The Truth About Education Standards And How To Fix Our Schools I

[This is a two-part essay by David Green, Director of *Civitas*, and others on education standards and a new policy for radical education reform. The second part will appear tomorrow…]

You are a parent. You expect schools to help you and others like you pass on knowledge to your children and equip them to uphold the moral consensus on which our free society depends. You want to believe that – at the very least – teachers will teach your children the basic skills, including handling numbers, reading fluently and writing correctly.

Yet with every year that a new set of examination results are published there is a fresh slanging match. The government claims that record results represent further improvement in the education system; and cavalcades of critics claim the same results represent further deterioration in the education system. What's the truth? How can you possibly be sure? In this brief report we set out the official statistics and contrast them with the best independent measures available today. And we provide references, and wherever possible web links, so that you can check for yourself.

Better results, higher standards?

The current government has provided massive inflows of funds for education over the last few years.[1] By 2005-06 investment is forecast to reach a whopping £57.8 billion, amounting to 5.6% of GDP,[2] and the government accordingly claims that these increases in funding have 'resulted in a measurable improvement in standards'.[3] So, official results are used to justify expenditures on the assumption that, if the number passing national examinations increases, then standards must be on the up.

Looked at this way, the figures do seem impressive. The number of 11 year-olds passing their Key Stage 2 tests in English at the expected Level 4 – which is supposed to represent a reasonable level of literacy or numeracy for that age group – has rocketed from 57% in 1995/96 to 77% in 2003/04, and this trend was paralleled in numeracy.[4] GCSE results have also shown a remarkable rise in recent years. At 16, the number achieving 5 or more A*-C grades has risen from 44.5% in 1995/96 to 53.4% in 2003/04[5], with the 2005 figure leaping to 55.7%[6]; while at 18, the number gaining A-C at A-level has risen from 46.4% in 1992 to 69.9% in 2004/05.[7]

And yet Digby Jones, Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry, has been complaining for years that the education system is letting people down, and in August 2004, a CBI survey of over 500 firms found that 37% were not satisfied with the basic literacy and numeracy of school leavers.[8] Quite apart from the disturbing fact that nearly half of all 16 year-olds leave school without 5 or more GCSEs, are those that do well in exams *still* not up to the job? When the likes of Jeffrey Robinson, a senior examiner in GCSE maths, claim, as he did in 2001, that pupils achieving As and Bs would have got Cs and Ds ten years earlier, is this just scaremongering?[9]

The critics are not alone. OfSTED reports also cast doubt on validity of claims that progress has been made. It recently found that 44% of boys and 29% of girls were leaving primary school unable to write properly, and highlighted the danger of focusing too much

on overall results for English.[10] Doing so masks the 20% gap between reading and writing. Whilst the expected standard in reading was met by 83% of pupils last year, only 63% met the standard in writing.[11] Thus one in three pupils are currently entering secondary school without the writing skills needed for the National Curriculum.

Mike Tomlinson, the head of a government inquiry into exam reform, in giving evidence to the Education Select Committee, also made swingeing criticisms of the system. Among other points, he remarked that it was 'difficult to defend' the existing system where marks aren't deducted for poor grammar and spelling. He also said it was possible to get '100 per cent in two questions, 0 per cent in another and be regarded as having passed', which meant that there was no guarantee in the system that the pupil had understood all the areas in the syllabus.[12]

Independent research

Fortunately we don't have to rely on government statistics alone. There is considerable independent analysis pointing towards relatively static or even declining levels of attainment. The two main fields of independent research are: longitudinal studies – standardised tests that allow us to measure changes over time – and international comparisons.

Longitudinal tests are revealing about examination performance at every level. The Curriculum Evaluation and Management (CEM) Centre at the University of Durham tracks the changing achievements of pupils throughout the educational system.[13] The CEM Centre's Year 11 Information System (YELLIS), is a monitoring programme providing performance indicators for pupils aged 14-16 (Years 10 and 11). The Basic YELLIS test is a measure of developed abilities providing a baseline of performance, collected from over 1300 secondary schools and 200,000 pupils. The test includes compulsory verbal and maths sections, and an optional non-verbal section.

The recorded change in ability since 2001 has been minimal. Results for the test are graded from A to D. For year 10 students (age 14/15), the proportion achieving an A or B has risen from 58% in 2001 to 60% in 2004, while those gaining a B or C rose from 47% to 49% and C or D from 35% to 37%. For year 11 students (age 15/16), the increases are similar. Those gaining A or B increased from 70% in 2001 to 72% in 2004, while students achieving B or C increased from 57% to 60% and those awarded C or D from 44% to 46%.[14] Research by Dr Robert Coe of the CEM Centre, has estimated the average GCSE achievement of students with the same score on the YELLIS test. The overall trend is for the GCSE grades achieved by students of the same (YELLIS) ability to increase, inviting the conclusion that GCSE standards had been lowered.[15]

