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There are 47 proposals in the [Schools White Paper](#) out this week, evidence perhaps of the reforming zeal of the present Secretary of State. The proposals cover most aspects of the school system including funding, school improvement, the curriculum and accountability but the clue to the whole thing lies in its title: '*The Importance of Teaching.*'

For some time now, Michael Gove has been building a narrative of school reform around an enhanced profession; keynote speeches in June to the National College and in September at the Westminster Academy in particular have each developed the theme. '*The noble profession,*' as David Cameron referred to it when launching the Conservative pre election Paper on school reform at the start of the year, has been battered about the head with endless prescription and mindless bureaucracy for too long and needs liberating, supporting and incentivising to be able to perform at its best. So runs the argument, one widely developed not just in the White Paper but also in a [Support Paper](#) that sits alongside.

Part of the evidence base for this comes from the famous [McKinsey report](#) of three years ago which argued that "*the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.*" The Report caught the eye of Tony Blair and equally it seems that of Michael Gove. As such, it offers an interesting insight into the way in which the Secretary of State has approached these reforms.

First, select, the best bits of the Blairite reforms such as enhancing the profession, opening up freedoms to Academies and granting Local Authorities a strategic role, and refresh. Second, add a hefty spoonful of lessons from abroad. Three in particular are cited in the Foreword and form the basis of the Paper: enhancing the qualities of the profession; devolving as much power as possible to the front line while hanging on to high levels of autonomy; and ensuring that children from poorer families are helped to succeed. Third, stir in some reforming zeal: "*education reform is the great progressive cause of our times*" and fourth, allow to set in what is becoming a standard template for public service reform: pared back central services; transferred responsibilities; a greater focus on outcomes; a concentration on the essentials; and wider responsiveness and accountability.

As for what comes out the other end as proposals, these can perhaps be grouped into three categories: the familiar but given a bit more polish; the unexpected; and those awaiting further consultation and development.

Amongst the familiar given more polish, five stand out.

First, reform of A levels and GCSEs where the trend away from the modular system continues with Ofqual asked to review the rules on resits at A level and reconfigure a linear route for GCSEs. Qualification development used to be undertaken by QCDA but seems here to have fallen to Ofqual who have already set up an expert group to examine the issues. Ofqual is also asked to advise on incorporating spelling, punctuation and grammar in future GCSE mark schemes as well as at the concept of international benchmarking of tests and exams for 11 and 16 year olds along with those for 18 year olds that it is already looking at. Second, extending the Academy blueprint to all schools including primary, special and 'standard' state

schools, the latter in partnership with high performing schools. This extended family will gradually take off from next April and in theory build a head of steam that will eventually see most schools with Academy status.

Third, and still on the subject of schools standards, more support for Free Schools; *“every proposer of a Free School which gets through the initial stage will also have a named DfE official who they can contact if they have any questions or difficulties.”* In addition, Free Schools along with University Technology Colleges (UTCs) and new Studio Schools are to be encouraged to *“drive innovation in vocational education.”* Further evidence, it seems, of the wish to create a distinct breed of specialist vocational providers for 14-19 learners though strangely no mention of the existing breed, namely colleges.

Fourth, a sharper set of floor targets to act as performance measures in the future. 35% of pupils to gain 5 good GCSEs in secondary school, up from 30% and 60% of primary pupils to gain level 4 in English and maths. And fifth, more transparent data about school performance: attainment in specific subjects, trends over time and class sizes at a national level and reading policy, setting policy and behaviour policies at an institutional level, now to be published across *‘families of schools.’*

Amongst the more unexpected proposals, equally 5 stand out.

First, the decision to replace the YPLA with a new Funding Agency, the Education Funding Agency (EFA,) a technical matter perhaps but significant that the new Agency is an Executive Agency, thus closer to the Dept. Second, and while on Agencies, the creation of another one, the Testing Agency, *“to oversee statutory tests and assessment for pupils up to age 14.”* The remit for this will become clearer once the current review of SATs completes next June. Third, the creation of a network of Teaching Schools, leading schools that will take on responsibility for providing some initial teacher training but also some professional development for existing teachers. Fourth, a new approach to school improvement where top head teachers will take on the role as Leading National and Local leaders supporting schools and working with Local Authorities, commissioning services where needed. Fifth, the commitment to level the funding playing field between schools and FE colleges for 16-19 year olds, now firmly back on the agenda.

As to proposals awaiting the completion of reviews, four are hugely important.

First, the position of vocational education, particularly its relationship with the ‘ac Bacc’ and position on any future league tables. These must await the completion next spring of Alison Wolf’s Review. Second, the future of Key Stage 2 testing, the subject of the Bew Review. Third, the shape of the National Curriculum which goes out for national consultation shortly and fourth, formula funding equally to go out to consultation. The whiff of change emanates from them all.

Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)
Pearson Centre for Policy and Learning

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