
The promise of a national education service

Eddie Playfair*

The proposed creation of a National Education Service (NES) for England offers us the possibility of a decisive break with the market model, where education is treated as a commodity and where individual and institutional competition are regarded as the drivers of improvement.

Is the advocacy of an NES an historic opportunity for English education and what might be the benefits and challenges of implementing such a proposal?

1. The need for a system and a turn away from the market

The very idea of creating a single national education system seems novel, if not utopian, in the current English context, even though such systems are commonplace in most developed countries and generally command wide political support. Education in England does not function as a coherent system capable of achieving the aspirations we have for it; whether for greater opportunities or greater equality for all. England lacks both a national vision of what education is for and the system of public education capable of fulfilling our educational aspirations. Different school types run by a bewildering range of unelected bodies compete in an unequal contest for students and results. Selection, both covert and overt, is increasingly prevalent and distinct segregated pathways from age 14 are becoming the norm. Students seen as 'less academic' are steered towards routes with reduced opportunities for breadth and depth of learning.

I wrote about the creeping marketization of the English education system in the Spring 2015 edition

of *Forum* (1) and concluded by imagining two different futures for English education following a 2015 general election. One, (Future A) was based on an extension of marketization and the other (Future B) on the development of a National Education Service.

In this imagined Future B scenario, the demand for a National Education Service grows from dissatisfaction with the incoherence and chaos people are experiencing across all the phases of education and a sense that the solution might be found in the imagination and daily practice of the people actually concerned with education. So, following a national debate about the purpose and organisation of education in England it becomes clear that there is a real consensus that England needs a common national education system with both social and personal objectives to meet the needs of all its people. The most common expression of this is that 'education needs to be like the NHS'. There is a groundswell of support for a comprehensive national education system based on agreed common aims, cooperation and universalism rather than competition and selection. The breadth and depth of the national debate gives people the confidence that change is possible and promotes a sense of optimism about the future. Another outcome is a celebration of the work of teachers and pride in the work of students as people learn more about what happens in our schools and universities.

The commitment to create an NES "open to all throughout their lives" (2) offers solutions to many of the problems of our fragmented and divided education 'non-system' and a possible route to Future B. Using the NHS paradigm for education requires a major shift in the way we think about our educational institutions. The idea of mobilising all publicly funded education

providers to serve the whole community could be very popular if it can be attractively fleshed out. People will need to understand what a National Education Service might look like in their area and how it might benefit them. This requires concrete examples of how a fairer and more effective system could be assembled from the somewhat dysfunctional set of elements we currently have.

In order to make the case for an NES, there also needs to be a clear critique of the marketization of education. Providers in all phases in England are operating in a market where they compete for students and are subject to a high-stakes accountability regime where any performance below average is seen as failure. This is not conducive to a high-performing and supportive system.

With at least one major party now placing the idea of an NES on the political agenda, there is the opportunity for a real debate about the extent to which we want to turn away from market mechanisms and reinvigorate public service values in education. So far, the proposal has mainly been defined in terms of resources; university tuition fees and school funding for instance, with less attention given to purpose and organisation. While the case for more investment is clear, the creation of an NES is a higher order question. A national drive to make the best of what's on offer available to all our citizens could be the centrepiece of a winning programme and education could find its 'NHS moment'. The idea could be a game-changer and could lead to a new consensus which could attract support from across the political spectrum.

2. What do we want from an education system?

Any attempt to construct a new system needs to be based on what we want it to achieve. At the highest level, we could start with 'human flourishing' as an aim; addressing both the development of fulfilled individuals and the creation of a good society. We shouldn't have to choose between preparation for life, preparation for work, active citizenship or cultural literacy as aims. They are all indispensable and interdependent. Any definition of purpose also has to do justice to where we are and where we've come from; the world as it is and the world as it could be. Education has to help all citizens join the world while also opening up the possibility of challenging and changing it for the better.

Asking the question 'what is the purpose of education?' inevitably leads us to rethink many of our current assumptions, such as the binary thinking about people's capacity to learn which has them being either 'good with their brains' or 'good with their hands'. It

should require us to challenge the received wisdom that education is essentially a private commodity to be rationed and fought over and not a social good based on co-operation. It should also blow the case for selection and segregation out of the water.

