



# Parents and education and schools

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When compulsory education was first under consideration in Britain in the 19th century, there was much concern about the infringement of parents' rights. T.H. Green, professor of moral philosophy at Oxford, solved this conundrum by claiming that compulsion would be a justifiable intrusion, necessary for only one generation of children. Parents who had themselves been to school would naturally come to appreciate education and desire education for their children. Several generations on, we still await that happy dawn. Now, in the 21st century, there is much new discussion about the nature and purpose of schools: independent, local authority controlled, free schools set up by parents, schools sponsored by other bodies such as religious groups, and academies, often grouped under a sponsoring foundation. Amid all this, however, we should not forget from where our students come—from homes and families—and it is these young people, the students, who are the concern and purpose of schools and of education. I mention both education and school here, deliberately, for we should keep in mind the distinction between the two things. Education may occur in a school, but it can take place elsewhere: in the home, while travelling or while listening to someone—whenever someone is brought to appreciate and understand something for the first time. Schools may well provide opportunities for this to happen, but attending school does not guarantee that it will happen unless a pupil can be brought to engage with teachers there, and with the business of learning. In the UK, the law requires parents to provide an efficient education for their children. It does not require children to attend a school but, for most parents, sending their children to a school is the easiest way to meet this obligation. Behind all this, of course, is the assumption that if children attend school they will be educated. In this article I want to look at parental responsibility more widely, at confusion and uncertainty about our expectations for young people and of young people, and at a better relationship between parents, children and teachers. The article has in mind a greater consistency in our approach to parenting, to young people and to the way children are brought up and educated. It is mainly UK focused.

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## 1. Parental responsibility

In the UK a great deal of political energy has been spent in recent decades in trying to find a system of schooling that would transform education. The matter of academically selective schools and the type of school that would fit alongside them has been revived of late, and the age at which young people may leave formal education behind has been raised. Politicians maintain the pretence that the right system, if only they could find it, and the right teachers, would transform the work of schools—and concerned parents would no longer go to some trouble to avoid sending their children to schools where there are significant numbers of children who are resistant or hostile to the discipline required by education. In the meantime, if the OECD is to be believed, the literacy and numeracy skills of young adults in the UK has slumped from top to bottom of the league table of developed countries.

What politicians cannot easily do is to transform families. Parents choose to bring children into the world and are trusted to care for them, to feed, clothe, clean, house and entertain them. They are expected to have regard to the interests of their children and of the wider community in which they find themselves. They are required by law to ensure that they are educated and, for most of us, that means using state schools.

Schools came about so that parents could use others' expertise in the business of educating their children. When groups of parents and tutors worked together, schools arose. In successful schools there is a partnership between parents and teachers to see that parents' long-term commitment to their children is supported as far as their education goes. Schools became institutions of some kind, privately owned or supported by a trust or partnership. Then the state took over the provision of schools for most children and kept control of them.

However, parents who decide to educate their children themselves are not subject to anything like the systems of control and accountability to which schools, especially state-funded ones, are subject and the question has to be asked why these parents are trusted to such an extent when trained teachers are not. Is it perhaps because of a continuing reluctance on the part of politicians to challenge parents, or a tacit acknowledgement that parents really do know best?

Of course government will not test parents as it tests schools. In any case, education is but one area of a parent's responsibilities and if it were to be monitored in some way it would surely need to be done as part of a wider move to hold all parents more closely responsible for their children. Let a dangerous animal loose onto the street and you can face prison; raise a dangerous teenager and there seem to be no consequences. As I write there are concerns about radicalized teenagers and about rising levels of knife crime among younger teenagers. Yes, schools work better with supportive, responsible parents, but such parents are also concerned about other aspects of their children's lives and our expectations of them should reflect this reality.

Some two years ago a headline on the news pages of *The Times* announced changes in the Family Court that were intended to improve the way that cases involving children were conducted. The intention was to reduce the stress and trauma for a child when the future of the family was addressed. The article comprised thirteen paragraphs; it was only in the final paragraph that there was any reference to the children's interests. Far more concern was given to the wishes and convenience of the adults involved, post settlement.

