

Labour's record on Education

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Tony Blair famously declared that his three priorities for government were “education, education, education”. Labour planned to place schools in the vanguard of its efforts to tackle social disadvantage and exclusion. What education policies did it pursue, how much did they cost and what was achieved?

- There was a **major increase in spending** on education, from 4.5 per cent to 6.2 of GDP. This closed the gap between the UK, formerly a low spender, and other European countries, but did not affect its rank position.
- By 2010 there were 48,000 **more full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers** (11.9 per cent) in England and 133,000 more FTE teaching assistants than in 1997. Building Schools for the Future set out to **replace or refurbish the entire secondary school stock** within 20 years.
- Labour took a centralised approach to **improving school standards**, implementing National Strategies, and closing schools that did not meet targets. It extended the previous Conservative policy of **greater choice and diversity**, introducing Academies and Trust schools. Other UK countries did not follow this model. **Tuition fees** were introduced for Higher Education (HE).
- **Extra funding was directed to disadvantaged areas**. More **vocational qualifications** were introduced to increase engagement. Every Child Matters signalled a **wider agenda for childhood**, including new ways of supporting the most vulnerable children.
- **GCSE attainment improved**. By 2010, 76 per cent of English pupils were achieving five good GCSEs (A*-C), compared with 45 per cent in 1997. Evidence on whether this is due to ‘grade inflation’ is inconclusive.
- **Socio-economic inequality decreased**. The gap between pupils receiving free school meals and other pupils in obtaining five good GCSEs narrowed from 30.7 to 20.2 percentage points. However, gaps closed less at higher levels and in HE. Some indicators, for example the proportion the proportion of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) got slightly worse.

In a more constrained funding climate, the Coalition inherited an expanded and more centralised school system, with greater equality but still large socio-economic achievement gaps creating concerns about social mobility. In early 2015, we will produce an equivalent account of its educational record.

Labour's aims and goals

Labour set out to increase educational standards and to narrow the wide gaps in achievement that existed between people from poorer and richer backgrounds. Its reform programme was motivated by:

- educational and social goals - "to give everyone the chance to realise their full potential and build an inclusive and fair society"
- economic goals - "to build a competitive economy"
- a wider goal of public service modernisation.

For schools, the main targets related to examination scores: the proportions achieving expected levels in national tests at age 11 and 16. However, concern with a wider range of children's outcomes was in evidence from 2004 onwards, and was reflected in the creation of the new department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2007. After two decades of low education spending, another main priority was to reinvest in and 'modernise' schools.

Labour also sought to encourage "lifelong learning" enhancing skills and employability. It set itself an ambitious target of increasing the rate of participation by 18-30 year olds in higher education to 50 per cent by 2010, and enabling more people from low income families to go to university.

Policies

School improvement

As part of the strategy of investment in English schools, teachers' salaries were increased, and performance pay was introduced. The 'Teach First' programme was designed to bring top graduates into teaching. Teacher training was reformed to give more on-the-job support to newly qualified teachers, and there was an added focus on leadership. Central guidance and local support were both expanded, through National Strategies for primary and secondary schools as well as a Leadership Incentive Grant and the School Improvement Partners programme. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities underwent a major expansion and from 2004 the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme set out to refurbish or replace the entire stock of secondary school buildings.

School choice and diversity

Conservative policies of choice and diversity in schooling were extended. Schools were encouraged to develop specialisms. Academy schools were introduced, initially to replace struggling schools in disadvantaged areas, but later on a more widespread basis. In 2007 Labour also brought in Trust Schools (semi-independent schools backed by charitable Trusts), and paved the way for subsequent Coalition reforms by giving parents the right to request new schools, moving local authorities into commissioning roles, and encouraging schools to join together in federations. None of these policies were followed in other UK countries.

Curriculum and assessment

Labour did not immediately reform the curriculum and examination system. However, changes over time broadened the curriculum, allowing more room for 'personalised learning'. *Excellence and Enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools*, (in 2003) gave primary teachers more curriculum autonomy, while the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* in 2004 saw a new emphasis on variation within secondary schools and a wider range of vocational courses for 14 to 16-year olds as equivalent to GCSEs. The measures taken included intensive, small group tuition in English and maths for those falling behind,

'gifted and talented' programmes, and more setting by subject ability. Concerns about distortions caused by 'teaching to the test' led to the abolition of Standard Achievement Tests (SATs) at age 14 and in science at age 11, although the overall strategy of holding schools accountable through assessment targets remained. League tables were dropped in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Targeted initiatives

Many of Labour's key policies for improving schools were particularly targeted towards disadvantaged areas. In addition there were extra programmes and funding streams such as Excellence in Cities and City Challenge. Smaller initiatives included a programme of extra support for 'Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances' and, from 2008-2010, the 'Extra Mile' project encouraging struggling schools in poorer areas to adopt practices from more successful schools. The late 2000s also brought an added focus on pupils who were falling behind in primary school, with three specific programmes: "Every Child a Reader", "Every Child a Writer" and "Every Child Counts".

