about declining exam standards are branded as elitists.¹⁶ Yet, this crisis in standards has got nothing whatsoever to do with the efforts or abilities of either teachers or pupils. And *that* is exactly the problem.

Results: the ultimate test of success?

Blair claims that it is thanks to his school reforms that pupils’ capabilities have consistently improved. His proof? Incremental rises in results since 1997. Prima facie, one cannot argue with this. From the end of primary school through to A-level, apparent progress measured through test and exam results has been generally steady and impressive.

The headliners:

- In 1997, only 63% of pupils at Key stage 2 (age 11, final year of primary school) managed to achieve level 4 in the literacy SATS tests and only 62% in the numeracy SATS. **By 2006, these figures were 79% and 76% respectively.**¹⁷

¹¹ Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, (<http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/article.aspx?PageId=932>)

¹² See also ‘City Academies ‘fail to deliver’ on innovation’, (http://www.ft.com/cms/s/073881f2-2062-11dc-9eb1-000b5df10621.dwp_uuid=34c8a8a6-2f7b-11da-8b51-00000e2511c8.html)

¹³ *The Guardian* 19th January, 2006 (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/secondaries/story/0,,1689797,00.html>)

¹⁴ Note: In 2003 the Audit Commission argued that the government’s targets had frequently led to ‘perverse consequences’ whereby public sector employees were ‘gamed’ to meet targets while failing to genuinely improve performance: Daily Mail, 19th September 2003; *BBC News Online* 17th May 2006 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4987110.stm>)

¹⁵ *The Guardian* 10th June 2007 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uklatest/story/0,,-6698831,00.html>)

¹⁶ *The Observer* 13th August 2006 (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/alevels/story/0,,1843722,00.html>)

¹⁷ Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Publication, *GCSE and Equivalent Results for Young People in England 2005/06 (revised)* (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000702/SFR01-2007V1.pdf>)

- In 1997, 46.3% of GCSE students (age 16, final year of secondary school) achieved 5 or more A*-C grades while 6.6% had no passes. **By 2006 58.5% of pupils achieved 5 or more grades A*-C, while only 2.2% did not achieve any passes.**¹⁸
- In 1997, 87.2% of A-level entries were passes. By 2006, this was the case for 97.2% of the entries. **The percentage of A grades rose from 16.1% to 24%.**¹⁹

To understand what these results actually show, they are best examined on three levels:

- **The results**
- **The shifting standards** *behind the results*
- **The story** *behind the shifting standards behind the results*

Key Stage 2 SATS at age 11

The results ... The rise in results has been striking, although they have consistently fallen short of Blair's targets to get 85% of pupils achieving the expected level 4 in literacy and numeracy.²⁰ Since 2000, increases in the Key Stage 2 results have slowed down considerably. As it stands, according to the 2006 figures, over 20% of pupils are not reaching the expected level in literacy as are nearly 25% in numeracy.

The shifting standards... That such a large number are *officially* not reaching level 4 is particularly worrying when looking at the number of marks required to do so. To achieve the expected level (level 4) in the 2006 Key Stage 2 literacy SATS papers, pupils were required to accrue just 43 points out of 100. In the 2006 Key Stage 2 numeracy SATs papers, a level 4 needed only 46 points out of 100.²¹

The story ... With primary literacy and numeracy being Blair's first major school reform, primary schools have been under continuous coercion to produce results in line with government-set targets. This pressure started in the form of an initial push on literacy and numeracy, shrinking considerably the amount of time available for other subjects.²² Following concerns about the detrimental effects of such a narrowed

¹⁸ Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Publication, *GCSE and Equivalent Results for Young People in England 2005/06 (revised)* (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000702/SFR01-2007V1.pdf>)

¹⁹ *BBC News Online* 17th August 2006 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4801035.stm>)

²⁰ Consecutive SATs targets missed (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/sats/story/0,,1289880,00.html>)

²¹ Mansell, W., *Education by numbers: The tyranny of testing*, p136, Politicos: London, 2007