When families and children are under discussion the term *single parent* often arises. There are times, I believe, when such terms serve, conveniently, to obscure the truth that a man and a

woman together are uniquely responsible for the arrival of any child in this world. They may be helped by others, medical technicians and facilitators who put them in touch, but it is the choices and actions of these two people that constitute the essential first step in the creation of another human being. They may not be formally together (e.g., married) when they take that first step but they are, nevertheless, jointly responsible for the child's existence. No one other than these two people is initially responsible for a child's existence. Should they fail the child no one else can be obliged to take on the role of parent, and the child becomes dependent upon institutional care, or upon adults willing to take on the role and responsibilities of parents by means of adoption.

This truth was brought home to me when I decided to escort a fourteen-year-old boy back to the children's home where he lived, from the school where I was deputy head teacher. It was a Friday. The boy would have seen his four older siblings leave school to return to the home that they, but not he, shared with their adoptive parents; their natural parents had been killed in a road accident. This boy, the youngest of the family, had been born with a hare lip and, I can imagine, had seemed the least attractive of the five orphans. He was the only one not to be taken on by these adoptive parents. He had been behaving badly in school and now he feared expulsion on the Monday when the matter was to be dealt with. Expulsion—permanent exclusion in modern edu-speak—from school would mean loss of regular contact with his siblings.

I explained the purpose of my arrival with the boy to the receptionist and asked to see the person who was responsible for his welfare. That was not possible; the boy's key worker was on leave that weekend and there was no one else to whom I could explain his troubled state. Of course the staff of children's homes have to take time off for themselves or courses or conferences. With a parent it is different: you can phone or text a parent and require them to attend to their child immediately.

The question, "Why have children?" seems never to be answered from the point of view of the children concerned: life's voiceless and vulnerable conscripts. Children spend 80% of their waking hours under the influence, at least nominally, of their parents. However, it is not until their offspring become a public nuisance and achieve the greater visibility that is the lot of many teenagers that it dawns on politicians that parents might be part of the problem.

There are culpable parents who undermine or destroy their children and the social structures upon which they depend—education, health, language, truth, fairness, reason, justice and consideration for others. As a head teacher I was confronted by an obstructive parent who had threatened colleagues who had challenged his daughter's bad behaviour in and out of school: she had racially abused and attacked a fellow pupil, outside the pupil's home. When, eventually, his poor daughter tried to kill herself it was the school he wanted to blame. And what would we make of the case of Courtenay Crocket, a teenage girl who was killed by her mother's live-in lover? Had her mother been required to check the man's background, had she known that she would have been held responsible for bringing this man into her daughter's home, then perhaps her daughter would not have been killed.<sup>1</sup>

These examples serve to show how the underlying causes only come to light once damage to children has been inflicted. If, as seems reasonable, parents were expected to exercise much

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<sup>1</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, "Stepfather jailed for Christmas beatings" (15 December 2005).

greater care with regard to these matters, at least as a prudent preparation for life, how much easier would it be to expect them to prepare their children for school and education? Questions could then be asked of parents: when a child is born we might ask whether either parent had previously harmed or neglected children in their care; long before it is admitted to a school we could ask whether the child could distinguish between *yes* and *no*, *please* and *thank you*, and *yours* and *mine*.

Should there be any doubt as to what a concerned parent can do, meet two fathers and a pair of parents with whom I had dealings. The first lived apart from his wife and their son, who was troublesome at school, sufficiently so to embarrass at least any reasonable parent. The mother refused to communicate with the father about their son so he came into school every week to face whatever was the news about his son's progress, or lack thereof. At least we, and his son, knew that we had his support.

The second father had a son who was pushing the boundaries of good behaviour in school. Unexpectedly, the father appeared on stage during a school assembly. Puzzled by his father's appearance there, his son soon found himself invited to join him on stage, where he was promptly administered a thorough dressing down, fuelled by his father's anger. Problem solved, and the further possibility of their fathers appearing on stage was clearly going through the minds of the other four hundred boys in the hall.