Policies of support were accompanied by controversial policies of pressure. 'Floor targets' mandated minimum performance levels expected in national tests. Under the 'National Challenge' policy, launched in 2008, 638 schools were given notice to improve or to be closed and become Academies.

A wider agenda for childhood

In its third term, Labour developed a wider view of childhood and the complex issues facing disadvantaged learners. The *Every Child Matters* agenda promoted working across education and children's services towards five sets of outcomes, headlined as 'enjoy and achieve', 'stay safe', 'be healthy and happy', 'make a positive contribution' and 'achieve economic well-being'. The Children's Plan (2007) set out how schools were expected to contribute to these outcomes. A new programme was rolled out from 2007 to develop the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL). Schools were also encouraged to offer 'extended services' between 8am-6pm, including out-of-hours learning and childcare, as well as parenting classes and other support services.

Post compulsory education

A broader secondary school curriculum was seen as the route to increasing post-16 participation in education. But Labour also targeted young people around the minimum school-leaving age through Connexions – an integrated service incorporating careers advice, youth services and other support services. An Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) of up to £30 a week was also made available for 16 to 19-year olds from low income families remaining in full-time education. In 2008, it was announced that all young people up to the age of 18 would be guaranteed a post-school learning place - either education or work-based learning, and the school leaving age was raised to 17, with effect from 2013.

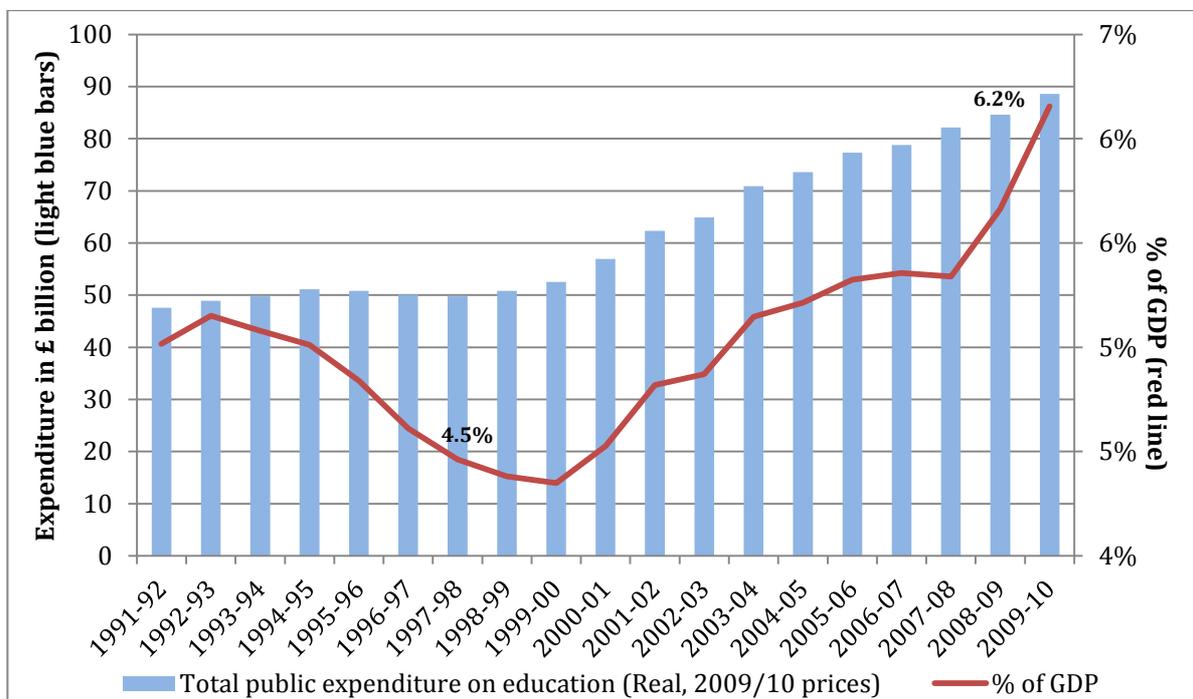
Higher education proved particularly challenging for Labour as it sought to increase funding to universities and widen participation, while prioritising spending on schools and the early years. Tuition fees were introduced in 1998, and variable fees (of up to £3,000 per year) from 2004, beginning a process by which the burden of paying for university education was shifted away from the general taxpayer on to individual students. However both fees and maintenance (for low income students) were moved onto a system of loans which students paid back when they were earning. In Scotland, fees were abolished in 2008.

