

Rt Hon Alan Milburn
Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

Can schools make Britain fairer?

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It is part of Britain's DNA that everyone should have a fair chance in life. Yet too often demography is destiny in our country. Being born poor often leads to a lifetime of poverty. Poor schools ease people into poor jobs. Disadvantage and advantage cascade down the generations. Over decades we have become a wealthier society but we have struggled to become a fairer one. Today I want to explore what schools can do to help solve that conundrum.

Let me say at the outset that here in the North East, schools are proving they hold the key to unlocking more social mobility in our country. In the last five years, this region has had faster improving GCSE results for the poorest pupils than any part of the country. That is testament to the hard work and leadership provided by heads, teachers and governors in this part of the world. You deserve a big thank you for what are you are doing. But you know too that while North East schools are moving in the right direction, there is a long way to go before the prospects for a poor child growing up here are as good as those of a wealthier child. The gap remains large and is narrowing far too slowly.

The global financial crisis has brought these sort of concerns to the fore. In its wake a new public consensus has begun to emerge that unearned wealth for a few at the top, growing insecurity for many in the middle, and stalled life chances for those at the bottom is not really a viable social proposition for Britain. As birth not worth has become more a determinant of life chances, higher social mobility – reducing the extent to which a person's class or income is dependent on the class or income of their parents – has become the new holy grail of public policy. These are developments that are welcome.

The job of the Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty that I chair is to assess, candidly and independently, whether what this and future Governments actually do, as distinct from what they say, is

helping or hindering the prospect of Britain becoming a more mobile society. Of course, there are many things that determine life chances that are way beyond the reach of government. Individual temperament, family life, social attitudes. And there are many questions that other institutions in civil society – employers, schools, universities to name but three - have to answer if social progress is to be achieved. As the Prime Minister is fond of saying, we are all in this together. That is why the Commission's focus is also on the policy and practice of all those institutions that can make such an important contribution to improving and equalising life chances.

In 10 days time the Commission will present our second State of the Nation report to Parliament. The test we will apply in it is not about good intentions. We take those as read. It is about whether the right actions are being taken. Certainly there is much to welcome in what Government, employers, schools and universities are currently doing to address these issues. There is considerable effort and a raft of initiatives underway. The question is whether the scale and depth of activity is enough to combat the headwinds that Britain faces if we are to move forward to become a low poverty, high mobility society. The conclusion my Commission reached in our first annual state of the nation report last year is that it is currently not. We concluded that the statutory goal of ending child poverty by 2020 will in all likelihood be missed by a considerable margin, perhaps by as many as 2 million children and with it the end of a decade-long reduction in child poverty. For the North East, as a region with one of the highest levels of child poverty in the UK, such a conclusion is deeply depressing. We concluded too that there is a very real danger that social mobility – having risen in the middle of the last century then flat-lined towards the end – could go into reverse in the first part of this century. These are profound challenges for all political parties – and not just those in government. In the lead up to next year's general election they all have a responsibility to say how they would address them and make progress.

Of course there is no single lever that on its own can make a nation more socially mobile. No single organisation can make it happen either. All sorts of things make a difference. Individual aspirations as much as parenting styles. Family networks as well as careers services. Career development opportunities alongside university admission procedures.

But the global evidence suggests the key is employability and education. Social mobility speeded up in the 1950s thanks to a big change in the labour market. The shift from a manufacturing to a services economy drove demand for new skills and opened up new opportunities millions of women and men to step up and get on.. Social mobility has slowed down in the decades since primarily because of another big change in the labour market: the move to a globalized knowledge-based economy. Since the 1970s technological change has been skills-biased. People with higher skills have seen large increases in productivity and pay while those with low skills have experienced reduced demand for labour and lower average earnings. Those with qualifications enjoy greater job security, higher levels of prosperity and better prospects of social advance. Those without skills find it hard to escape a world of constant insecurity, endemic low pay and little prospect of social progress.

Bridging this divide is the key to healing social division in our country. As our economy becomes ever more reliant on high levels of skills and education they will become more crucial to social mobility in the future. A genuinely national effort is needed. Employers can help by establishing stronger links with schools and colleges. Voluntary organisations can help by raising aspirations and mentoring pupils. Careers services can help by providing inspiration and encouraging ambition. Colleges can help by leading efforts to make vocational education as attractive as an academic one. Professions and universities can help by ensuring recruitment practices are genuinely open and fair.

But it is what happens in schools that will have the greatest influence on Britain's prospects for social mobility. Study after study has come to the same conclusion. Time spend in education - including the vital early years - is the most important determinant of future social status and success in schools is the most important factor determining mobility. That is why education must be a top priority for our country, including when it comes to where our government, spends our money.

In the UK, our education system is characterised by world-beating centres of excellence, at every level from primary schools to higher education institutions. Thanks to the leadership of heads and teachers and governors the last 15 years have seen major changes in what our schools do and what they achieve. GCSE and A level results

have risen dramatically, more students than ever before now go on to university and there has been a new focus on improving the early years of children's lives. There has been significant progress too in narrowing the education gap between poorer children and their better-off classmates. Over the last decade - the proportion of children eligible for free school meals achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths more than doubled.

