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Pocket Watch – The 2020 challenge for social mobility

Introduction

One month on from the concerns about social mobility raised by the OECD in its 2014 survey of different education systems (*'Educational mobility starts to slow in industrialised world,'*) the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has issued its own major report highlighting similar concerns. Every bit as authoritative as its title suggests, **'State of the Nation 2014,'** the Report concludes that *'a new national effort is needed involving employers, schools, colleges, universities, parents and charities to avoid Britain becoming a permanently divided society.'* So what is the Commission, what is it saying about social mobility and what role should education be playing in this area?

What is the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission?

The Commission was set up under the Child Poverty Act four years ago to provide advice, advocacy and progress reports on improving social mobility and reducing child poverty. It's a small UK wide non-dept public body, chaired by Alan Milburn and as part of its remit it provides an annual report to Parliament. The Commission became fully operative in 2012 and this is its second annual report and pretty much follows the themes in its 2013 report.

What's it saying?

Its main message is that while there have been some improvements over the last few years, the economy picking up, child poverty not gone away but improving, better provision for early years, the pupil premium having an impact to name just a few, things are finely balanced and the benefits are not being experienced by all. More children are living in absolute poverty, the attainment gap in schools remains pronounced and there are 5m low-paid workers. On top of that the recession's been tough on young people, those under 30 who've been hit by anything from tuition fees, to housing costs, to restricted job opportunities. So, election year and all that, the Commission is calling on the incoming government in 2015 to adopt radical new policies. It lists six in particular covering economic, social and education priorities, to help overcome the sense of division and it's calling this: *'the 2020 challenge.'*

What role does it see education playing?

How far issues like school type, school funding or school curriculum affect life chances remains a moot point, the current government has certainly focused on at least two of these but more needs to be done. To take just one statistic: *"on current trends, it will be at least 30 years before the attainment gap at GCSE between free school meal pupils and the rest is even halved."* Among the eight recommendations for education, five stand out. First, greater help for parents in the form of a national campaign funded by removing childcare tax breaks from high earning families. Second, a greater focus on the primary stage, where disadvantage can often be more successfully challenged, with the ambition of ending illiteracy and innumeracy in the next 10 years. Third, there should be a Teachers' Pay Premium and new pay grades to encourage more of the best teachers to work in deprived areas. Fourth, *"schools should give more focus to preparing children for the world of work"* and fifth, universities should use the lifting of the student numbers cap to launch a major campaign to widen participation *"aiming to admit 5,000 more from a free school meals background"* by 2020.



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