How much did Labour spend?

Labour financed its policies through a large real terms increase in education spending. Across the UK as a whole, spending grew by 78 per cent between 1996/7 to 2010, from £50 billion to £89 billion (in 2009/10 prices) (Figure 1). This was the biggest increase over any decade since the mid-1970s and far exceeded growth in the number of pupils and students.

As a percentage of GDP, education spending rose from 4.5 per cent to 6.2 per cent. This was a rapid rise by international standards, but the UK had previously been a low spender. It closed the gap with other countries but remained the 10th highest spender out of the EU15 countries.

Figure 1: Public expenditure on Education as a percentage of GDP



Source: HM Treasury Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses

In England there was a 75 per cent increase in spending on secondary schools and 56 per cent on primary. However, spending per head increased more for primary aged children than secondary, because of changes in pupil numbers. Capital spending grew from 6 per cent of the school budget to 11 per cent.

How was the money spent?

Much of the money went on attempts to improve quality – of teaching, leadership, the curriculum, learning experiences, the transition to work, and home-school relationships. Not everything can be readily counted.

However, Labour's additional spending purchased some big increases in the number of school staff and in new or refurbished school buildings. In England, the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers grew by 11.9 per cent, an increase of 48,000. Meanwhile, the number of FTE teaching assistants more than trebled, rising by 133,000 from 61,000 to 194,000, and numbers of other support staff more than doubled, from 73,000 to 169,000.

Overall, this provided an additional 275,000 FTE regular teachers and support staff in English schools, achieved as a 56 per cent increase in secondary and 46 per cent in primary. As shown in Table 1, the ratio of pupils to teachers and adults dropped in both primary and secondary schools. Class sizes also fell. Outside mainstream classes, the increase in support staff meant many children benefiting from extra small group tuition, mentoring, before and after-school clubs and family support.

Table 1: Pupil: Teacher and Pupil: Adult Ratios in Primary and Secondary Schools

	1997	2002	2007	2010
Primary schools				
Pupil Teacher Ratio	23.4	22.5	21.8	21.3
Pupil Adult Ratio	17.9	14.6	12.4	11.4
Secondary schools				
Pupil Teacher Ratio	16.7	16.9	16.5	15.7
Pupil Adult Ratio	14.5	13.3	11.4	10.4

Source: DCSF/DFE School Workforce in England Statistics

Over 160 secondary schools were replaced or refurbished under the Building Schools for the Future programme, with nearly another 450 well underway. Many of the new Academies were also in new buildings funded outside BSF.

Effects on academic attainment

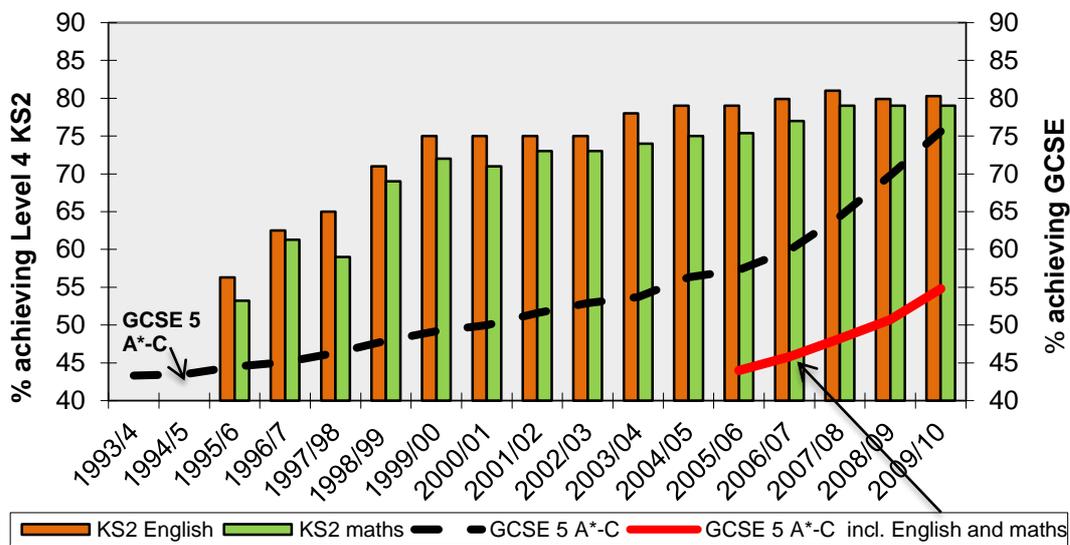
Test scores and GCSE passes point to substantial increases in attainment

