

Try one last initiative: put an end to new strategies

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With a definite whiff of mortality drifting about the precincts of Westminster, the unthinkable of even a few months ago has begun to feel eminently thinkable. This government - so relentless and restless since 1997 in implementing its education, education, education mantra - may be tottering precariously into its final phase.

Of course, one by-election massacre plus a string of unlucky or self-inflicted blunders may not presage the end of the New Labour project, but some commentators are speculating about a political landscape of a different hue. Much of what we now take for granted in schools was fomented in the big bang of 1997 and, in particular, in the New Labour blueprint - Michael Barber's book *The Learning Game* (Gollancz), an astringent mixture of tough talk and empathy for pupils categorised as disaffected, disappeared or just disappointed. He was intolerant of Britain's lack of progress in basic literacy since the war, keen to professionalise teachers while increasing our accountability and collegiality, and determined we should compete with the educational big boys.

Thus began a volley of educational reforms, giddy in their ambition and regularity. A National College for School Leadership; Teachers' TV; strategies for (amongst other things) literacy, numeracy, behaviour and attendance; Beacon, then Leading Edge, Schools; a short-lived policy of parachuting in superheads; the academies programme; extended schools; Every Child Matters. You felt that somewhere in Whitehall fresh-faced policy advisers were running amok like toddlers unleashed in the pick'n'mix.

And the impact of this stream of initiatives? Due credit first. Most noticeable has been the scale of investment. Generations of underfunding had made those of us working (and educated) in the state sector assume it was normal for schools to be unkempt and symbolic of low aspirations. The annual "Blunkett" money, capital grants, the determination that schools needn't be graffiti-strewn and second best - these may prove to be the government's greatest legacy.

And there's no doubt that teaching and school leadership have enjoyed a surge in status thanks to the deliberate commitment of Blair, then Brown and, after a faltering start, ideas like the National College for School Leadership. But from a government which initially proclaimed "standards, not structures", the tendency towards structural change has been obsessive.

Few will criticise the shift of administrative tasks from teachers to what Barber queasily called para-professionals whom we prefer, in more humdrum terms, to call our support or associate staff.

But on Ruth Kelly's watch we were also required to rethink our staffing structures, jumping through a madcap short-notice hoop to replace management allowances with teaching and learning responsibilities, plus changes to performance management, and introduction of the upper pay spine.

In hindsight, it all feels like a clumsily missed opportunity to create school cultures in which improving teaching and learning is our remorseless focus based on teachers planning together, observing each other, and evaluating classroom impact. Instead, according to an unexpectedly outspoken statement by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector last week, school standards have "stalled".

This is a dangerous moment because, just as a raft of new measures is being rolled out within the ambitious Children's Plan, there is a risk that the old control-freakery will resurface and lob more initiatives our way.

What is needed now is less government and an end to policy announcements. As good teachers and parents know, there comes a time when being able to step back is not only an act of faith, but also the essential next step in moving from the superficial to a profound change.

A good mantra for the next phase of the Government's education policy - whether in its twilight phase or not - might be "less is more".
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