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Former minister says Government is 'thrashing around' on school reform



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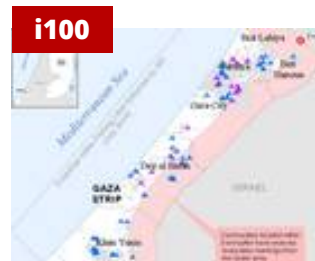
BY RICHARD GARNER, EDUCATION EDITOR | Wednesday 05 March 2008

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The former Labour education secretary, Estelle Morris, last night mounted a scathing attack on the Government's school reforms, warning there was a risk that "we thrash around from one initiative to another" with ministers and senior education figures failing to ask key questions about whether reforms were actually working.

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In one of the starkest criticisms of the Government's education policy by a former cabinet minister, Baroness Morris of Yardley said there was "cause for



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concern for both politicians and educationists" over the lack of impact on disadvantaged children of government schools policies.

Speaking in London to members of the National Education Trust, an independent education foundation, she added: "Despite improvements in overall school standards, the gap between the highest and lowest achievers has barely changed."

Baroness Morris, who spent five years in government, first as schools minister, then education secretary until her resignation

in 2002, said ministers and others involved in running the education system should be asking themselves why other countries were doing better than the UK. Last week, the biggest inquiry into primary education for 40 years resulted in scathing condemnation of the Government, after researchers concluded that political interference had hampered children's learning because teachers were pressured to teach to the national curriculum tests. The result had set back the quality of education for a generation, the Primary Review found.

In addition, the latest international league table of reading and maths standards, compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, showed Britain had tumbled down the table. In maths, 16 countries had overtaken the UK since 2000, including Slovenia, Belgium and the Netherlands.

And controversy has been renewed over school admissions on the day parents of 560,000 children across the country were allocated



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their secondary school places for September. Early indications appeared to show the number of parents unable to gain access their first choice school would exceed last year's figure of 100,000.

Criticism of the lottery system, introduced by Brighton and Hove Council and supported by ministers as a last-resort solution for oversubscribed schools, also re-emerged after the town's two most popular schools had had to turn down hundreds of parents who had put them down as first preference.

In all, 481 parents chose Blatchington Mill School in Hove as their first choice despite it having only 300 places, and 469 chose Dorothy Stringer which had only 308 places. In both cases, the lottery was used to determine the final allocations. "Too many children already have their life chances decided by the lottery of who their parents are and where they can afford to live," said the Liberal Democrat schools spokesman David Laws. "The real challenge is to address the massive differences in performance between schools, which is often the cause of oversubscribed places and parental disappointment. Tinkering with admissions procedures is far less important than driving up standards in all schools."

For advice on how to appeal against your child's allocated school visit: independent.co.uk/education



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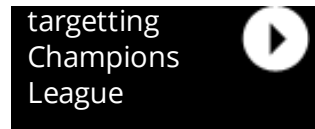
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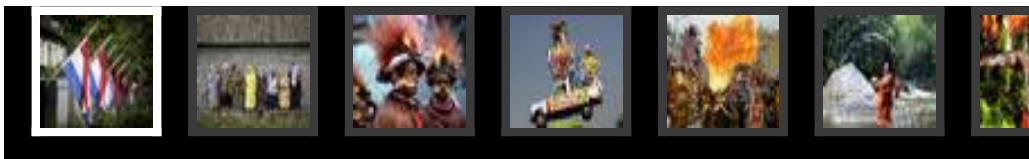
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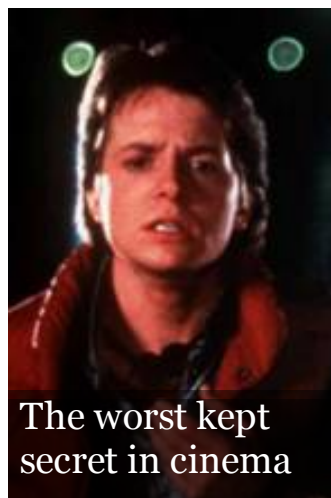
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