Another boy was becoming a habitual liar. A phone call and a discussion with his parents was followed by a meeting in school at which I deliberately and falsely accused the boy of several outrages. His parents, who of course were expecting all this, nodded and dismissed his every protestation. As the boy became increasingly desperate to convince his parents that my accusations were unfounded we explained to him what we had planned between us, to show him what life might be like if other people lied as freely as he did.

All three boys were helped because their parents and I trusted one another and worked together; I mention them because it is only too easy to read of ineffective parents. We should hear about the good ones, not least because they make it clear that home and school can work together. Cooperating with schools may not be as easy for all parents, but experience such as this suggests that we should expect them at least to try.

## **2. Confusion about young people**

First, a reminder about what we adults should expect of ourselves, in particular those characteristics that define maturity and independence: a concern for truth; reason; understanding and consideration of others; tolerance; a sense of justice; a sense of responsibility; and a degree at least of self-reliance. All these of course enshrined in our ability to use language, to absorb and then to communicate understanding.

To ignore or deny these characteristics is to deny our adulthood and to remain dependent on others' virtue; it could be said that to grow up is, in part at least, to become less parasitic on these virtues. When we call on others' expertise, or greater knowledge or understanding, we are tacitly acknowledging the means by which their expertise came about. Parents in particular who are indifferent or hostile to the demands of the educational process, to the discipline required in schools, not only undermine their own child's education, but also that of others who might otherwise go on to become the surveyors, engineers, doctors or lawyers upon whom these deniers of education may find themselves dependent.

This the basis for what I refer to as the discipline required by education, to which we should add a willingness to leave others alone at times so that they can get on with the business of learning, thinking, recuperating and innovating, and then taking responsibility to provide a kind, rousing word to someone who needs support and encouragement.

We do not arrive in this life as teenagers, ready to trouble the older generation. We spend several years in a vulnerable state, dependent on others initially for our every need, and infinitely receptive to emotion, to ideas, to learning, to our language and to a culture. This is what we do until we emerge on the threshold of adult life and come to the attention of the rest of society, some of us noisily, most of us awkwardly and a few of us aggressively, resentfully.

Targeting young people with legislation is especially difficult for two reasons. Firstly, the target is particularly resistant to legislation. Put aside their resentment at being instructed when they have no say, no democratic voice in legislation aimed at them. An important part of growing up is being able to decide what to do, to ignore pressure or suggestion or advice from somebody else and make up your own mind. Targeting young people who have just discovered this freedom, or have had it thrust at them by advertisers or gang leaders, will prove far, far more difficult than changing adult attitudes towards smoking and excessive drinking, for example. For adolescents, rules can often be seen as yet another challenge, especially when imposed arbitrarily or aggressively.

There is a widespread assumption that children who do not attend school are socially excluded, but that view makes little sense if children *choose* not to attend. It could as well be said that these children include themselves in other parts of society. When their choices involve worthy endeavour and constructive activity is this not social inclusion and should we not ask whether it might be much better than wasting the time and energy of teachers and other young people who do want to be at school?

Secondly, legislation can have contrary effects. As one young man of my acquaintance put it: if my teachers don't like the way I behave in school, why do they insist that I attend? Ironically he had touched upon an important truth: the last thing a troublesome teenager needs is the company, support, challenge, competition, provocation and intimidation of other disaffected teenagers.<sup>2</sup>

Adolescence, it is claimed, is now being stretched at both ends, with children becoming "teenagers" earlier and "adults" later. For too many young people this transition to adulthood is said to be complex, messy and not very successful.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, adult expectations of younger teenagers are confused. Before they can achieve a sustained sense of their own independence, the world of trade and commerce encourages them to think that they *are* independent and capable of making decisions for themselves. I once listened to the marketing executive of a company that made children's clothes, interviewed on BBC Radio Four's *Women's Hour*. She was quite explicit: companies such as hers deliberately targeted eight-year-old girls in order more easily to get their hands inside the parents' pockets. Another area in which adolescents are encouraged to see themselves as more mature is in the matter of the franchise—with proposals to lower the age at which young people may vote. At the same time, the age at which young people may leave education has, effectively, been raised

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954) for an example from fiction.