That progress, however, is tempered by the long tail of education under-achievement that still characterises our educational system. Far too many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds still leave school without good qualifications and the gap between poorer children and others remains unacceptably high. Children eligible for free school meals suffer a triple whammy of educational disadvantage. They arrive at primary school less ready to learn than their peers: only a third achieve a "good level of development" at age five compared to their better-off classmates. Fewer than 2 in 3 of them then leave primary school at the expected level in reading, writing and maths compared to four in five of their peers. And they leave secondary with two in three of them not achieving 5 GCSEs compared to around a third of other children. Their risk of ending up in poverty as adults is much greater as a result. Poor children are four times as likely to become poor adults as other children.

Something is going badly wrong when research we have undertaken as a Commission shows that low ability children from wealthy families overtake high ability children from poor families during school. It found that poorer students who achieve excellent results in primary schools fall behind more advantaged students with similar results during secondary school. If poor children getting Level 5 in English and maths at age 11 followed the trajectory of similarly attaining children from better off families, over 2,000 more would go to an elite university each year.

These challenges are writ large in the North East. Poor kids in this region do relatively well at the end of primary school and, if you exclude London, at the national average at GCSE. But still today almost 3 in 4 poor children in the North East do not achieve a good level of development at age 4, over one-third fail to achieve the expected level in reading, writing and maths at age 11 and two-thirds fail to achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths. Although our primary schools are rated more highly than the

national average by Ofsted generally and in the most deprived areas particularly, the reverse is true for secondary schools. Maybe it is no surprise that poor children in the North East are more likely to drop out of education and employment at 16 years old than anywhere else in England. Or that the North East has the lowest regional rate of youngsters going on to higher education. The London rate is more than double our's.

Not surprising perhaps. But surely something that we should never tolerate, still less excuse. In my view it is not just a social injustice that poor children do less well at school than others. It is a moral outrage and it has to change. From 2016 there will be a new and powerful reason for doing so. The new school performance measures that will be introduced then raise the bar on subject choice and qualification quality at GCSE. Frankly, they will make it harder for schools to 'game' results. New analysis the Commission has undertaken shows that the new system will lead to 8 per cent of secondary schools falling far down the league table rankings across our country. In the North East one fifth of schools will suffer that fate – the highest of any part of the country. The schools with the biggest predicted falls are those with the greatest proportion of disadvantaged students.

That need not be inevitable. For many decades it was widely accepted by governments and publics alike that – when it came to learning - deprivation was destiny. Better off children would naturally excel. Poorer children would naturally fall behind. We now have extensive evidence – international and domestic – that such social determinism is wrong. Countries as different as Canada, Poland and Singapore have demonstrated a great track record in raising the attainment level of their poorest children.

In Britain, London used to have amongst the worst state schools in the country. Today they are among the best. London outperforms every other region of Britain when it comes to getting good results at both GCSE and A level. As importantly, children on free school meals at London schools do 50% better at GCSE than similar children in every other region. Some have said this is all down to the ethnic mix in London schools. Our research suggests that only 20% of the so-called London effect is explained by that factor. Most of it is down to earlier improvements that took place in primary school and to London schools finding ways of pulling together to drive sustained improvements in results.

London explodes the dangerous myth that all often has dominated policy and practice both in the education and political world – that schools serving disadvantaged communities cannot overcome the very real challenges they face. Of course schools in poorer areas have a tougher time than schools in better-off areas. They need more help from government. Getting the thrust of education policy right will help schools to get it right. But schools can do more to help themselves, regardless of who is in charge either in Whitehall or in the local town hall.

As our *Cracking the code* report, published last week, shows some schools in disadvantaged areas are doing far better at overcoming the challenges they face than others and are helping far more poor children to succeed. There are shocking gaps in performance between similar schools serving similar communities with similar intakes of poorer pupils. For example, if every school in the North East did as well as the best performing school with a similar ability intake then 6,600 more children would get five good GCSEs including English and Maths each year – an increase of 40 per cent. Across England as a whole the best performing schools are helping three times as many disadvantaged children to achieve five good GCSEs (including English and maths) as schools with similar levels of disadvantage. If even half that gap was closed almost 25 per cent more disadvantaged children a year would be getting 5 good GCSEs.

These are pretty unpalatable findings. But ones it is important to confront. All schools should be aspiring to be better than they are and as good as they can be. The same is true for individual teachers. New polling of more than 1,100 teachers carried out for the Commission found that most have high expectations of their pupils. But one in five (21 per cent) agreed that colleagues at their school have lower expectations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In secondaries the number rose to 25 per cent. A majority of these respondents (61 per cent) agreed that colleagues' lower expectations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds adversely affects these students' outcomes.

As a Commission we take the view that headteachers and governors have a responsibility to ensure that every teacher in every school has uniformly high expectations of their students. Our polling suggests that while the vast majority of teachers expect the best from every pupil, regardless of background, in some schools low expectations of disadvantaged students remains a problem.

