

THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS (NUT) ON EDUCATION

James Stanfield

In October 2005 the government published its latest White Paper on education which promised to extend parental choice and release schools from local education authority (LEA) control, enabling the development of a system of independent self-governing state schools. The National Union of Teachers' (NUT) response was less than positive, suggesting that the White Paper contained 'wholly unnecessary and damaging structural reforms'. In particular the NUT was uncomfortable with the White Paper's agenda for choice, which it suggested 'appears not only to ignore the root causes of social disadvantage, but also appears wilfully to propose measures which will exacerbate the educational effects of social disadvantage through encouraging segregation'. According to the NUT, the government's proposed approach for enabling choice was both unclear and could lead to chaos, benefiting neither parents nor school communities, and simply fuelling the competitiveness of an internal market.

While the NUT recognise that school choice reforms can lead to an increasing willingness by teachers and local authorities to listen to parents, they suggest that such reforms are not necessary in the UK because there are already plenty of mechanisms available to enable this to happen, including elected parent governors, parent/teacher associations, and other opportunities for parent/teacher contact which schools already employ. In any case, the NUT suggest that increasing parent power is likely to accentuate social division and claim that there is no evidence that the majority of parents seek or desire these powers. They also proudly state that head teachers 'have previously realised educationally sound change, such as the inclusion agenda, sometimes in the face of opposition from parents, who can be concerned only for their own children'!

According to the General Secretary of the NUT (Steve Sinnott), no sensible government would consider the 'unfettered expansion of individual schools' because this would change the very nature of the school whilst also damaging provision at surrounding schools. Instead, the alternative proposal involving local authorities would allow the interests of the 'whole community to be paramount rather than the misguided self-interest of the articulate parent' (NUT, 19/12/05).

The issue of choice in education was addressed in the NUT's 2004 publication *Bringing Down the Barriers*, which recognised education as a fundamental human right, and suggested that for this right to be fulfilled, 'education must be a public service, inspired by the values and ethos of public service and publicly provided'. In this same document the NUT also demanded a halt to the role of the private sector in education, and instead recommended that the government should develop policies which encourage local authorities to combine to provide support for other local authorities.

Such comments lie in stark contrast to the responses to the White Paper from the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). According to BCC President, Bill Midgley, a 'greater injection of the business ethos into our education system is very much needed and we support moves by the Government to allow businesses to become more involved in the running of schools'. Sir Digby Jones, Director-General of the CBI, also recommends that the 'contribution business makes to improving state education should go beyond the purely philanthropic. Specialist education companies brought in by the state sector have demonstrated striking success in helping pupils overcome their basic skills challenges and in turning round failing LEAs'. Sir Digby Jones concludes by suggesting that, 'It is a great pity if ideological opposition has held back good ideas to involve business that could have further improved opportunities for young people'.

The NUT's mission is clear and unequivocal. The government monopoly in education must be protected at all costs. However much we agree or disagree with this statement, the NUT has proved to be one of the most successful and influential pressure groups in British politics over the last century. The pathetic state of education in the UK today is all the proof you need.

All quotes taken from: 'Initial Comment from Other Organizations on the Education White Paper', *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, 25 to 26 October 2005. Available at http://www.teachers.org.uk/resources/word/organisations_resptoWP.doc.

James Stanfield is based at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (j.stanfield@newcastle.ac.uk).