<sup>3</sup> *The Guardian* "Childhood ends earlier as parents pressure children, says survey" (6 November 2006).

to eighteen while the age at which they may marry, and bring children into the world, remains unchanged at sixteen.

It is with regard to their personal lives that some young people have been burdened by concerns transferred to them from adult life and which serve to persuade them that they are grown up. First there was the provision of confidential advice and materials for contraceptive purposes, without the knowledge of parents and, more recently, there are calls for children to be taught in schools about the variety of adult sexuality and the possibility that they might want to regard themselves as belonging to the “wrong” gender. This would not be a matter of a response to an individual child’s questioning or concerns, but a blanket approach to a matter that (some) adults want to impose upon children whether or not they had asked for these things to be addressed. Like religious belief, these matters are best addressed by parents who should know their children and make it as easy as possible for them to ask about matters that concern them, or to be made cognizant of matters which the parents believe should be brought to their attention.

In recent years, concern has also been expressed about the demeaning of young people by systems of examinations designed to hold out the hope of success to a wider range of candidates, to protect the weaker ones from the stigma of failure. It is driven also, I would assert, by governments and schools setting such great store by examination statistics, for their own purposes, that failure is treated as something final, from which there can be no return. This stigmatization of failure, and conferral of irrevocability, is nonsense. Failure is, in fact, an important facet of the scientific method—the rigorous testing of ideas would be impossible without the readiness to learn from negative results. Young people need to see that they can learn from mistakes and from failure.

This important truth is something I point out to classes by asking how many of them could ride a bike; most of them would raise their hands. Then I would ask them to lower their hands if they had managed to do so without getting scars on their knees; most of their hands would remain in the air.

There is another factor that feeds into adult confusion about young people, the fear that they might take over from us. It is a fear that lies behind the hilarious St Trinian’s stories written by Ronald Searle, in which hordes of wild teenage girls take over a boarding school and imprison their teachers. More recently in the UK, fear of violence on the part of teenagers seems to have displaced worries about the number of pregnancies among them. Neither of these concerns has resulted in greater expectations of parents, who, of course, have been and remain legally responsible for these young people.

Young people are often better and quicker than adults in learning and adapting and in our dealings with them it helps if we can find it in ourselves to acknowledge the possibility that we may become dependent upon them. Current jokes about the capacity of children to show grandparents how to use modern electronic devices reveal this truth. I once held open a door for a pupil who was pleasantly surprised and asked why I had been “nice” to him. He grinned when I explained that one day I might find myself in a wheelchair, dependent on someone else to push it, and that he might turn out to be that person.

On another occasion a local magazine advised older readers to avoid the dangerous teenagers who “hung out” in the car park of a local shop. First I wrote to ask how it was that these teenagers were to discover that they were regarded as dangerous if no one ever spoke to them. Then I got on my bike.



They looked me over when I pulled up alongside them with squeaking brakes. “Excuse me. Can you help me please? I’m looking for some dangerous teenagers”. They were not sure about this. “Someone told me that there are some dangerous teenagers who hang about here. Can you help me find them, please?” It took only one of them to catch my eye and start to laugh—then I could explain my mission, to debunk the perceptions of my own generation.

In class my teenage students usually had a weekly period of compulsory reading. They read in silence and could only reject something, and choose an alternative, once they had read ten pages. It could be fiction or non-fiction—important for boys—with a minimum of pictures. This satisfied their sense that they were entitled to choose what to do with their time, and kept them usefully and cheerfully engaged. Short stories were invaluable: Graham Greene’s *The Case for the Defence* and *The Destructors*, and Roald Dahl’s anthology, *Tales of the Unexpected*, stand out.

Rather than raise the school-leaving age, we should have considered reducing it to fourteen, not to empty schools, but so that they become more effective and more attractive to youngsters. Many youngsters have part-time jobs. For some of them, a chance to work alongside “real” adults and begin to learn the discipline of work and adult life would be much better than being shut up with lots of other disgruntled youngsters. Those who remain out of school and unoccupied should remain the responsibility of parents, who could send their children to school only if they were prepared to support those schools and persuade their children to take school seriously. Schools and education are too precious to be treated otherwise, and so are children.

