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The Big Question: Ten years on, has Tony Blair fulfilled his pledge to improve education?

BY **RICHARD GARNER**, **EDUCATION EDITOR** | Thursday 30 November 2006



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Prime Minister Tony Blair is making a speech on education today to commemorate the tenth anniversary of his pledge to make "education, education and education" his top priority.

Has Blair delivered?

He has certainly kept education as a top priority during his nine years of premiership - constantly referring to the need to establish a world-class education service in the UK to compete in the global economy. Whether he has achieved that aim is debatable. Certainly, the statistics show a big improvement in test and exam results - both in national curriculum tests and at GCSE and A-level. However, the

Government has still to reach many of the targets it set itself.

How has primary education fared?

This was certainly one of the biggest success stories of the first Blair administration. There were real improvements in the percentage of pupils reaching the required standard in maths and English tests at 11 - the first improvements since the end of the Second World War, according to the National Foundation for Education Research. Now



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79 per cent reach the standard in English and 76 per cent in maths - compared with 57 per cent and 54 per cent a decade ago. However, the improvements have tailed off after a remarkable start, so ministers have not yet reached their 2002 target of 80 per cent in English and 75 per cent in maths - let alone the 85 per cent target for both subjects set for 2002.

What happened to class sizes?

Blair promised to outlaw class sizes of more than 30 for five- to seven-year-olds by 2002. He achieved that a year early. There were some 9,000 children still in larger classes because of late mid-term arrivals and events like that - but it was a major reduction from the 485,000 in 1996. However, the numbers have risen to 28,000 in the past five years.

How have secondary schools fared?

Again, the statistics give a good story, with the percentage of youngsters getting at least five A* to C grade passes rising from 44.5 per cent in 1996 to 58.1 per cent this year. In A-levels, the percentage of A-grade passes has risen from 15 per cent to 23.9 per cent. However, this has brought problems in itself with university admissions tutors saying they can no longer select the brightest candidates for oversubscribed courses - such as law and medicine. Here, many critics argue, lies the Government's biggest failure: its lack of progress in tackling exam reform.

Where has it failed?

The Government set up an inquiry into 14 to 19 education under the chairmanship of former chief schools inspector Sir Mike Tomlinson,



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in 2002, and then rejected its main finding - that the current GCSE and A-level system should be replaced by an overarching diploma covering both academic and vocational education. As a result, the Department of Education is now piloting its own specialised vocational diplomas - in subjects as wide ranging as leisure and tourism and engineering - but many believe they will still be considered second-class as long as they are separate.

The problems go deeper than that, though. The Department has made great play of the fact that it wants harder A-levels and GCSEs, but still has not come up with a definite plan as to how to achieve that. In the meantime, many of the independent schools have ditched GCSE in favour of the International GCSE (which is more akin in standards to the old A-level). They are also threatening to break away from A-levels to a new exam, the Pre U - which again is more traditional, A-levels without coursework if you like.

The worry is all this will create a two-tier system, with universities favouring those taking the Pre U (ie independent school pupils) because they consider it to be harder.

Is the 'bog-standard' comprehensive still there?

There are still a few - 2,600 of England's state secondary schools are now specialist in one subject or another leaving about 400 comprehensives. According to government advisers, most of these perform poorly - and have not produced good enough results to become specialist. By 2010, 200 of these will have become academies - privately-sponsored state schools run by the sponsors themselves. The rest, ministers hope, will join with a better performing school locally to form a "trust" or federation and be lifted that way. Performance in the specialist schools, especially at GCSE, has

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improved markedly - but the jury is still out on the academies. One big plus is that research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research has shown they are not selecting the elite - they are taking more than their fair share of pupils entitled to free school meals. A worry is over the amount of control the sponsors have - particularly in the case of those sponsored by the Christian evangelist Sir Peter Vardy, the car dealer, where there have been allegations that creationism is being taught in science lessons.

What about school buildings?

