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Contributors
ANDREW BAXTER is senior writer for FT special reports
SIR DAVID BELL is vice-chancellor of the University of Reading
SIMONEY KYRIAKOU is news editor of Financial Adviser
HELEN WARRELL is the FT's public policy correspondent (education and home affairs)
WARWICK MANSELL, JILL PARKIN and BIDDY PASSMORE are freelance journalists
Michael Gove, the education secretary, has not been shy about reforming the schools system during his four years in office. But it may turn out that one of the most significant decisions he has made in government has more to do with his role as a parent than as a minister.

For when it emerged this month that Gove would be the first ever Conservative education secretary to send his child to a state secondary school, it signalled that the ground was shifting in the British establishment’s relationship with private education.

It is perhaps predictable that Gove should express confidence in his own radical overhauls by sending his daughter Beatrice to a state school – and, as it happens, one of the best in London. But more surprising were his family’s reasons for doing so.

Sarah Vine, Gove’s wife, explained in her column for the Daily Mail that while the state “doesn’t care where its pupils come from”, independent education was, by contrast “about snobbery”.

“Of course the parents of private school children are paying for the best teachers and facilities,” she wrote. “But let’s be honest: they’re also paying for their child to mix with the right kind of kids.”

Soon after Vine expressed this distinctly un-Tory view, the prime minister’s wife, Samantha Cameron, was also reported to be planning to send her oldest child to a state secondary in September 2015. One friend of the family was quoted in the Daily Mail saying that Cameron wanted a “normal education” for her children, rather than a rarefied or elitist one.

“You get to meet normal children from normal houses… The children can be socially fluid,” the friend reportedly said.

For David Cameron – an old Etonian often accused of being out of touch with the electorate on account of his privileged education – the decision to send Nancy to a state school has clear political advantages. But it also reflects changing views about the benefits and drawbacks of private schooling. The recent revelation that five out of the six Conservatives who are finalising the party’s 2015 manifesto attended Eton College shows that for people in public life, educational provenance can be an uncomfortable subject, even 30 years after they have left school. It is almost as if in some jobs or sectors, having been to a prestigious independent school is a liability.

Of course, the decisions made by government ministers are not necessarily relevant to the dilemmas and deliberations faced by most parents in the UK. For a start, many would argue that the prime minister and education secretary are lucky to have a choice of whether to send their children to state or private schools. The steady year-on-year
spanking-new buildings, strong discipline, sporting rigour and academic ambition.” Finally, Tatler’s reporter gets to the nub of the issue: “Best of all, when you do finally get into the Cabinet, everyone will love you because you didn’t go to Eton.”

The key question is what this means for the school system. In the private sector, foreign parents are still willing to pay high premiums for a traditional British public school and increasing numbers of places are being taken by pupils from Russia, China and the Middle East. But to avoid desertion by local UK pupils, some schools are offering lower fees to British parents.

In the state sector, meanwhile, competition for the best schools is only increasing – there were seven applicants per place at London’s Grey Coat Hospital school, where Gove’s daughter will go.

The education secretary has vowed to break down the “Berlin Wall” separating private education from its state counterparts. With more and more independent schools such as Eton and Wellington College sponsoring local state academies and free schools, it appears it might finally be possible for some children to experience the best of both systems.

Gove was clear, earlier this year, that this should be the aim. “My ambition for our education system is simple,” he told teachers. “When you visit a school in England standards are so high all round that you should not be able to tell whether it’s in the state sector or a fee-paying independent.”

Some public schools are reported to be thinking about cutting fees for British pupils.

rises in independent school fees, coupled with the effects of the downturn on family finances, mean the middle classes are increasingly being priced out of the education market and can no longer afford for their children the type of education they may have had themselves.

Recent research by the Financial Times proves this point. While some private school fees shot up by as much as 49 per cent in real terms between 2003 and 2013, net household earnings for the core professional classes – engineers, solicitors and academics – contracted in real terms by 1.7 per cent over the same period.

Even the top 1 per cent of earners – people such as doctors, lawyers and bankers – have seen only a 9 per cent rise over the decade, demonstrating a yawning gulf between school fee increases and high-end incomes.

So momentous is the resulting migration into government-funded education that even Tatler, the high society journal, has started to include some of the country’s top state schools alongside its annual list of the best in the independent sector.

“Is private really superior? Not always, not any more,” reads an article in the January edition. “The state sector has some
Exam data make comparisons difficult – but some areas do better. By Andrew Baxter

Apples and pears come to mind when comparing educational attainment levels in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is not just that Scotland has its own examination system – the other three countries all set GCSEs and A-levels but have considerable leeway over the curriculum, how they run their schools and the information they publish about results.