### **3. A new relationship between parents, children, teachers and the wider community**

At the end of his time at infant school, our son’s teacher, a family friend, reported that he was the best judge of an acceptable minimum that she had ever taught, a judgment that did not surprise us at all. It was all the more convincing because of the good relationship we enjoyed with this teacher, whom we trusted, and who felt that she could speak her mind with us. This same teacher was also deputy head of the school, a role that she combined with class teaching. Her reputation was legendary. Whenever the local authority tried to persuade her to take up a headship in one of its schools she turned it down, for she was determined to continue teaching, something she did extremely well. We appreciated this essential trio of child, parent and teacher, and our son and his classmates continued to benefit; for the teacher it was a difficult decision in the face of intrusion from an outside agency, in this case the local education authority.

A recent newspaper report told of a Scots girl, Chelsea, who published a letter on social media, in which she thanks her parents for making her independent just days before her father was jailed for drug offences.<sup>4</sup> For years the girl had hidden the truth of her family life from her friends. She became head girl, achieved fluency in German and had spoken in front of hundreds of people at a school prize-giving. She also revealed how, at the age of ten, she took her younger brother to his first day of school because her mother was incapable of doing so.

The girl says that the catalyst for her breaking free from the limitations of her home life was the unconditional support of teachers who believed in her when she couldn’t. In this she was most fortunate and no doubt her teachers brought about a tremendous transformation in her

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<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, Head girl’s thank-you letter to addict parents (1 February 2017).

prospects, but she was willing to trust them and cooperated with them. How do we deal with young people who are indifferent or hostile to teachers and school, especially when they are to be found in substantial numbers in a subculture that is hostile to education? A school may help individuals such as Chelsea when the majority of its pupils are prepared to work, behave and cooperate from the start. I cannot see schools being able to help whole populations in the same way without the support of parents.

We see here something of the tripod of essential relationships around the education of children, something to which I made reference at the beginning of this essay. Now we need to consider others who involve themselves in various ways with what happens in schools: school governors, sponsors and politicians, and also trustees and owners of various types of independent schools, as well as advisors and inspectors. There are two important factors separating this group from teachers: they do not teach and they do not have to face parents to give an account of their stewardship. Increasingly, teachers who hold senior posts have abandoned the discipline of work in the classroom and joined others who are variously known as leaders and managers and whose claim to be teachers is at least questionable.

Of the governors, trustees, politicians and owners of schools, I will have something to say later. For the moment, let us consider the last-named group, of non-teaching teachers, which has joined other interest groups such as Ofsted inspectors and local authority advisors who exercise power without responsibility. It might be interesting to compare here a system of inspection devised by independent school teachers with that imposed on state-funded schools by politicians. The independent schools system involved teams of teachers, drawn from several schools for a very limited time, to see what goes on in other independent school with a view to helping them where they can and also, crucially, learning from them in order to spread good practice. I would see this arrangement as teachers, who are essentially trusted by parents, cooperating with other teachers to improve the quality of their teaching in a way that reflects their accountability to parents. Ofsted inspections are conducted on the organization's own terms in order, supposedly, to "drive up" standards. Inspectors pass on statistics—information about populations—which at best can only provide guidance. Where they comment on the teaching they see, they do not have to stand by those comments and any outcomes. Teachers, on the other hand, have individuals to engage with and have to make decisions and take actions by which they have to stand, rather than commenting about aspects of a school and then moving on.

It is one thing for politicians, both national and local, to use statistics to provide information about a whole population; it is another for them to direct the particular steps that teachers should take in their work. Compare the standing of teachers with that of medical practitioners: The government could save a fortune in the health service were it to ban anaesthesia. The need to employ an anaesthetist in operating theatres would be avoided, some patients would die on the table and not require post-operative nursing and other patients would decline surgery. Yet, were the State even to discuss such an outrageous idea, it would be rejected immediately by the medical profession, which the general population would doubtless support. In contrast, for years, teachers have condemned as harmful the standard assessment tests which politicians have required them to impose on children. Politicians have used the law where persuasion and argument have failed, and the vast majority of teachers have implemented the



very tests they condemn. What sort of basis is this for engaging the trust of parents, which is essential for schools to be effective?<sup>5</sup>

What of the community in which schools have to operate, the apparatus of government, business and other organizations, further and higher educational institutions, the citizenry, as well as parents and children? We are all affected by whatever is achieved in our schools, and depend at least minimally on the education of our fellow citizens. How then can we match the responsibilities that fall to parents and teachers with the more distanced concerns of government?

