



‘There is a compelling vision about the role schools can play in a fairer, more cohesive society.’

Fiona Millar, writer and education campaigner

Wanted: a politician prepared to back good local schools

Fiona Millar proposes her alternative manifesto for parents that goes beyond issues of choice, diversity and competition to create environments in which all children can thrive

Parents will be centre stage in the coming election, just as they have been for the past 20 years. Much will be said and done in our name and the debate will undoubtedly be coloured by the views of a small group of media commentators whose personal experiences are not necessarily representative of the nation at large. Many of the arguments will be what my children would describe as ‘rinsed’, in other words we will have heard them all before. Choice, diversity, competition and the power of parents, as consumers, to act as agents for change in the school system are hardly new ideas, although the Conservative promise to create surplus places, the so-called ‘supply side revolution’, at a time of public-sector cuts, will certainly give them an edge.

I should start by saying that I have nothing against

parent choice or parental involvement in schools. The primary school my children attended has, for me, been a microcosm of parent power in action. When the school was heavily criticised by Ofsted in the mid 1990s, a core group of aspirant parents withdrew their children, confidence in the local community plummeted and it sank to the bottom of the local league tables.

However an equally powerful group stayed and put literally hours into everything from the governing body and PTA to cake sales and discos. With the headteacher and staff, we crafted a strong inclusive vision that has helped create the successful and popular school it is today. I now chair the governing body of that school and of another local secondary and indeed have spent 20 years as a parent and governor in one of the most active schools markets in Western Europe – the square mile in which I live is home to 29 state and private schools. I would argue that we need a wholly different approach, and a more coherent political argument, to underpin policies concerning parents and schools.

The starting point must be that there is a compelling

vision about the role schools can play in a fairer, more cohesive society. It is bigger than the simple fulfilment of choice, and it doesn't conflict fundamentally with what many parents want for their own children. While no one can speak categorically for 13 million parents, successive opinion polls, and research into the campaigns for new schools in areas where there aren't enough places, suggest that the majority of parents want a good local school for their children. They also tend to be clear about the characteristics of that good local school; it should be one which is well resourced, which commands the confidence of a wide cross section of the local community, where the intake is balanced, the leadership, teaching and behaviour are good and the physical environment well maintained.

This kind of school almost certainly provides the best environment for all children to thrive. Schools need a critical mass of students who are positive about learning and education; many parents want to see that in the schools they choose for their children. It is no coincidence that all the countries that achieve the highest standards and lowest social differentiation in achievement have non-selective systems with relatively little diversity.

The politician who is prepared to stand up and say 'We believe in the principle of good local schools where children of all backgrounds and abilities can be educated together' may need to be brave, given the political context. Allegations of Stalinism and social engineering would undoubtedly follow. But the supporting arguments could be powerful and popular. Resources and

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expertise could be focussed on the quality of teaching, leadership, class sizes and the relationships between adults and young people within those schools. Other policies would then be calibrated in relation to the aim of creating good mixed local schools and some decisions on admissions, curriculum and qualifications would be inevitable – the good local school will never work if its curriculum is as skewed as its intake.

Parents would still have choice, not of institutions which the politicians have tried to make as different as possible, but of institutions which are broadly similar and uniformly good; worries about selective entry tests, private tuition and long journeys might start to evaporate, as would the trauma of separating children from their childhood friends and the now familiar annual tale of too many parents chasing too few places at seemingly 'better' schools.

But there is another, and perhaps more important way of thinking about parents and schools; less about parents as consumers and more about parental engagement in their children's learning, and in their development into well rounded, social citizens. A child's life chances may be affected by which school they attend but a range of other issues are possibly more important to their ability to succeed; personal resilience, family income, the educational qualifications of their parents, their peer group, the neighbourhood in which they live and critically, the home learning environment and parenting. Some of these lie too far outside the school gate for them to be the business of heads and teachers, although governments that want to see more equitable outcomes for children should undoubtedly be putting more resources into reducing income and housing equality. But schools can and should be helping parents support their children.

Too often the idea of parental engagement in their children's learning is muddled up with the idea of parental involvement in schools. But the research reviews of Professor Charles Desforges for the Government in 2003, which flagged up the importance of 'at home' parenting, especially for children in the primary age group, suggested that a 'good' parent never needed to walk

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through the door of a school to make a difference to his or her child’s prospects. According to Desforges, what really mattered was a parenting style typified by love, warmth, good communication, aspiration, confidence and suitable boundaries.

However acting on these findings has not been straightforward. If we accept that ‘at home’ parenting can impact on a child’s achievement and behaviour, what should schools do about it? Is it their job or indeed the state’s role to ‘interfere’ with what is essentially a very private and personal relationship? Some heads and political figures have complained about teachers being asked to do social work and schools being expected to offer therapeutic services. The ‘respect’ agenda, which prevailed in the latter part of the Blair years, further confused the issue, rightly linking the root causes of antisocial behaviour to poor early parenting, but putting an emphasis on ASBOs, fixed penalty notices and contracts which appeared to be more about blaming than supporting parents.

And confusion still exists about what services for families and parents mean in practice. When the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education studied family and parenting programmes, it discovered no less than 16 different terms in use under the vague umbrella of family and parenting support. Many of these confused family learning, aimed at helping parents improve their own skills, with parenting support. The latter can mean anything from parenting support advisers, non-teaching

staff who specialise in home-school links, to parenting courses which are now widely recognised as helping change children’s behaviour. Many parents who have been coerced onto such courses say they wish they had been given the chance to do them much earlier in their children’s lives.

But the narrative could be simplified. Schools are places of learning but they are also places where children and young people develop social skills, learn to tolerate and co-operate. Working with their families complements those aims and that work needs to start early with high quality pre-school provision. We know that able children from poorer homes fall behind their less able, more advantaged peers before they even start school, and the EPPE (Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project) study has demonstrated the value of high quality early years settings for long-term attainment and social behaviour. This is especially marked for children from poor homes.

The offer of family learning and parenting courses should be a key element of any extended services as children move through primary and secondary schools and this must be a universal service, not just a response to problem or disadvantaged families. Families, parents and children from all backgrounds move in and out of risky situations in their lives, often due to relationship breakdown, mental health problems, alcohol or substance abuse at home. If services for parents are seen as only relevant to some poorly skilled adults and children, or peripheral to the work of schools, families who most need help will inevitably feel stigmatised and become harder to reach.

The idea of a good local school, rooted in its community and providing wider services for that community, may well be anathema to politicians with fetishes about diversity and freedom. It will almost certainly not be as eye catching or headline grabbing as the niche school set up by the idiosyncratic group of media friendly parents. But if we listen to what parents say they want – good local schools in which all children can flourish and become good citizens – it will almost certainly be the answer to their needs.