Parents and employers in England can access the most information, as the country’s Department for Education remains wedded to league tables. Wales stopped publishing league tables in 2001, but performance information is available through school prospectuses and, at a school level, through the Welsh government’s website.

Scotland publishes national information and local authorities publish their own statistics. Northern Ireland also provides national statistics and, following a freedom of information request, a local breakdown is available at The Detail, an online investigation and analysis service.

Fortunately, there are data for assessing the performance of 15-year-olds. The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) is a triennial international survey that focuses on reading, mathematics and science skills. In the 2012 tests, Scotland and England were ahead in all three subjects and overall performed similarly. Northern Ireland was a little behind in all three disciplines, while Wales was further back, having also performed relatively poorly in 2009.

John Jerrim, a lecturer at the University of London’s Institute of Education, suggests Wales might have a higher proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students, although he notes Pisa “tells you where you are but doesn’t necessarily reveal why”.

The Pisa results fuelled a political debate in Wales over educational standards, which was stoked by the latest annual report from Estyn, the Welsh schools inspectorate. “Fewer than half of secondary schools are good or better [than in the previous year] and the proportion that is unsatisfactory has increased from one in seven to one in four,” it said.

Reform, including new literacy and numeracy tests and better accountability, is under way, but Welsh ministers warn there are no quick fixes.

The London-based Joint Council for Qualifications publishes exam statistics for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Overall, 68.1 per cent of students achieved grades A*-C last year in their GCSEs, with Northern Ireland at 76.5 per cent, England 67.9 per cent and Wales at 65.7 per cent, although it narrowed the gap with England slightly.

Arguably a more useful statistic, published in England and Northern Ireland, is the percentage of students gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent, but including English and maths.

On this basis, Northern Ireland increased its score from 60.1 per cent in 2012 to 60.9 per cent last
Bright spots

Applications for university from 18-year-olds in disadvantaged areas reached their highest rates this year. Northern Ireland was top at 26 per cent, according to Ucas.

Data sources at www.ft.com/schools

Teacher turnover

Staff recruitment and retention spark a political battle

Few topics divide the world of education like the recruitment and retention of teachers. Michael Gove, education secretary, is encouraging graduates into the profession through schemes such as Teach First and Schools Direct. But the government is also imposing demanding achievement targets and many head teachers are caught between a desire to hire the best and the need to manage a tight budget.

Some teachers are leaving, and the government has noticed. In January, Michael Wilshaw, chief inspector of schools, told the education select committee that it was a “national scandal” that about two-fifths of teachers leave within five years.

But what constitutes “leaving”? A point being debated in parliament is turnover (joining another school) versus wastage (going altogether). Stephen Gorard, professor of education and public policy at Durham University, explains: “If someone moves from a secondary school to a further education college, this might be treated as wastage. [This] gives a misleading impression about an attractive profession, which is pensioned and has cachet.”

A Department for Education representative concurs. “Teaching has never been more attractive, with more top graduates entering the profession than ever and vacancy rates at their lowest for eight years.”

Pay reforms, schools “choosing” to become academies and head teachers being given autonomy ensure ‘good teachers’ are recognised, he said.

Research by Nasuwt, the teaching union, in 2012 found 53 per cent of teachers said job satisfaction had fallen, while 54 per cent felt like leaving altogether. “The profession remains on the verge of a national recruitment and retention crisis. No one should be surprised that applications for training are down and resignations are up,” says Chris Keates, general secretary. Alan Smithers, director of the University of Buckingham’s centre for education and employment research, says: “The government knows there is a problem, which is why its current policies aim to correct it. But the reasons people leave now were the same a decade ago: it is hard to maintain a decent work-life balance, and the continual, low-level disruption in some classrooms makes it difficult to teach.”

Labour says there is a particular problem in languages, maths and physics but warns of the danger to pupils’ education of bringing in too many inexperienced people, who tend not to stay.

Steve Robinson, executive head teacher at Birley Learning Community in Sheffield, says students’ education must be paramount. “Consistent, outstanding teaching, based on good pedagogy and excellent relationships in the classroom, are the basis for good outcomes for students. Anything that disrupts those relationships can be to the pupils’ detriment,” he says.

Simoney Kyriakou
All eyes on the clock

Would extending pupils’ day mean better exam results? By Warwick Mansell

Longer school days and shorter holidays are the best promise any political party could make ahead of the next general election, says a former top adviser to the prime minister.

Paul Kirby, former head of David Cameron’s Number 10 Policy Unit, suggested in January that schools should open for longer. Parents could work full-time without incurring childcare costs, he said, while results would improve, as the time was used for further study and extracurricular activities.

