



Agenda Setting
LISA NANDY

Head head head head head head head head head head

Gove's sums just don't add up

Graham Lane says current plans will not improve results and help all students succeed

Michael Gove has been in the headlines again. He apologised to his former teacher for being badly behaved at school. The Education Secretary has indicated that he would like to see Britain leave the European Union. And he has suggested that MPs intervene to sort out failing schools in their constituencies. However, Gove's teacher remembers him a hard-working and well-behaved student. Opting out the EU would damage Britain's already parlous financial situation. And MPs have no power over schools.

Gove holds another misguided view: that all academy schools are performing well and certainly better than local education authority schools. They are not. Further, local government can be proud of its record raising standards and turning round failing schools.

In 1997, the Labour Government gave local authorities the duty to promote higher educational standards in all publicly funded schools in their own areas. Many do that very effectively. While here is no simple route to success, London, for instance, has seen a significant rise in educational standards, especially in the most deprived boroughs.

Sadly, is now more difficult for local councils to raise standards, especially as more schools become academies. Local government has no role in helping academy schools. They schools must rely on buying in support from the private sector or look to the academy chain which they have been required to join. This is little more than privatising services to schools.

In 1986, the London Borough of Newham was bottom of the league tables as regards the GCSE examination. However, its results have continued to improve every year including this year.

It is difficult to discover how local authorities is performing now, since the Government has stopped publishing the figures relating to them and we only have the results of individual schools to go on. But Newham remains high in the table. The measures it took to raise standards included funding the schools to avoid class sizes of more than 30, publishing all the GCSE results with full details, setting targets for improvement



The Education Secretary is misguided and mistaken

supported by an inspection and school advisory service, appointing the very best head teachers they could recruit and increasing the number of classroom assistants.

Newham council also adopted a policy of integrating almost all the children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. It established a school governors' forum, so that councillors and governors had a regular dialogue on the educational policies of the borough. Many other local authorities have made similar improvements.

There is no evidence that setting up academy schools improves standards. There was no such improvement in grant-maintained schools under the last Conservative Government.

If a school is judged to be failing, the reasons for this must be fully understood. It may be the head teacher, a lack of resources, a high turnover of staff, inadequate buildings, staff shortages, or a high turnover of students through no fault of the school. (Many schools in London have a turnover of more than 30 per cent of their students every year.)

Removing schools from a community of local schools can be very damaging. Schools work best if there are in partnership with other neighbouring schools, rather than in competition with one another. The role of local government is not to run or manage schools, but to provide the necessary strategic planning and support to help schools to achieve and work together.

Local councils should plan school admissions properly and deal with issues such as major school repairs and establishing new schools where they are

needed. Academies are being set up to operate as separate institutions and their existence prevents a partnership of local schools working together to raise standards in the area.

Now Gove wants all schools to become free-standing, or privately-run and independent establishments. This is likely to end in tears. Many young people are at risk of missing out on an appropriately balanced education that equips with all the knowledge and skills they will need in the

Cutting back the school curriculum to a narrow range of subjects, which are only assessed by an external examination, will limit the life chances of many in this country. Everyone must acquire what he or she will need to survive and compete in a fast-changing world, including fluency in at least one other European language.

The GCSE taken at the age of 16 is increasingly irrelevant in opening up opportunities. But the Conservative-led coalition prefers to look back to the previous century for its inspiration.

The Labour Party must challenge this backward thinking and develop a vision of the future in which damaging current policies are reversed and we have a publically-funded education system that seeks high standards for all and not just a few.

No other European country is planning to follow Gove's lead. How likely is that he is right and everyone else is wrong?

Graham Lane is a member of the European Lifelong Learning Commission and a former chair of the Local Government Association's education committee