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Analysis: Information will provide solutions

By Alan Smithers

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England has some of the best but also some of the weakest schools in the developed world.

Successive governments have piled on initiatives and poured in money, but the latest official figures show too many schools are still inadequate.

There have been improvements. The number of failing schools has been halved in the past ten years. Some have been closed.

Others have been able to climb out of the bottom category and a few, mainly primary, have even made it to the very top.

They have achieved this by improving, among other things, the leadership (about two-thirds sack the head), teaching, and discipline.

But there is a stubborn rump and the detailed judgements of the school inspectors suggest why.

Of all the things they take into account, including the teaching, the leadership and the pupils' personal development, the one that has most

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bearing on whether a school is classed as failing is the test and exam scores.

And, as in football, the results are mainly down to the players available.

Failing schools are often those in which the poor, the newly arrived and the disadvantaged end up. As they move in, aspirational parents move out.

At the secondary level, the government is pulling down these sink schools and starting again.

There are hopeful signs as with the Mossbourne Academy opened on the same site as the failing Hackney Downs School, which has over a thousand applications for 180 places.

Those who would otherwise have been locked into a failing school have been freed up to experience the ethos of Mossbourne or other successful schools.

Fewer primary schools fail because younger children are generally better behaved and more responsive.

England at one time had the conceit that it had the best primary schools in the world.

That is, until the Conservative government in 1994 introduced tests which showed that less than 40 per cent of 11-year-olds could handle both words and numbers properly.

This year it has been raised to 71 per cent with the initially poorer-performing schools improving faster.

Still not good enough, but holding out the hope that failing schools at this level can be tackled through national strategies.

The educational establishment, as in the recent Cambridge review of primary education, seems to regard primary school tests as an unnecessary source of anxiety.

But without these tests and Ofsted we would not know what the situation



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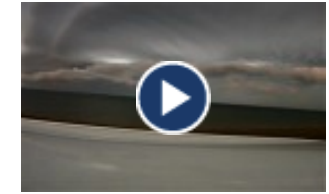
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was.

However intractable the problem of failing schools may seem, accurate information about how well the schools are actually doing is the first step towards finding solutions.

Alan Smithers is Professor and Director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham

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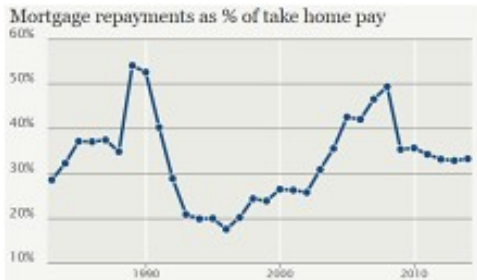
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