²² *Times Education Supplement (TES)* 28th June 2002 (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/update/strat.html#3Rs>)

curriculum, the highly disproportionate emphasis was, officially at least, discarded.²³ Nevertheless, pressure, routed through the Local Education Authorities (which were set their own specific targets), continued the focus on literacy and numeracy test scores.²⁴ For LEAs with particularly low scores, typically those more economically disadvantaged, the targets were notably ambitious;²⁵ so ambitious in fact, that one of the teaching unions announced that it would back members who refused to accept unrealistic targets.²⁶ Partly due to one-size-fits-all pedagogical dictation from Whitehall, partly due to these unrealistic but ‘non-negotiable’ targets, ‘teaching to the test’ has become an integral part of primary school teaching. A third of primary schools offer government-funded ‘booster classes’, described by Ofsted as ‘late intervention to ratchet up performance’.²⁷ Government figures also reveal that for four months every year schools take up nearly half of all teaching time in year 6 discarding normal teaching and coaching pupils for the SATS.²⁸ And this is just the *officially acknowledged* extent of cramming.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the value of Key Stage 2 SATs performance has been widely questioned by educationalists. Alternative measures of achievement such as those of Durham University’s Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM) have found that increases in test results, particularly in literacy, were indeed more to do with test preparation than they were to do with any rise in actual learning levels.²⁹ In CEM’s own independent tests, which have been carried out annually since 1997 on 5,000 children across 120 schools, it found no evidence of a rise in literacy levels.³⁰ But more depressing is evidence which shows that, not only have primary pupils not been improving as claimed, but their development in thinking and

²³ *TES* 28th June 2002 (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/update/strat.html#3Rs>)

²⁴ LEA targets: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/league.html>; in 2003 the *Financial Times* reported that ‘...under the new push, school and local authority resources must be more tightly focused on those areas and those children seen to be in danger of missing the targets’. (*Financial Times* 10th January 2003)

²⁵ Tower Hamlets’ target: in Tower Hamlets the 1996 figure achieving level 4 was 36%, in 2002 it was to be 70%, (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/league.html>)

²⁶ The National Literacy Trust (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/league.html>)

²⁷ *TES* 5th December 2003 (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/update/strat.html#3Rs>)

²⁸ *TES* 27th April 2007 (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/update/strat.html#3Rs>)

²⁹ Interview with Peter Tymms, director of CEM, 27 January 2006, de Waal, A., *Inspection, Inspection, Inspection*, Civitas, London: 2006

³⁰ Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM), Durham University: Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) Project: Standards Over Time 2002, (online: www.pipsproject.org/standardsvertime.asp)

speaking,³¹ and in broader cognitive skills, has been hampered by teaching to the test.³²

GCSE examinations at age 16

The results ...Results for 2006 show an improvement, but nevertheless over two-thirds of all 16-year-olds fail to get five good (A*-C) GCSEs.

The shifting standards ...The headline figure of five good GCSEs does not include English and maths. A recent study by David Brown, a retired head teacher, indicates that pupils can achieve the benchmark of five A*-C grade GCSE passes without being tested in either literacy or numeracy.³³ Indeed, the BBC reported that one in six schools with better overall GCSE results in 2004, compared with 2001, had paradoxically seen attainment fall in English and maths.³⁴ In response to this controversy, the government now provides a figure for pupils obtaining five good GCSEs. In 2006, when English and maths were included in the five,³⁵ fewer than half of pupils (45.8%) qualified. **Hence, 21.7% of pupils who managed to obtain what counts as five good GCSEs did so without having demonstrated reasonable knowledge of maths and English.**

What should we make of the rise in performance? According to best available independent comparisons, we should be highly sceptical. The University of Durham's Curriculum Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM), as part of their YELLIS (Year Eleven Information System) project, offers the largest sample for comparison. They test pupil attainment in maths and vocabulary. The examination is kept virtually identical from year to year and the scoring system, out of a hundred, remains stable.

Dr Robert Coe, director of secondary projects at the CEM, used this data to show how this allowed pupils of similar standards to achieve different results over the years.³⁶ A student who scored 45 (just below the average) on the YELLIS test could expect to achieve D grades in French, Maths and History at GCSE in 1996, but by 2005 would be receiving C grades; enough to push a number of students into achieving the five

³¹ Hargreaves, L., and Moyles, J., Merry, R., Paterson, ASF and Esartes-Sarries, V., 'How do elementary schools teachers define and implement interactive teaching in the national literacy hour in England?' presented at the American Educational Research Association Conference, New Orleans, 2002

³² *TES* 20th January 2006; *The Guardian* 24th January 2006
(<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1693061,00.html>)

³³ *The Independent* 12th January 2005

³⁴ *BBC News Online* 21st October 2005 (online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4359840.stm>)