The more widely and deeply the question of purpose is discussed, the more powerful the answers will be. The debate needs to go well beyond the Westminster bubble of policy makers, think-tanks and experts and involve as many people as possible. Such a debate goes to the heart of our view of ourselves and the kind of society we want. What emerges might well surprise and delight us.

Our current 'anti-system' of unequal competing providers in a somewhat chaotic market is not capable of achieving any national educational aims based on equality or inclusiveness. If we want to have national educational aims, we need to give ourselves the means to ensure they can be achieved. This requires national coherence and consistency across the board, in short, a system.

3. How we got here: learning from the turn to the market

Before discussing where we go next, it's worth briefly considering how we got where we are now. The market experiment has had many negative effects and many victims. Those who would reverse it need to highlight the problems, but also to understand what drove it in the first place and to learn the lessons.

What were the ideas and arguments which drove the gradual turn to the market from the 1980's onwards? They started at the margins of politics with the Black Papers and the early 'culture wars' of the 1970's and worked their way to the heart of policy making during the Thatcher governments, morphing into the target-driven public service reform of the Blair governments. The stages in this process are well documented by Ken Jones (3) and others.

The claims about the system as it was in the 1970's included that it tolerated low achievement and failure, discouraged ambition and achievement, was wasteful, inefficient and bureaucratic, was subject to local authority political whims, was unresponsive to parents' wishes or the needs of the economy, offered little choice and was organised for the convenience of its workers rather than the aspirations of students and parents.

Whatever we think of these claims, they had some purchase and resonance with parts of the electorate and all contributed to justifying an incremental reform agenda which has built the new market 'common sense', in education as elsewhere. This was presented as benefitting the consumers; parents and students in this case, by strengthening their market power. The trend to greater marketization was in tune with the

'choice and diversity' and 'freedom and autonomy' agendas which were themselves a response to an alleged crisis of 'standards'.

These tendencies fit within what Pasi Sahlberg (4) has called the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) and connect to global pressure to 'open' public services to greater competition and market forces, encourage new entrants and reduce the influence of education workers and their unions.

This movement is neither monolithic nor irreversible, but we need to learn from the last 30-40 years and acknowledge the power of its arguments. We cannot ignore such key concerns as standards, choice, innovation and efficiency. These questions need to be addressed and it is not in the interests of advocates of an NES to be seen as tolerating mediocrity, inefficiency or bureaucracy.

NES advocates need to have something to say about what the benefits of institutional autonomy might be, how success and achievement should be defined, how to use performance data and research evidence to best effect, what the potential is for innovation and creativity within a national system and how to achieve a balance between system stability and competition as conditions for improvement.

An NES needs to be based on the wider public interest while also responding to the aspirations and ambitions of individuals. Rather than rejecting the language of ambition, advancement, choice and standards, it could be appropriated and broadened by finding a language of 'self-interest plus' with the 'plus' being the social or civic interest, intergenerational solidarity, pride in collective achievement, concern for community; local and global. Rather than rejecting the idea of 'rigorous' curricula and assessment, the case could be made for a broader kind of rigour.

To the benefits of hard work, concentration, pride in a job well done, we could be adding those of democracy, deliberation and debate, co-operation and consensus building. To the rhetoric of social mobility, we could be adding that of social equality; creating a society where the cost of failure and the spoils of success are reduced in the interest of social cohesion. To the consumer's instinct to select, evaluate and acquire, we could add the educated citizen's instinct to inquire, reason and critique. The market teaches us to be acquisitive, but where are we to learn to be inquisitive if not in our public education system?

4. What might a National Education Service look like?

Creating an NES will be an evolutionary process without a final destination. We have lost much of the 'hard wiring' which a good system needs, and it will be necessary to build on the commitment of education

staff, leaders and parents, to gradually 're-wire' our system based on different values. Nevertheless, even at this early stage, it is useful to sketch out some of the opportunities for change which will arise as well as some of the attractive headline 'signature policies' which could attract support:

- The new system should be built from the existing one with collaboration around nationally agreed shared aims, core entitlements and funding as givens. Requiring education providers to work together in the interests of their communities would release a 'co-operative dividend' or 'partnership premium' by squeezing out much of the waste and inefficiency of market competition.