After decades of chronic underinvestment by previous governments, there has been a major increase in capital spending. Labour inherited a situation where only £700,000 a year was being spent on improving school buildings. This has now shot up to £5bn a year, and is forecast to reach £8bn by 2008.

What has happened to higher education?

One of the first acts of Blair's first government was to bring in student fees. He has since gone even further down the road of introducing a market into higher education by allowing universities to charge top-up fees of up to £3,000 a year. Critics say this will make it impossible to reach his target of 50 per cent of youngsters going on to higher education by the end of the decade - and the first year of the new fees regime has shown a slight drop in student numbers. At present, participation rates are hovering at about 43 per cent - an increase on 1996, but not on target to reach the 50 per cent figure.

Some, notably the former chief schools inspector Chris Woodhead, accuse the Government of "dumbing-down" higher education with



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the introduction of "Mickey Mouse" courses such as golf studies and deep-sea diving. It is true that the Government is to allow further education colleges to award degree status in the hope of increasing the number of vocational degree courses, but even Universities UK, the body that represents existing university vice-chancellors, says that those subjects labelled as "Mickey Mouse" by their critics often lead to a job at the end of the day.

Have our schools and universities improved under New Labour?

Yes...

* Primary: standards in literacy and numeracy are markedly better. Class sizes have been reduced for five- to seven-year-olds

* Secondary: there have been year-on-year improvements in both GCSE and A-level results

* Universities: after years of falling budgets, with the introduction of fees they are finally getting more money

No...

* Primary: improvements in literacy and numeracy have slowed and class sizes for five- to seven-year-olds have risen again

* Secondary: the Government has failed to get to grips with reforms to the examination system

* Universities: highly unlikely to reach the target 50 per cent of youngsters in higher education by the end of the decade

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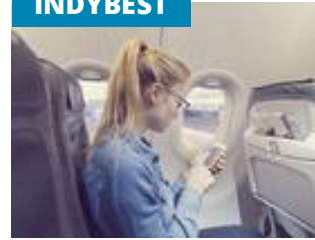
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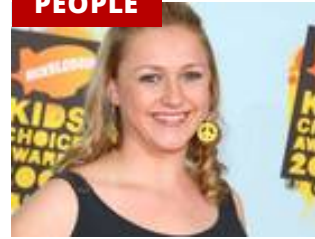
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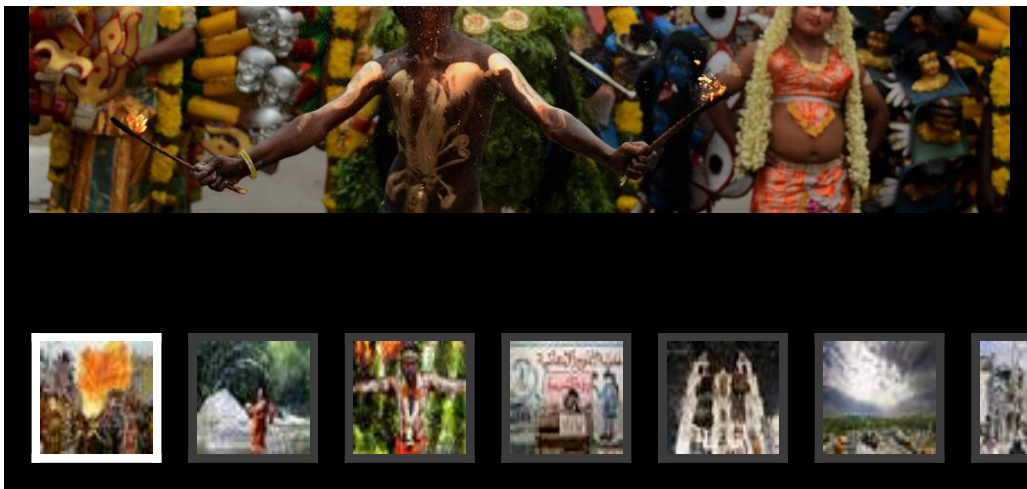
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