At A-level there is evidence to suggest that attainments have actually fallen while A-level grades have risen. Dr Robert Coe from the CEM Centre has compared A-level results with actual changes in achievement by using the International Test of Developed Abilities (ITDA), which includes maths, verbal and non-verbal elements.[16] In all six core subjects studied, attainment fell steadily. In maths, for example, the average ITDA score was 72.3% in 1988, while by 1998 it had dropped to 59.3%. At the same time the average A-level score for this subject increased from 3.78 to 5.69.[17] Dr Coe estimates the degree of grade inflation, arguing that 'A-level candidates across a range of subjects achieved over a grade higher in 1998 than candidates of the same ability had done in 1988'.[18]

Similar research has also been carried out by the Engineering Council into the achievements of students taking A-level mathematics, using a diagnostic test designed by Coventry University, concluded that there is 'clear evidence' of a 'decline over time in the competency of students with the same A-level grade'.[19]

Even the government's own Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has been nervously doing its homework. When the QCA commissioned a report comparing literacy at Key Stage 2 between 1996 and 1999, it found that reading standards had fallen, as cut-scores – the scores identifying grade boundaries – were made more lenient,[20] leading to the conclusion that 'some of the recent improvements in reading results…are illusory'.[21] Concurring in March 2004, the Statistics Commission, an independent body set up by the Government to ensure the reliability of Government statistics,[22] evaluated the notion that national test scores of 11-year-olds in the late 1990s were evidence of a rapid rise in standards as a 'substantial overstatement'.[23]

International studies look at the issue from another perspective by comparing how pupils in different countries perform in standardised tests. However, in the most recent samples of the two best tests, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), England was excluded. In 1999, TIMSS placed England behind less developed nations like Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, but the latest study results for 2003 said that England had an 'unacceptable sampling response rate'.[24] For the same reason, when the 2003 PISA was released in December 2004, Britain was the only developed nation not to appear. Unofficially, Britain's performance figures placed it at 18th for maths, joint 11th in reading, and 12th in science.[25] Even granting caveats, it looks as though we wouldn't have performed very well.

[*End of Part I. Part II tomorrow*…]

Notes

[1] http://www.dfes.gov.uk/2002spendingreview/pdf/investmentforreform.pdf
[2] http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/326/0F/sr2004_ch07.PDF
[3] http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2004_0186; see also: www.cybertext.net.au/tct2002/disc_papers/organisation/barber.htm
[4] http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000489/index.shtml
[5] http://performance.treasury.gov.uk/T004_I0202.pdf
[6] http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000610/tab001a.xls
[7] http://www.qca.org.uk/downloads/4791_chart_of_all_alevels_92-01.pdf; http://www.jcq.org.uk/press_releases/results/index.cfm
[8] http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/press.nsf/0363c1f07c6ca12a8025671c00381cc7/e30c6e2644c7d997802570590041fa41?OpenDocument
[9] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2001/08/24/ngcse24.xml
[10] http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubs.displayfile&id=3851&type=pdf
[11] DfES Key Stage 2 SATs Performance Tables for 2004: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performancetables/
[12] Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence, Education and skills Committee, 24.11.04
[13] www.pipsproject.org/standardsovertime.asp
[14] www.yellisproject.org/Newsletter.asp?n=40&d=092004
[15] Dr Coe, R (1999) 'Changes in Examination Grades over Time: Is the same worth less?' www.cemcentre.org/research/examchanges/BERA2.html: Figure 7
[16] Dr Coe, R (1999) 'Changes in Examination Grades over Time: Is the same worth less?' www.cemcentre.org/research/examchanges/BERA2.html: Figure 7
[17] Tymms, P., and Fitz-Gibbon, C., 'Standards, achievement and educational performance' in Philips, R and Furlong, J. *Education, Reform and the State: Politics, policy and practice, 1976-2001*, Routledge: London, 2001. (A-level grades are coded as follows: A=10, B=8, C=6, D=4, E=2, N=0 and U= -2.)

[18] Dr Coe, R (1999) 'Changes in Examination Grades over Time: Is the same worth less?' www.cemcentre.org/research/examchanges/BERA2.html: Figure 7
[19] http://www.engc.org.uk/documents/Measuring_the_Maths_Problems.pdf
[20] Massey, et al (2002), *Comparability of national tests over time: key stage test standards between 1996 and 2001*. Final report to QCA of the comparability over time project (Research and Evaluation Division of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate)
[21] Ibid, 63.
[22] http://www.statscom.org.uk/media_pdfs/reports/023%20-%20Measuring%20Stds%20in%20English%20schools.pdf
[23] http://www.statscom.org.uk/media_pdfs/reports/023%20-%20Measuring%20Stds%20in%20English%20schools.pdf; see also: Peter Tymms, 'Are Standards rising in English primary schools?' *British Educational Journal*, 30 (2004), 4.
[24] http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005005.pdf
[25] http://www.pisa.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/60/34002216.pdf