First, let us deal with those others, referred to earlier, who involve themselves in various ways with what happens in schools: school governors, sponsors and politicians, trustees and owners of various types of independent schools, as well as advisors and inspectors. Governors can hire and fire staff, leaving a head teacher and colleagues to make the best of an appointment, but not themselves living with the consequences. Likewise sponsors and trustees; but with owners, the easy assumption that they always put the interests of their pupils and of their staff first is unfounded. One such, of brief acquaintance, boasted how he turned off the central heating after lunch and, should his teachers complain, would mutter something about problems with the boiler. Other proprietorial schools have suddenly folded early in the summer term just as public examinations are about to start and, suddenly, pupils have nowhere to go, nowhere to sit their examinations.<sup>6</sup>

Then there are former teachers, who no longer face the discipline of the classroom and the challenge of accounting to parents for the stewardship of their children. Appointed out of the classroom to advise or inspect, they join another interest group, no longer required to earn the respect or the trust of colleagues on whom they once depended.

The nexus of all these pressures, all these interest groups, is the school, the natural extension of the family, where the wishes of parents and the needs of children have to be juggled while at the same time the school is coping with the demands and expectations of local and central government, inspectors and advisers, governors, sponsors and proprietors. And it is teachers, trusted, at least in theory, by parents, who actually deal with children, not as groups as represented in statistics and official figures, but as live individuals with all the individuality and particularity with which their human nature has endowed them. And it is teachers upon whom parents and children depend.

When a head teacher has to consider excluding a pupil, the needs and interests of the particular pupil may be brought most forcibly to his or her attention by governors, colleagues,

<sup>5</sup> Here perhaps is the place for a brief reminder that an OECD report, published early in 2016, showed that over the four decades or so that British governments have sought more closely to direct the work of state-funded schools, the literacy and numeracy skills of young adults have slumped from top place, in a table of twenty-seven developed countries, to bottom.

<sup>6</sup> “The Shared Learning Trust, formerly known as Barnfield Academy Trust, last week said it was closing its studio school<sup>7</sup> in Luton after ‘carefully weighing up its long-term viability’ in the face of dwindling pupil numbers”, <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/closing-down-14th-studio-school-to-fold-leaving-just-33-open/> (12 March 2016). See also: “Failing free school to be closed down—with 210 pupils and 25 staff affected” (*Manchester Evening News*, 29 June 2017); and “Private school grief: how the credit crunch is closing down schools” (*Daily Telegraph*, 14 May 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Studio schools are an alternative to mainstream education for 14- to 19-year-olds, with institutes taking on cohorts of up to 300 pupils. They provide work-related curricula, with pupils receiving vocational and academic qualifications, as well as work experience.

the pupil's parents, the local authority, and other interest groups whose help might have been engaged by the parents. The need to protect the identity and interests of this pupil will mean that the parents of other pupils are unlikely to know anything at all of the matter. Yet to them, a head teacher also owes a particular duty of care. Legally, a head teacher is *in loco parentis*, and any parent has a right to know that a son or a daughter is not at the mercy of bullies, thieves or disruptive peers, or incompetent teachers. Head teachers have very little time to consider this aspect in such circumstances and yet this part of their responsibilities should be paramount, for the other parents cannot themselves be privy to information about the company their children may be forced to keep.

Now let us look beyond our concerns with the classroom and schools and consider the other aspects of children's lives, especially the extent to which the community depends on parents to care for children, a responsibility which most parents willingly undertake. *Why, then, do we not trust parents to engage with teachers in finding an effective way to educate children?*

Two things are required, a teaching force that will undertake this and schools established and organized in a way that will allow it to happen.