³⁵ Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Publication, *GCSE and Equivalent Results for Young People in England 2005/06 (revised)* (online:
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000702/SFR01-2007V1.pdf>)

³⁶ Coe R., Conference at Wellington College, June 2006
[http://www.cemcentre.org/documents/News/Are%20A%20levels%20and%20GCSEs%20getting%20easier%20\(Wellington%2027.6.06\).ppt](http://www.cemcentre.org/documents/News/Are%20A%20levels%20and%20GCSEs%20getting%20easier%20(Wellington%2027.6.06).ppt)

grades at A*-C benchmark. Taking an average of 26 subjects, pupils of the same YELLIS standard could generally expect to achieve around half a grade higher in 2005 than they could in 1996. So when the government claims that over half of pupils now achieve the expected standard, it is mainly because the standard has shifted to include those that did not reach the same level in previous years.

This is unsurprising when we look at the pass marks required for some of the exams. For example, in an AQA (one of the country's largest examining boards) paper in Business Studies, the mark required to gain an A* in 2005 was 47 per cent.³⁷ Indeed, so devalued have many of the GCSEs become that some private schools are now opting for the more challenging International GCSE (IGCSE).³⁸

The story ... The added emphasis placed on school league tables has provided an incentive for schools to pursue qualifications that will most efficiently boost their position according to official comparisons (as well as short-term strategies such as focusing disproportionately on C/D borderline pupils).³⁹ Intermediate General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) are perhaps the most influential examples of this.

GNVQs have been manipulated within a bureaucratic 'loophole' to drive up GCSE results. Professor Smithers of the University of Buckingham's Centre for Education and Employment Research found that thousands of students took courses in these 'quasi-academic' subjects, which include science, information and communication technology, and business. However, 'entry to the more practically-sounding fields is miniscule. Hospitality and catering, manufacturing, construction, retail and distributive trades, land and environment together account for only 1.2 per cent of the Intermediate GNVQ.' Indeed, over half of all the GNVQs taken are in the single subject, ICT. Smithers has also noted that the influence these subjects have had on results is significant: 'from 2001 the proportion achieving five good GCSEs themselves has plateaued at about 50 per cent and the increase [up to 2005] has been through intermediate GNVQs which count as four GCSEs'.⁴⁰ David Brown calculated that since GNVQs are valued so highly compared to GCSEs, studying the IT GNVQ was thirteen times as effective in boosting a school's league table position as studying maths.⁴¹

The nature of GCSE coursework (which has since led to the decision to scrap it for most subjects), which has counted for up to 60% of a pupil's GCSE score, has also been a significant factor. The *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) has reported how schools are able to manipulate the system to gain better marks. A supply teacher told the TES how students at a private school in Lancashire were 'allowed up to six

³⁷ Mansell, W., *Education by numbers*, p137, Politicos: London, 2007

³⁸ *The Guardian* 2nd September 2006 (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/gcses/story/0,,1863460,00.html>)

³⁹ *TES* 15th June 2007 (<http://www.tes.co.uk/2394501>)

⁴⁰ Smithers, A., (2005), *Do School Exams Need Reforming?*, Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham

⁴¹ *BBC News Online* 13th January 2005 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4172749.stm>

'drafts' of English coursework before submitting a final version for marking'. Several contributors to the TES website have reported the increasing use of what are called 'writing frames', which are suggested outlines for an essay. They 'allowed some schools to provide virtual model answers'. A former head of English at a secondary school in the north of England said it was 'common to provide a structured plan, paragraph by paragraph, for coursework assignments'. Moreover, the TES reported that typing in 'GCSE coursework' into a search engine 'reveals more than 10 UK-based essay databases, all offering access to complete coursework essays'.⁴²

Other ways of boosting results have included schools and local authorities sending pupils to *private* crammers in the Easter holidays. The *Times Education Supplement* reported this year that '[a]t least five local authorities and 12 schools have paid for the ['crammer'] courses in which private tutors spend several days working through exam questions with pupils'.⁴³ This particular example clearly utterly undermines the claim that it is the government's effective school policies which have raised attainment.

A-level examinations at age 18

The results... There has been an unbroken trend over the last decade towards better results. One particular jump coincides with the first sixth form cohort to finish the new modular A-level courses.

