

POLICY WATCH

2008/52

22 August 2008

GCSE results 2008: A postscript on some of the key issues

This year's GCSE candidates were Blair babes - 16 year olds who were just aged 5 when the new Labour age dawned in 1997 and now in 2008 have just completed their GCSEs. They are the first generation to have spent their entire school careers under the Labour system. They may not know it but they have probably been subjected to more initiatives and strategies, and in all fairness more investment and political will, than any other generation. So has it all been to the good?

Lord Adonis, the Minister wheeled out for GCSE results this year, claimed that *'since 1997 investment in education has doubled, there are 40,000 more teachers and there's been a 30% increase in the number of pupils gaining good GCSE results.'* On the downside, some parents still face "a postcode lottery" in terms of school choice and concerns remain about standards in core subjects and about widening gaps in performance. Both concerns surfaced in discussions around GCSE results this year.

The role of the [National Challenge](#) in raising performance was perhaps the big theme. At the moment, it's not clear just how many of the 638 secondary schools identified by the [DCSF](#) in June as failing to ensure that they have more than 30% of their pupils achieve 5 good GCSEs including English and maths, will be removed from the list in the light of this summer's results. Or even perhaps whether any will, given the Government's interest in long - term improvement, *'a secure upward trend'* as Ed Balls described it in his letter to Directors of Children's Services in June. The DCSF is assessing Local Authority National Challenge plans at the moment and is due to hold further discussions with Authorities shortly. The view is that there might be some re - assessment of the list, possibly some downsizing of it but the harsh fact remains that standards in English and maths are a major bargaining chip for all political Parties and for all its hard labour, the Government is currently facing media headlines about standards *'plateauing.'*

A 2 percentage point increase in English and maths GCSE could see about a tenth of schools potentially off the [National Challenge](#) list. But provisional figures for GCSE this year indicate just a 0.7 percentage point increase in A* - Cs for English and 1.1% for maths. At Key Stage 3, there was even a slight drop of 1 percentage point this year in English and of 2 percentage points in science with a one point increase in maths. At Key Stage 2, performance by 11 year olds this year rose by just one percentage point in both English and maths respectively. The Schools Minister argued, with some justification, that *"as we improve higher and higher each year, extra gain is that bit more difficult for schools to achieve."* The trend at the top end of GCSE is at least up, the number of entries gaining an A* or A grade this year rose from 19.5% to 20.7% the biggest rise since 1989, while the number of entries gaining A* - Cs leapt 2.4 points to 65.7%, the largest increase since 1990.

So the top end of the GCSE market seems to be working well despite constant unease about whether pupils are being challenged enough. What about at the other

end where pupils do not perform particularly well in GCSEs and yet where they may have considerable skills to offer? There has been regular agonising about this each summer and this year was no different.

The Conservatives have added a new dimension to this debate with their claim that under Labour, educational inequality has actually worsened and that the youngsters who regularly under perform at GCSE largely come from disadvantaged areas. Some disturbing stats can be found in their recent Paper entitled '[A Failed Generation](#).' For example, "33,909 of pupils eligible for free school meals did not attain any GCSE grades higher than a D in 2006/7 ...and 20% weren't even entered for English, maths and science GCSE." Their charge is that "in the last year, the attainment gap at GCSE between the poorest areas and the wealthiest widened by 15 percentage points from 28% to 43%."

The release of regionally based stats this year allows for a closer analysis of such claims and at first glance seems to indicate some correlation with under performing but disadvantaged areas singled out under the National Challenge. The fact that the Government is extending the National Challenge to other parts of the country, that it is funding an extension of the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme to include progression into HE, that it has established a guarantee of a place for any youngster whatever their results under the September Guarantee and that it is launching a whole new suite of qualifications for 14 - 19 year olds suggests that it is taking this issue seriously.

17 year olds will have to stay on in some form of learning under new legislation from 2013 but this still leaves the question of what form of learning is best for those outside GCSE. It's difficult to know in this regard how far the latest contribution to the debate from the think - tank [Civitas](#) and picked up by much of the media on GCSE results day in crude headlines such as 'Vocational courses used to bolster results' actually helps. Their [Report](#), 'School Improvement - or the Equivalent' claims that "lower - income pupils are disproportionately likely to be 'pushed' into poor quality vocational courses" and that they are left with 'a learning experience and qualification of questionable value.' With unintended irony, the Report says it is not out "to undermine the value of vocational qualifications in the country" yet it leaves little to the imagination. Two issues, dog this debate: one, at what age should young people start to learn vocationally specific skills? Civitas, and others, argue for 16. And two, is parity of esteem between 'academic' and 'vocational' qualifications fool's gold? Should we not recognise and value the special worth of each separately?

Were there other themes this year? Well, one was a further fall in the number of overall GCSE entries, now down to 5.7m. Apart from demography, the reason may well be that many youngsters are taking English and maths early. Another was an encouraging increase in both entries and performance in the 3 sciences, 94% of entries in Chemistry for example managed to gain an A* - C. Another was growing agreement that the major factor contributing to a rise in performance was less that standards were slipping more that of 'teaching to the test' despite the Government's recent refusal to recognise this. And a final one: parents it seems continue to use a range of financial incentives to encourage their offspring to do well. One area where the credit crunch has failed to bite.

Oh and the headline figures: overall A* - C pass rate up to 65.7%, overall pass rate 98.4%

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