- There needs to be a new settlement between national, regional and local levels of government about where to locate different responsibilities. This would include an equitable national funding system and admissions processes as well as a new level playing field with a single legal status for all schools which describes their degree of autonomy as well as their accountability. This will mean a shift from competing chains of schools towards local and regional collaborative networks. Strategic planning and decision-making should be transparent and subject to democratic scrutiny. A regional level will be needed for post-16 and higher education where catchments are wider and specialisation greater. There needs to be a balance between local democratic accountability and national minimum standards of service. The planning and regulation to ensure quality and equality will need to be light touch, with a minimum of bureaucracy.

- There should be room for regional and local innovation as well as specialisation, and the regions could lead on different themes, share this work nationally and create new forums for action research, evaluation, curriculum and professional development. There should be scope for choice and diversity within this comprehensive system without the need for competition or market incentives. There could be friendly rivalry between different parts of the service as they strive to offer the best to their communities, but this should be combined with a commitment to sharing what they do best to help the whole service improve.

- The English regions should be given the right to elect education councils to oversee the development of the system in their region using the full range of educational resources available, giving the new councils a strong mandate to develop a distinctive approach for their area compatible with the national aims.

- The school curriculum should be redefined in terms of human flourishing as well as the fundamental knowledge and skills that everyone needs to build on to be a successful contributor to society. There should be both breadth and specialisation at upper secondary

level, with no options being closed off at any age.

- Any national curriculum will need to command widespread support, to be broad and challenging and apply to all, while allowing for some innovation and experimentation at school and regional levels. We should aim to give young people the tools and the opportunities to access the best that human culture has to offer and to develop the skills which allow them to make a difference in the world.

5. The need for compelling 'signature' policies and new institutions

The idea of an NES is the high-level organising principle. To gain support it will need to be exemplified through policies which appeal to people and gain popular support. As well as deciding how much additional investment can be found for education from total public spending, any government introducing an NES also needs some attractive and concrete ideas which symbolise their approach. What might such 'signature' policies look like, based on an ambitious, egalitarian and life-long vision of a National Education Service? Here are a few suggestions:

- A National Baccalaureate for all young people to aim for. This would recognise and celebrate the talents and skills of the nation's young people, including their creativity and contribution to community and cultural life. Achieving a full diploma would be recognised as a challenging and valued milestone for all young adults and a passport to further progression.
- A broader National Citizen Service for young people which would include all volunteering and civic activity with the opportunity to 'earn' credit towards university or adult education based on the number of hours of activity. This would be a mutual 'something for something' way to move away from fees while also promoting community development and cohesion.
- Local arts and language education hubs to guarantee access to 'minority' or threatened subjects not available in all schools or colleges.
- An adult learning entitlement to free education for all non-graduates, delivered through new adult learning partnerships and driven by learner demand. This could lead to a renaissance of all sorts of adult learning with universities working with others to respond to the needs and interests of adults in their region. Study circles, reading groups, current affairs groups, cultural and health activity, community organising and volunteering could all feed in to university extramural programmes with a consequential strengthening of community solidarity.
- Elections for new regional leadership for education across all stages, creating space for debate and discussion of educational aims and priorities.

- A new deal to recruit and retain teachers: free training, sabbaticals and exchanges for all teachers working in the public sector.

A new system will also need new institutions; responsive, inclusive and democratic ones which we have yet to invent. This will require an experimentalist culture, as described by the Brazilian philosopher and politician Roberto Unger (5). Unger argues that we should not give up on the central promise of democracy which is that people's 'constructive genius' can be applied to the task of achieving greater equality and a better life, democratise the market and deepen democracy itself in order to overcome what he calls the 'dictatorship of no alternatives' which can paralyse those who want to make real change.

6. Creating a National Education Service

Popularising the idea of a National System is just the start of a process of renewal. How might it be brought about? We need to make sure that it is informed by the best of our values while recognising that the aims and values of education are always going to be contested and subject to debate. This doesn't mean that we should give up on striving for consensus or aiming for system stability. It will require a broad and inclusive process of policy deliberation and construction, allowing plenty of time to put together a coherent popular alternative for 2022 if not sooner. Developing the policy that could make this a reality will require considerable discussion around both values and priorities.

