

**The Starmer government looks a poor guardian of England's improving schools,
It is fiddling with what works and not yet dealing with what doesn't
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Many public services in Britain are in a wretched state. Yet England's schools are a clear exception. Pupils are increasingly numerate and literate, compared with peers abroad. In maths tests for the OECD, a club of rich countries, English teenagers bounded from 27th place in 2009 up to 11th by 2022. In reading, a recent test placed England's primary schools fourth in the world. Foreigners tour England's classrooms in search of tips. They include envious visitors from America, where trends in test scores are less encouraging.

In education as in so much else, the Labour government that took office in July talks a lot about the terrible problems the Conservatives left behind, such as decrepit classrooms and staff shortages. It is less willing to admit how far standards have risen in recent years—and how unfashionable Tory policies, such as stiffer curriculums and exams, helped bring that about. Instead of a vision for improving English education further, Labour promises to tinker. At best that is a wasted opportunity; at worst, it will do serious damage.

Labour's approach to education typifies the government's broader failings. It has a juvenile fixation with social class. Thus far Labour's big boast in education has been levying value-added tax at 20% on private-school fees from January 1st. Few believe the main aim is to raise money. Rather, it is to squeeze institutions that the party deems shameless purveyors of privilege. This unhelpful policy has stoked a furious row about places that educate only 6% of Britain's children. It reflects a misplaced priority: these days plenty of state schools outperform private ones, despite having poorer pupils and less cash.

Another tendency in education (as elsewhere) is deference to public-sector unions, whose members make up much of Labour's rank and file. The party is right to fret that teachers are getting harder to recruit and retain. The long-term answer is higher pay. But the government seems keener to offer other concessions that put standards at risk. It has ordered schools inspectors to issue vaguer, gentler (and thus less informative) reports. It says it will reduce schools' freedom to set curriculums and pay star teachers better. Some school leaders have used their autonomy poorly. But others have bred excellence.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, has identified some serious problems in state education. One is absenteeism: about a quarter of secondary-schoolers are missing at least 10% of the time, twice as many as before the pandemic. The share who miss half their lessons is going up. Another is the buckling system for the one-fifth of pupils with special educational needs, who are not doing any better than they were five years ago, even though spending on it has soared. Yet in both these areas Labour has little by way of convincing plans.

Indeed the prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, has been no more able to articulate a grand vision for the future of education than he has for the rest of his government. Despite being out of office for 14 years, Labour took power with an undercooked agenda and fuzzy, contradictory ideas about what Britain needs. Compare that with Sir Tony Blair, who arrived in 1997 with a lucid view of education's central role in making Britain fit for globalisation.

Lacking a big idea, the government may keep meddling hamfistedly. In a few months Ms Phillipson will hear back from a panel reviewing what children are taught and how they are assessed. Some hope that the government will shift the emphasis away from exams and towards nice-sounding "life skills", such as creativity and teamwork. Yet worsening grades in places that have pursued such a trendy path—including Scotland, which like Northern Ireland and Wales controls its own schools—suggest this is a dismal dead end.

Rather than unpicking Tory reforms that improved literacy and numeracy, Ms Phillipson would do better to entrench them and focus on absenteeism and special needs. As things stand, the government risks harming one of the few public services its predecessor left in good shape.