Assessed at age 11 (Key Stage 2 SATs) and age 16 (GCSE) there were substantial increases in overall attainment. Figure 2 shows that age 11 results improved most in the late 1990s, continuing a pre-Labour trend, and rose again between 2003 and 2008, before appearing to plateau. Eighty per cent of children were achieving the expected level in 2010 compared with 63 per cent in English and 61 per cent in maths in 1997.

GCSE results at age 16 show a different pattern. The proportion of students achieving five passes at grades A* to C improved slowly till 2003/4 and then increased rapidly, with a step-change after 2007. By 2010, 76 per cent were achieving five higher grade GCSEs, compared with 45 per cent in 1997.

Whether these increases represent real improvements in knowledge and capability is debated. Comparison with international studies is inconclusive, providing no solid evidence that standards improved, nor any support for the claim that pupils in England slipped down the international league tables despite additional spending.

Figure 2: The trend for improved attainment continued under Labour



Source DFE: GCSE and Equivalent Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England, 2009/10, National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England 2009/10., (revised released 14 Dec 2010)

Attainment gaps narrowed between children from low-income families and other pupils

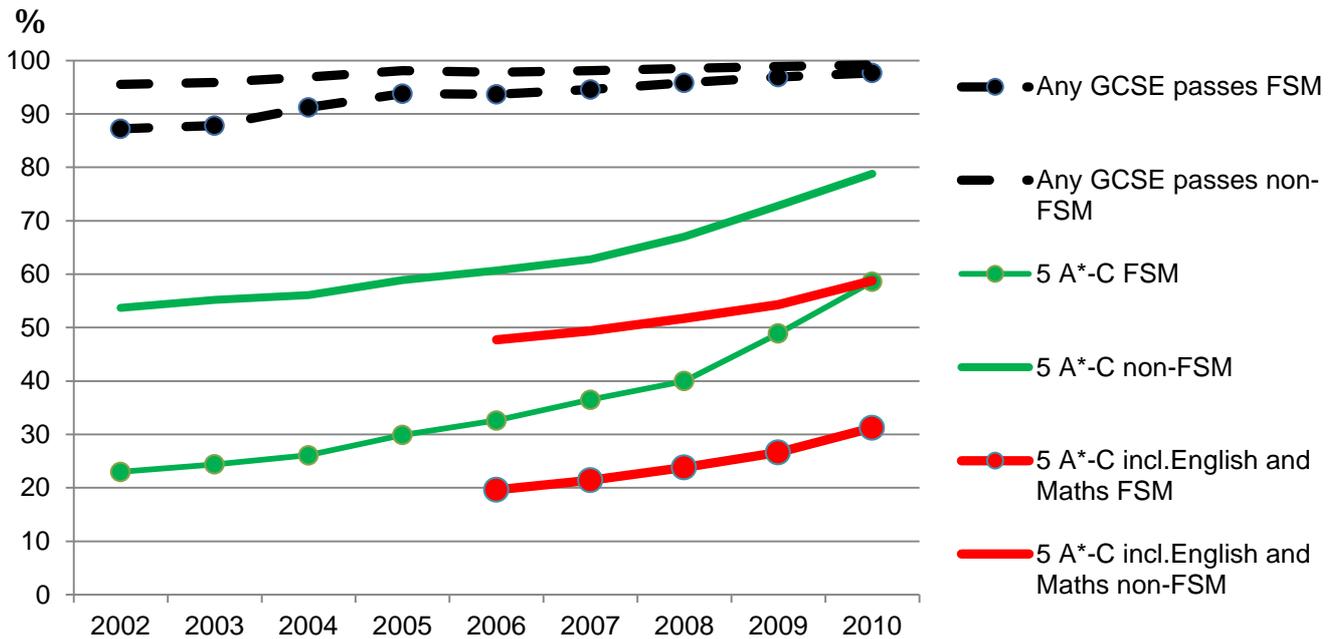
Socio-economic gaps in attainment closed on all indicators from 2002 (no national data was available before then). At age 11, the gap between pupils receiving free school meals (FSM) and non-FSM pupils closed gradually, with the latter's attainment appearing to reach a ceiling while that of FSM pupils continued to improve.