Some schools have managed to prove that deprivation needn't be destiny. They have cracked the code on how to improve social mobility by helping disadvantaged children to excel in education. The code-breaking schools seem to be following some simple rules that others can emulate. They use the Pupil Premium strategically to tackle the barriers to attainment; they build a high-expectations culture; they incessantly focus on the quality of teaching and adopt tailored approaches to engage parents. Critically, they seek to prepare students for life, not just exams. If some schools can do these things, it doesn't seem unreasonable to ask the question why others cannot do likewise.

So there are some things that are within a school's control. Other things are not: how schools are funded and how they are structured; how schools are assessed and how teachers are rewarded. These are in the gift of public policy and, ultimately, of politics. Some of the reforms that this government and the previous government made are, in our view, steps in the right direction. But progress is too slow and much more needs to be done to level the playing field. We believe the next government should focus on five key areas of reform.

First, making the narrowing of the attainment gap a far higher national priority for schools, early years, councils and parents. We believe that the introduction of the Pupil Premium and other reforms are positive steps in the right direction. But we do not believe that, so far, efforts to narrow the attainment gap within schools are being given equal priority to the focus there has been in recent decades on raising the bar – improving the standards of all schools. For us, it's not a question of either/or for schools. They have to be doing both. We look to the next government to give them equal billing through the standards it sets, the inspection regimes it sanctions, the league tables it publishes and the reward mechanisms it deploys.

Second, giving greater impetus to improving teaching quality in disadvantaged areas. High-quality teaching can add as much as 18 months of learning to a disadvantaged pupil compared to six months provided by a less-good teacher. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to experience an excellent education than their better-off peers. Those eligible for the Pupil Premium are more likely to attend schools – primary and secondary - that require improvement and less likely to attend schools that are outstanding. Although there has been progress in the North East, 16 per cent of

primary schools and 74 per cent of secondary schools in the most deprived areas still require improvement. Initiatives like Teach First, School Direct, Teaching Schools and the Future Leaders Trust are welcome steps to ensuring the best teachers are allocated to the most challenging schools to help poor pupils attainment. But those initiatives lack scale and are piecemeal. The next Government should do far more to ensure that the best teachers can be recruited to teach in the most challenging schools.

Third, helping schools collaborate to drive improvement. Greater autonomy for schools have brought about improvements. The early academies in particular managed to simultaneously drive up standards and close attainment gaps. But the global evidence suggests that schools also need to be able to pool expertise to help that process of improvement. The North East Schools Challenge has taken those lessons and is applying them in our region in an attempt to address under-performance, raise standards and close attainment gaps. It is a very welcome initiative and one that my Commission will study with great interest for the outcomes it achieves. But across the country the current architecture for helping schools to collaborate is complex and confused with both local authorities and Regional School Commissioners playing on the same pitch. The next government should clarify who is doing what and make area-based school improvement programmes the norm across the country.

Fourth, helping schools do more to prepare young people for the world beyond schools. Getting good exam results is important but in today's labour market – let alone the future one – they are not enough on their own to guarantee success. Employers are looking for good character skills as well as academic ones. We know that these are skills that schools can help to nurture. Some do. Many don't. Similarly, too often careers advice is seen as an afterthought for schools. The same is true for work experience. Less than half of British youngsters have access to a high quality work experience placement compared to 85% in France and 61% across the whole of Europe. We believe the next Government should develop a new outcomes-based means of assessing school performance so that schools focus harder on the quality of extra-curricular activity, character development and careers guidance. Ofsted should inspect schools for the quality of those services.

Fifth, doing more to help parents to parent. It is harder for schools to do their job if parents don't do their's. Parents' involvement during children's earliest years is the single biggest influence on their

development and is a key factor in improving children's academic attainment. Effective parenting has a bigger influence on a child's life than wealth, class or education. Most parents do a great job. But some do not and there has been a reluctance on the part of politicians and educators to call out bad parenting. Existing public policy interventions in parenting tend to be too timid or too targeted. We believe that the time has come to end this equivocation. We look to the next government to work with charities and educators to help more parents to parent well.

There are many things that drive social mobility and that can make our country fairer. Today I haven't spoken about the role played by early years services or by universities. Or what employers and professions can do to open their doors to the widest pool of talent. I have focused instead on schools. I have done so because what happens there will determine whether the promise that exists to make Britain a fair and open society can be realised.

There are many things that are going right in our schools. But we have to be honest about what is wrong. In my view we should no longer tolerate an education system that produces a cohort of youngsters who simply lack the skills to compete in the modern labour market. The changing nature of our economy demands that every child must be given better opportunities to learn and choose careers. It will be impossible to make progress in improving social mobility and tackling child poverty until the educational attainment gap between less well-off and better-off children is closed. At the current rate of progress it will be decades before that happens. That is simply not good enough. Our future success in a globally competitive economy relies on using all of our country's talent not just some of it.

In the end, the reason I am optimistic is because I do not believe that the fundamental problem in our country is that somehow it is ability that is unevenly distributed in society. In my view it is opportunity. We will not create a mobile society unless we create more of a level playing field of opportunity. That has to be core business for all of us. For businesses and councils as much as for colleges and schools. It has to be core business for our government too - regardless of who wins the next election.