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Balls rejects claims that political interference damages schooling

By Colin Brown, Deputy Political Editor
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Ed Balls, the Children's Secretary, has come out fighting after researchers claimed political interference in the curriculum was preventing primary schools from providing a better education. "I am not going to apologise for delivering what parents want even if these researchers – on the basis of often old research – don't like it," he said.

Mr Balls accused the researchers at Cambridge University, who published a damning report yesterday on primary education, of being "out of touch with the concerns of parents I speak to around the country who want to know their children are learning the basics of English and maths".

He was also facing a backlash from parents waiting to hear next week whether their children have been allocated places at schools of the choice. Warning that allocation by catchment area was unfair, the chief schools adjudicator Philip Hunter said choice almost always led to segregation. "It's a myth to say there's a system where everybody is achieving their first-choice school," he said.

"It leads to a position where some schools have got such a high proportion of children from difficult backgrounds that there's no chance at all," he said.

However parents in Brighton awaiting the results of a lottery to decide who gets which school places protested they were being used as "guinea pigs" for social engineering. Mr Balls insisted it was for local authorities to decide their admissions policy and for the adjudicator to resolve disputes.

He was also facing a backbench rebellion after announcing to Labour's spring conference in Birmingham that the Government is accelerating the delivery of city academies – a programme which has led to 10 per cent of education funding going to 1 per cent of schools. Ken Purchase, the MP for Wolverhampton North East, tabled a Labour motion in the Commons attacking the expansion of city academies, expressing disappointment that "Ed Balls should have been taken in by this nonsense spouted about the improvements in academies when there is no real evidence to show they can do anything at all, unless they have huge tranches of money that should be available in the education system generally". He added: "I hate to go on the record criticising the Prime Minister but I don't think he is in touch with English education."

Mr Balls told the BBC: "Those who use poverty or deprivation as an excuse for poor performance are letting children down. That is why I am expanding city academies."

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REUTERS/DARREN STAPLES
Britain's Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Ed Balls speaks during the Labour Party spring conference in Birmingham.

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