Michael Gove, the education secretary, says he supports parts of the proposals. But how realistic, or worthwhile, would they be?

In February, Gove was asked on the BBC’s The Andrew Marr Show for his views on Kirby’s suggestion that state schools open 45 hours a week, 45 weeks a year. Most now operate for 39 weeks, from 8.30am or 9am to between 3pm and 3.30pm. “I don’t believe in shortening the school holidays… but I do think that we do need to have a longer school day,” said Gove.

Many parents might see this as attractive, but sceptics question whether there is good evidence of correlation between school hours and academic achievement.

In evidence last June to the School Teachers’ Review Body, which oversees teachers’ contracts, Gove cited pupils in east Asia, who do well in international tests and were “often learning for many more hours than their peers in England, giving them a critical edge”.

The FT analysed country-by-country results in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa), which tests 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science. There was no significant correlation with OECD data on countries’ school hours.

Scores from the 2012 Pisa maths tests put Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan in the top four. But OECD figures say that in Japan and South Korea (statistics for Singapore and Taiwan were not provided), lower secondary pupils get less teaching time than their counterparts in England. Many Japanese and South Korean teenagers attend after-school private “cram schools”, which do not feature in the data, but the DfE does not advocate this.

Asked by Marr whether there would be extra funding, Gove was non-committal. “One of the things that we need to look at is exactly how it can be delivered appropriately,” he said. His suggestion would not be “mandated” from the Department for Education (DfE).

In evidence to the review body, Gove cited Ark Schools, the London-based academy chain. Academies, semi-independent state schools funded directly by central government, can agree terms with teachers. Ark sets teachers’ hours at an above-average 8am to 5pm. Alex Bigham, a spokesman for Ark, says this makes possible a school day for pupils of 8.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Thursday, and 8.30am to 3pm on Friday.

However, some newer Ark academies cannot offer extended hours because they are slightly less generously funded. “The DfE holds up groups such as Ark as positive models for the benefits of having a longer school day. But... the government does need to recognise the additional costs that go with it,” says Bigham.

‘Teachers’ contracts are another issue. David Young Community
We want more schools to use the freedom to vary the length of the school day and we want more schools to use this freedom. The DfE says there is evidence from many countries of variation in performance between pupils who get different amounts of teaching. Some fast-improving countries in Pisa tests, including Germany, Turkey, Mexico and some US states, have increased their hours, it adds.

Academy in Leeds, also cited by Gove, runs extra sessions from 3pm to 4.35pm, four days a week, including arts, sport and revision classes. Ros McMullen, the principal, says this is possible because teachers’ contracted hours are 8.15am to 4.35pm.

Teachers’ contracts in non-academy institutions (about half of England’s state-funded secondaries and 90 per cent of primaries) limit formal hours to 1,265 a year, equating to 8.30am to 3pm, Monday to Friday, for 39 weeks.

Gove wants this cap scrapped, but the review body rejects this, arguing it is sufficiently flexible and safeguards teachers’ workloads, with most working well beyond the formal 1,265 hours.

“The difficulty [for Gove] is that if teachers are under national terms and conditions, schools will have no way of implementing a scheme such as ours, beyond asking teachers to volunteer,” McMullen says.

A DfE spokeswoman says: “We have given all schools the freedom to vary the length of the school day... and we want more schools to use this freedom.”

The DfE says there is evidence from many countries of variation in performance between pupils who get different amounts of teaching. Some fast-improving countries in Pisa tests, including Germany, Turkey, Mexico and some US states, have increased their hours, it adds.
With just over a year to go until the next election, shadow schools minister Kevin Brennan is already considering the challenges he will inherit if Labour wins.

Aware that the conglomeration of free schools, academies and comprehensives has created a vastly different landscape from that left by the last Labour government, he surveys with some trepidation what he calls the “Govean archipelago” of structures put in place by education secretary Michael Gove.

But as the only former teacher covering education on either the government or opposition front benches, Brennan considers himself well qualified for the task ahead – especially restoring trust and confidence to a teaching profession whose morale is “in the cellar” after a long-running battle with Gove.

Top of his to-do list is sorting out the growing crisis in school places sparked by a birth-rate boom. “Our concern is that the government hasn’t been focused on that as its top priority,” he says. “It’s been very keen to pursue what to us seemed to be pet projects around things like free schools… rather than actually devoting the resources that are available to meet the places shortage”.