The shifting standards ... Robert Coe of Durham University's CEM used the International Test of Developed Abilities to compare the actual attainment of pupils from year to year with their paper qualifications. Taking an average of 40 A-level subjects, he found that those scoring 50% on the ITDA test in 1997 would tend to achieve low C grades, but by 2005 were achieving low B grades. **Essentially a post-Blair A-level is worth a whole grade less than a pre-Blair A-level** (see Explanation, p9)ⁱ

The story... The 2001 jump coincides with the first sixth form cohort to finish the new A-level courses, where each subject is divided into 6 modules, three of which are taken as AS-levels in the first year of the course. These modules can be revised for separately and sat at different points in an academic year and then re-taken individually, allowing students to submit the best combination of scores to produce their overall A-level grade. Whether this new system is capable of gauging the abilities of students accurately and offers a genuine challenge for the best students to overcome is in doubt. Regardless of this controversy, a sudden rise in grades, as students took advantage of the new 'bite-sized' structure of modular exams, was almost inevitable.

The consequence is that A-level exams have become so oblique at measuring academic ability that universities have been forced to come up with ways round this, from US-style university entrance exams⁴⁴ to entire new qualifications (the

⁴² TES 21st March 2003, page 7

⁴³ TES 2nd March 2007 (<http://www.tes.co.uk/2347994>)

⁴⁴ *Daily Telegraph* 5th June 2007
(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/06/05/nschools05.xml>)

Cambridge Pre-U). Many universities now wish to review the results for all individual modules taken by students, including A-level modules and GCSE re-sits. The University of Reading, for example, has announced that in August 2007 it 'will receive the individual unit marks for each qualification'.⁴⁵ Their explanation was that '[t]o allow universities to make fair decisions applicants must provide full information on their completed qualifications'. The government now concedes that questions need to be more challenging with the imminent introduction of A* grades to accommodate high ability. Blair's proposal to fund at least one International Baccalaureate centre in each local authority is in line with calls for more stretching exams.

A final factor over the Blair years has been the choice of A-level subjects being taken. From 1997 to 2006, the number of A-level entries has increased by over 50,000. However, this increase has not been reflected in traditional subjects. In fact, many have declining numbers of entries: physics, French, German and mathematics have all registered reductions of between 3,000 and 10,000 over the last decade. By contrast, psychology has increased by 26,000; Media & Film Studies by 14,000; ICT by 12,000 and PE by nearly 10,000.⁴⁶ This is not merely students opting for easier subjecting. There is evidence that schools have been discouraging pupils from taking subjects that are deemed more challenging and are therefore less 'safe' an option for league table purposes.⁴⁷

ⁱ **Explanation:** Durham's CEM runs the ALIS (A Level Information System) project, the sixth form equivalent to YELLIS. Part of the scheme involves examining students using the ITDA (International Test of Developed Abilities) which keeps the standard as stable as possible from year to year. In all six subjects a significant drop in the standards of A-level students has been noted. Biology, English, French, Geography, History and Mathematics saw a noticeable drop in the average from 1989 to 1998, in the case of biology and maths by more than 10 points.ⁱ Of course, the make-up of students continuing education into sixth form has also changed significantly. So this is not in itself a demonstration that standards in the education system falling in general, only that the standards of students passing through into the sixth form is decreasing.

Nevertheless, if the standard of A levels were being held stable, one would expect the proportion of good grades to be falling, not rising. Therefore, when this drop in abilities is considered against the rise in A level grades, the gap between standards over years is revealed as a yawning chasm. Taking an average of 40 subjects, Dr Robert Coe found that a student that scored 50% on the IDTA test would get D grades in 1995, but could expect B grades in 2005, equivalent to a rise of nearly one and a half grades. Biology, French, English literature and Geography have all seen rises of a grade or more in the period from 1988 to 2005.ⁱ

ⁱ Coe, R., Changes in Examination Grades over Time: Is the same worth less? (British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Brighton, September 1999)

ⁱ Coe R., (2006), Conference at Wellington College (online: [http://www.cemcentre.org/documents/News/Are%20A%20levels%20and%20GCSEs%20getting%20easier%20\(Wellington%2027.6.06\).ppt](http://www.cemcentre.org/documents/News/Are%20A%20levels%20and%20GCSEs%20getting%20easier%20(Wellington%2027.6.06).ppt))

⁴⁵ http://www.reading.ac.uk/Student_Recruitment/advisors/news/Cashing%20in%20GCE%20Module%20results.htm

⁴⁶ Table 15, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000703/index.shtml>

⁴⁷ *BBC News Online* 25th April 2007 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/6588695.stm)