Changes at age 16 were more dramatic (Figure 3). In 1997, nearly 13 per cent of FSM pupils left with no GCSEs, but by 2010 this had dropped to just 2 per cent, virtually eliminating the socio-economic differential. At the higher standard of students achieving five higher grade GCSEs (A*-C), the gap fell from 30.7 percentage points in 1997 to 20.3 in 2010, with the biggest drop coming after 2008. However, at the still higher threshold of five A*-C including English and maths, the gap closed only very slightly. While FSM pupils improved on this measure, other pupils improved as fast. Academic analysis comparing England with other countries confirms this picture. Amongst lower attainers, England did not have particularly high socio-economic inequality in 2009, and this had improved over time. However, it had large socio-economic gaps among high attainers and this had not improved.

Some of the improvement for FSM pupils was achieved by the increasing availability of vocational subjects at GCSE level. What remains a matter for dispute is whether the introduction of these subjects was a positive development (enabling young people who would otherwise have been marginalised to achieve success in relevant subjects) or a negative one (because it diverted them from 'more difficult' subjects with greater currency in the labour market).

Outcomes for looked-after children were only monitored from 2006 and they improved on all measures. The gap between them and other children fell, in terms of those getting any GCSEs, but rose slightly at higher levels.

Figure 3: The closing gap in poorer children's attainment 2002-10



Source: DfE Statistical Releases SFR 04/2004, 08/2005, 09/2006, 46/2006, 38/2007, 32/2008, 34/2009, 37/2010, 04/2013

Post School Outcomes

Progress on post-school outcomes was slower than progress at age 11 or 16. Higher achievements at the bottom of the distribution meant that more 16 year olds were staying on at schools in 2010 than 1997. However the proportion of 16-18 year olds who were not in education, employment or training rose slightly from 8.9 per cent to 9.1 per cent during Labour's term in office.

Higher education expanded, but not quite as much as Labour intended. 46 per cent of young people went to university in 2009/10, against Labour's target of 50 per cent. There was some modest progress to greater equality of access. In 2009/10, 30.7 per cent of young full time first degree entrants to English universities were from lower social classes, compared with 27.9 in 2002/3. This contrasted with the situation in Scotland where the proportion from lower social classes fell over the same period, suggesting that Labour's tuition fee policy in England was perhaps less damaging to university access than its critics feared.

Conclusions

Labour undertook an ambitious programme of activity to reinvest in and modernise schools after two decades of low spending. It also sought to tackle entrenched socio-economic inequalities in educational attainment.

In many respects, it was successful in both these objectives. The Coalition inherited a larger, better paid, and better supported workforce, and a stock of newer and better equipped schools. These offered a wider range of learning opportunities and support services. Higher education institutions were better funded and making a greater commitment to widening participation. Standards overall rose, with the trend at GCSE level, especially, accelerating. The extent to which this reflected real increases in knowledge and learning is contested – international comparisons provide no conclusive evidence either way. Socio-economic gaps closed on every indicator.

However, Labour had by no means reached its goals when it left office in 2010. Wide socio-economic gaps still remained, especially at higher levels of educational attainment. Attainment levels among some of the most disadvantaged young people were still poor. Moreover, despite better progress at school, the proportion of school leavers aged 16 to 18 outside education or the labour market remained the same.

Commentators have accordingly argued, from different perspectives, that not enough was achieved. From the left it is suggested that greater choice and diversity, and Labour's emphasis on league tables, made education too narrow and marginalised some of the most disadvantaged learners. From the right it is maintained that 'easier' exams failed young people and that excessive centralisation held back innovation and excellence.

The Coalition has adopted both similar and different approaches to raising standards and closing gaps. Continuing the policy of choice and diversity, it is expanding the Academy programme and introducing new 'Free Schools', run by parents, charities or other local organisations. In contrast to Labour's centrally-run programmes, it is promoting greater school autonomy. Reforms to curriculum and assessment are being introduced with more emphasis on traditional subjects, fewer vocational equivalents and less coursework. Spending on schools has been relatively protected from austerity measures and disadvantaged students are targeted through the 'pupil premium'. A new suite of social mobility indicators has been introduced to keep track of gaps in educational achievement. Whether this programme proves more successful than Labour's endeavours remains to be seen. In early 2015 we will produce a similar report on the Coalition's record.

Further Information

The full version of this paper, by Ruth Lupton and Polina Obolenskaya, is available at <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spcc/WP03.pdf>. This is one of a series of papers produced as part of CASE's research programme *Social Policy in a Cold Climate* (SPCC). The research, concluding in 2015, examines the effects of the major economic and political changes in the UK since 2007, focusing on the distribution of wealth, poverty, inequality and social mobility.

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