He is not alone in voicing such fears. According to the Local Government Association, by September 2015, almost half of England’s school districts will have more primary pupils than places and some authorities will face a 20 per cent shortfall. Not only is it difficult to conjure up extra capacity when budgets are tight, but the issue could become toxic for the party in power when the squeeze hits hardest.

But the Welshman – who was children’s minister, third sector minister and further education and skills minister in the last government – is also concerned about how to manage the free schools, which he says diverted Gove from the places shortage.

The conundrum is how to solve what Brennan describes as an “accountability deficit” caused by a lack of adequate oversight for schools and academies, which lie outside local authority control.

Describing the government’s thinking on this as “very vague” and “muddled”, Brennan promises that Labour’s solution will be set out in a review by David Blunkett, the party’s former education secretary.

Brennan says the aim is to avoid a situation where the secretary of state for education is in the “ludicrous position” of running more than half of the secondary schools in the country. “There is no way that somebody in Whitehall can know what’s going on in every school in every part of the country,” he says.

Given the sensitivity around restoring the role of local government in the management of schools, Brennan admits the issue is fraught with “all sorts of very, very difficult questions”.

“The problem for the government is you can’t be the promoter and the ideological outrider for a policy like free schools and at the same time be… holding it to account and ensuring that the standards are being met and the probity is there,” he says.

Unlike shadow education secretary Tristram Hunt, who joined the opposition front bench last year, Brennan has been on the shadow education team since the coalition took power, and consequently has a long view of the reforms. He recalls that one of his earliest fears about free
schools has been their power to employ unqualified teachers – a subject that caused Hunt political difficulty when it emerged he had taught some primary school lessons himself, despite criticising unqualified teachers.

However, Labour is emphatic that it would not allow teachers without proper qualifications into the classroom.

Inevitably, the shadow schools minister is pessimistic about the prospects if the Conservatives win in 2015. He warns that a future Tory administration would be likely to continue its ideological mission to create a more competitive education market by trying to “float off” state schools to private interests such as charitable trusts or profit-making entities – which has already happened in Sweden, the home of the free school movement.

“[Schools] would then be run in the same way that chains of supermarkets are run… in a branded way across the country and you’d send your child to a Tesco school or to a Sainsbury’s school or to a Waitrose school or Co-op school,” he says.

The shadow minister is keen to resist such market liberalisation at any cost, arguing that it goes to the heart of a Tory blindspot.

“I think it’s wrong,” he says. “It doesn’t understand the nature of education, it doesn’t understand the motivations for people involved in education… We’ve seen this ideological experiment fail before and I think it will fail again.”

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Choosing a School

Beyond the prospectus

Parents need to look hard to find the right place for their child, writes Jill Parkin

Walking into the girls' toilets during a secondary school open evening, I found two other mothers carrying out an inspection.

"It says a lot about a school," said one, checking the locks. "Clean, dirty? Lots of soap? Sexual health advice notices: good or bad?"

"This roller towel's very wet and stuck," said the other. "Yuck."

So much is polished and laid on for parents at open evenings that it can be difficult to know what to look out for or ask. You may have done the obvious checks, such as inspection reports, exam results and university success, but sports trophies, art displays and smooth-talking headteachers can compromise your critical faculties.

Jacqui Hanlon, a lawyer and mother of four, knew just what she wanted eight years ago, when the family moved from Cambridgeshire to Norfolk and she began looking for a school for her daughter Rebecca, who is now 15 and studying for her GCSEs at Norwich High School for Girls.

"We wanted intellectual rigour, so of course we asked about curriculum matters and homework, but the attitude to education is more important," she says. "In the end, it was the school's approach to learning beyond the classroom that sent her there and kept her there. The opportunities have been amazing, about so much more than Ucas [university entry] points. In year nine, Rebecca had a two-week trip to India to study Hinduism and Buddhism. The philosopher AC Grayling has also visited the school to talk about ethics. "The school produces confident girls who are intellectually curious and keen to engage in learning beyond the curriculum. The attitude towards girls and science is fantastic." With teachers' support, Rebecca won a place on a year 10 science camp at the John Innes Centre for plant science and microbiology in Norwich.

In both independent and state sectors, asking about the extras may reveal more about a school than the league tables. You may find — or be able to persuade parents you know to organise — a "meet the parents" event. Parents whose children are already at a school get together, often at a local primary school, to give parents of prospective pupils the lowdown on local state secondary schools. The idea started in London two years ago but is spreading across the country (meettheparents.info).

The more you talk to parents of children already at a school, the better. They can tell you the school's teacher retention record, for example. Pupil mobility is also important: if children come and go frequently, you may worry about progress and friendships.