An NES should be grounded in equality and opportunity for all and the vision must be generous and inclusive; based on the belief that everyone can benefit from a full, broad education and everyone is entitled to access the best that our system can offer.

The architecture of such a national system could be created by a single Education Act early in the new parliament. But the work of building support for such a system, of embedding and developing it, will need to come from ongoing deliberation about the role of education in our society, both before and after the next election.

7. Objections to a National Education Service

It is also useful to anticipate some of the objections the idea will face. These include:

'It would represent a huge centralizing 'power grab' by the state.'

Recent years have seen a big shift of power to the national state in order to impose curricula, changes to the status of schools and to prevent local authorities

from opening new schools. An NES needs to shift power back to accountable local authorities to plan provision and respond to the needs of their areas. The national state should not try to micromanage education but instead use its powers to regulate the system to ensure quality and equality and protect the interests of learners, particularly the most vulnerable. Providers receiving public funding should be publicly accountable and we are entitled to ensure that our money is being spent in the public interest. This does not require a big bureaucratic state, but can be achieved by a small, often local, smart and democratic state.

'It would force 'bog-standard' uniformity and reduce choice.'

The current patchwork of '57 varieties' of school with different ways of sorting and segregating learners or offering curriculum specialisms creates confusion, narrows opportunity and institutionalises inequalities. A better planned system could enhance choice while aiming for a good school for everyone. Incentives which encourage some friendly competition between providers or areas to innovate and experiment would be entirely compatible with a national planning framework. A local, regional and national system based on schools with a single status working together could help to achieve excellence for all and respond to all our various educational needs much better than the chaotic market we currently have.

'It would reduce standards.'

We need to try to establish a consensus about what 'standards' we actually value, but clearly we would want a national system to be focused on offering the best to everyone and to promote high expectations. We know that selection does not raise standards but generally concentrates privilege. Selective admissions are all about keeping people out and we need to make the comprehensive case for opportunities and high standards for all; bringing people in.

'It would be prohibitively expensive.'

While there is a good case for spending more on education, the creation of a national education system does not in itself depend on this. Despite damaging cuts and austerity, there are plenty of examples of waste and duplication in the current landscape. Better co-ordination and collaborative planning can ensure that resources are used more efficiently rather than being wasted on competition. If people feel a real sense of ownership of the system, they will support the case for improvements and be prepared to vote for them.

8. Conclusion

The case for a National Education Service is strong and clear. It can be made by analogy with the National

Health Service. If we see public education, like health care, as a social good which can benefit individuals while also benefiting society, we need to ensure that the best we can offer is available to everyone throughout life and regardless of means.

The fact that such a proposal is now on the agenda shifts the terrain of debate and has the potential to build a new consensus based on valuing education as a means of social advance as well as personal liberation rather than overemphasizing personal economic gain. The 2020's could provide us with a historic opportunity to 're-set the dial' in English education in a way which benefits everyone and transforms the lives of many, just as the creation of the NHS did for health in 1948. If such a change is to be sustained and developed, the debate about the ends and means of public service education needs to involve as broad a constituency as possible; before, during and after the creation of such a Service. If the development and implementation is well handled it could usher in a period of cross-party agreement on the broad design of the system, as there is in many other developed countries, without precluding continued lively political debate about purposes, priorities and direction.

At a time when we face major social fracture in England and a demoralised public sector, the promise of a National Education Service is the promise of social advance and personal fulfilment for all. Are we ready to grasp this historic opportunity to transform one of our most precious public services?

References

1. Playfair, Eddie (2015) 'Market madness: condition critical', *Forum* 57 (2) p.213
2. Labour Party (2015) *Towards a National Education Service* <https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/education/>
3. Jones, Ken (2016) *Education in Britain. 1944 to the Present* (2nd edition) Polity.
4. Sahlbery, Pasi (2011) *Finnish Lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers' College Press, New York
5. Unger, Roberto (2009) *The Left Alternative*, Verso.

* This article is adapted from an article written in a personal capacity and published in *Forum*: Eddie Playfair (2018) The Promise of a National Education Service, *Forum*, 60(2), 159-170.