

Why this challenge leaves a sour taste

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After a year as PM, Brown should be helping the leaders of 'failing' schools, not rubbing their noses in the dirt

Unhappy anniversary, Mr Brown. As you celebrate one year in office, I can think of 638 headteachers who probably didn't send you a card. The dust from last month's National Challenge debacle should have settled by now. But even as the head of a school that wasn't branded as failing, the affair leaves a sour taste. What does the decision to highlight so publicly those schools below the 30 per cent threshold tell us of this Government's relationship with its teachers, teaching assistants and school leaders?

It was a former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who described the Church of England as the only society that exists for the benefit of those people "who are not its members". We might add to that the conscripted members of the new National Challenge club.

Depending on your outlook, it smacks either of desperate nannyism or panic. When you have the chief inspector talking publicly of "stalled" standards and a creeping sense of government mortality, it's hard not to panic.

The way the National Challenge was unleashed on the education system carried the implication that the Government cares more about underperformance than those of us in schools and local authorities. This simply isn't true. It's not as if any of us thinks a school where more than two-thirds of pupils leave without a clutch of good qualifications is acceptable. In most, no one will be more impatient to see standards rise than the head and staff - often against a backdrop of a community for whom exam results, performance tables and the idea of further (let alone higher) education are laughably irrelevant.

The initiative lacked the recognition that schools exist in their communities, often helping to hold them together, and are at the heart of a fragile web of relationships and perceptions, which we undermine

at our peril.

Let's accept that 30 per cent is a random line in the sand. It's useful for focusing minds. But little more than a year ago, the main priority was to get as many students five or more GCSEs as possible. By hook or by crook, the aim was to stuff pupils' pockets with as many grade C equivalents as we could. This led some schools to pitchfork into their curriculum an array of vocational qualifications that would shoot them into the supernovae of league-table performance.

Then the ground-rules shifted. English and maths had, rightly, to be included. If we've learnt anything about education policy in the past 10 years, it's that quick fixes don't work. You can hire as many consultants for as many strategies as you like, but progress will come down to getting good teachers in classrooms, teaching an appropriate curriculum effectively. It's also about shaping the local context - nudging parents and carers to raise their own aspirations, raising the expectations of children in some grim environments, and changing mindsets. Carl Honore's *In Praise of Slow* reminds us that our culture's "speedaholism" must be challenged. Real education is what will raise standards, and it doesn't come in a microwave package.

Many of us work in schools where aspirational parents keep us on our toes. They attend concerts and consultation evenings, email if homework hasn't been set and complain if a matter of school procedure goes awry. They hold us endlessly accountable, often meting out criticism and forgetting the power of praise. In the process, they help us to create better schools.

These are the very parents the National Challenge schools need more of. And how much harder the process of wooing them will be now that the local papers have sunk their teeth in.

Madeleine Vigar, head at our nearest National Challenge school - Castle Manor Business and Enterprise College in Haverhill, Suffolk - told me that in her school (23 per cent with English and maths), she needs to attract the more aspirational parents. And it's working - a combination of an impressive Ofsted report ("a good school with outstanding features"), a smart grammar school-style uniform, an emphasis on courtesy, high-profile attention to gifted and talented pupils, and a palpable culture of achievement - these were beginning to overcome catchment area problems of a community that had given up on itself. With this summer's results, the school will have moved itself

beyond the 30 per cent target and kick-started its upward spiral of confidence and achievement. Now, in the space of a government press release, Madeleine's crusade to lever up standards by attracting the parents who look instinctively to schools beyond the local estate, or flirt with the independent sector, looks more precarious.

It could have been different. How much more powerful if, at the launch of National Challenge, Schools Secretary Ed Balls had addressed journalists flanked by a handful of heads from the schools in question; if the message wasn't about parachuting in superheads, demanding action plans like lines in an after-school detention, and muttering threats of closure.

Instead, it could have been our national challenge - an example of how resources were being prioritised so that government, local authorities and school leaders could work together in a major collective drive to narrow the gap between our best and worst performing schools. It could have been a national challenge that was about the invigorating power of partnership, leadership and a shared intolerance of low standards. Instead, it feels less a club of shiny optimism and collective energy, and more a furtive backstreet sin-bin where, following the local newspaper reports, too many headteachers, would-be teachers and aspirational parents may think twice before heading there.