Helen Fraser, chief executive of the Girls' Day School Trust, which runs 26 independent schools in England and Wales, says a child's happiness is key. "Parents normally consider the overall excellence of the school — not just its academic results and league table position but its excellence in music, drama, sport and art," she says.

"They also look at location and ask how easy a school is to get to. They look at its university destinations and even at what its alumni are doing. But the most important question is: 'Is this going..."
The jet-set tutors

Influx of international pupils drives a boom in tuition

The influx of rich foreign families to London – from the likes of Russia, the Middle East, east Asia and southern Europe – has triggered a boom in demand for places at top schools. That in turn is causing rapid growth in the school placement and tutoring services that help parents get their children admitted.

"Until five or six years ago, the constituency of London schools was London. Now their constituency is the globe," says Susan Hamlyn, director of the Good Schools Guide Advice Service (GSGAS).

Wealthy foreign parents may not make a final decision to move to the UK until their children have found places at good schools, she adds.

Tutoring agencies and educational consultancies are growing, with more opening in the UK and abroad. Demand is reinforcing a trend towards tutoring at a younger age. Where tutors once focused on GCSE and A-level, the emphasis in London is now on getting pupils into secondary schools.

"Preparing boys and girls for entry to top secondary schools at 11 or 13 is our biggest market," says Malachy Guinness, director of Bright Young Things Tuition. "Nearly 60 per cent of our work is now with foreign families."

The company has set up BYT International for families based abroad. If there is time, they will send a tutor out for a year or more – to, say, Moscow, Kazakhstan or Abu Dhabi – to live with the family and tutor the children after school and at weekends, as well as joining them on holiday. The tutor teaches them English and the subjects they’ll need for Common Entrance, such as science and history, as well as giving ‘cultural guidance’. The cost for a year? About £50,000.

"It can be hard for wealthy parents to accept that a place at their dream school cannot be bought," says Guinness. "Many of the foreign families we deal with are used to paying a bit more and getting things in a hurry."

Harry Williams of educational consultants Bruton Lloyd (catering to wealthy parents mainly in Russian-speakers) also stresses the need for families to plan several years ahead if they can. And they should consider both boarding and single sex schools.

"We explain to them that most of the top independent schools in and around London are single sex and that getting your child into a top London day school is extremely difficult," says Williams. Bruton Lloyd, like BYT, sends its graduate tutors abroad to stay with families, as well as providing tuition in London.

The GSGAS package, starting at £2,500, covers everything from assessments to arranging interviews with schools and introductions to the best tutorial agencies.

"That means agencies with well-qualified, experienced tutors – not jolly undergraduates who play polo," says Hamlyn.

Biddy Passmore
Spoilt for choice

➔ A good school in every neighbourhood has to be the priority, says Sir David Bell

There are no votes in letting schools wither on the vine.

The columnist

Sir David Bell is vice-chancellor of the University of Reading and former permanent secretary at the Department for Education

The columnist

Sir David Bell is vice-chancellor of the University of Reading and former permanent secretary at the Department for Education.

Two-thirds think the nearest families should have priority but less than 40 per cent approve of moving to good schools' catchment areas. Half say parents have a duty to choose the best school; 60 per cent say they should balance it with other children's needs. Only 4 per cent say the top priority is lots of choice.

So, parents are not hard-nosed, calculating, rational economic automatons. Values matter. Debates about choice in education go to the heart of the British psyche about public services.

First, it seems parents are not crying out for unfettered competition. In the main, they want a degree of choice but the best choice for their child is a good local school. Of course, some parents will pay a premium to move near top schools. But would they if there was a good local school?

Second, parents do not want to let the market decide when it comes to letting failing institutions go to the wall. Rows over schools being forced to become academies show that some parents will continue to back poor schools, guided by their hearts as much as their heads.

Directly intervening to turn round struggling schools is the smarter political option. It was not the market that led to London having some of the best state schools. It was direct government action, in the same way that ministers stripped an academy chain of nearly a third of its schools last month.

There are no votes in letting schools wither on the vine. Allowing education to suffer in the name of choice and competition is not the British way.

Third, parents are still highly suspicious about profit-making in state education, although every other aspect of a school's operation can now be outsourced. That is why school autonomy and rigorous accountability, decisive leadership and governance, high teaching standards, robust intervention in underperformers and support from stronger providers are proven to be more effective and popular than simply letting the market decide.

Some schools will always be oversubscribed, so we must make sure that second choice does not mean second class. The option to send your child to a good school or a mediocre one is no choice at all.

The right policy is often the simplest – a good school in every neighbourhood. When politicians focus on that, rather than an abstract notion of choice that often creates greater and greater complexity in the system, education will be heading in the right direction.
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