To achieve this end, teachers would have to pursue professional status more vigorously, not an easy task, for struggles with politicians are not easy while at the same time teachers have their pupils to consider. Teachers do need to demonstrate more determinedly that they deserve the greater trust that parents have in them (compared with politicians<sup>8</sup>) and show themselves willing to police themselves and to protect children from untoward intrusion by others who have no formal connexion with the parents, who provide the first line of responsibility, support and protection for their children.

For schools, both state-funded and independent, there is a need for fiduciary status so that the interests of children are truly paramount and the teachers to whom the children are entrusted may work effectively with them. This will require more explicit expectations of *parents*, complementing those made of schools and of teachers.

The governors of the school to which a previous Labour Prime Minister sent his sons claimed that their most important function was to meet parents who wished to send their sons to the school, to ensure that the parents intended to give their whole-hearted support. Once the sons had left the school, the Prime Minister found himself under pressure from his left-wing colleagues to withdraw the right of state-funded schools to establish this basic matter of cooperation and trust, and legislated accordingly.<sup>9</sup> No one seemed prepared to ask, how on earth can teachers be expected to share responsibility for a child without some sort of prior agreement and understanding with parents?

Two boys, school friends of my son, were to stay with us overnight following a disco in a neighbouring village hall. They were twelve and I arranged to pick them up at 11 pm. My son was waiting on the spot; of the other two there was nothing to be seen and my son did not know where they were. I eventually found them in a cottage garden, one of them up a tree. When I asked why they had not been at the rendezvous their answers lacked coherence and I questioned

<sup>8</sup> ... while doctors engendered trust levels of 61 per cent—with teachers on 32% and the police on 29%—pollsters did not fare so well, with the lowest trust rating of 2.25%, followed by politicians on 5.2% and local councillors on 5.25%” (*PR Weekly*, 29 March 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Education and Inspections Act 2006.

them more closely, fearing that alcohol or possibly even drugs might have something to do with their refusal to answer my questions.

Towards midnight I rang their parents and summoned them to collect their sons, explaining that I was not prepared to take responsibility for children who refused to cooperate with me. One father appeared, apologized, tore his son off a strip and took him home. Subsequently the boy joined the sixth form where I taught and it was clear that he had learnt his lesson and grown up. The other boy's mother arrived from a dinner party an hour away. She was not happy about the situation but was not prepared to focus her annoyance on the cause of this inconvenience, who continued to trouble the world.

Establish a good understanding with parents and so much more is possible for teachers as they help younger generations to grow up.

So far we have contrived to strengthen the relationship between home and school. Strengthen this a little further and then we will be ready to consider the school's relationship with the wider community which, in state-funded schools, is at present achieved through membership of governing bodies and by direction and inspection.

If our expectations generally of parents are to be raised, then we must be prepared to complement these expectations with increased opportunities, not just to support teachers, but to help them with the running of the school and with their new responsibilities for safeguarding their pupils against untoward intrusion on their work. At present parents form a small minority of volunteers on governing bodies. As a sign of their commitment to their children's school, parents could be expected to submit to a ballot, similar to jury ballots, in order to provide further governors. Community representatives from local and national government, and local organizations representing employers and trade unions, could usefully be included, and governing bodies constituted without a dominant interest group.

A recent example from the independent sector is instructive here. When Hill House School, a prep school in Knightsbridge, was castigated by Ofsted in December 2016, parents were outraged and started digging. They found that one of the inspectors had been convicted of possessing indecent pictures and his criticisms of the school were immediately put to one side. This episode serves as a reminder of the vulnerability of schools to the intrusion of outside bodies; had the school not been supported in this way by parents the harm to its reputation would have endured.

If the board of governors is properly constituted in the way I have suggested, it could then be a matter for the governors to determine the extent to which they heed the blandishments or requirements of bodies and organizations outside the school.

To those concerned about obliging parents to join governing bodies, I would say that for these parents, membership would not only provide an opportunity to influence and support the school, it would necessarily engage them in debate about the running of the school, and give others an opportunity to hear and challenge their views.

On governing bodies, and at other times and on other occasions, teachers will explain to parents what they are doing and seek to garner their support and understanding. What they obviously cannot do is treat each child in accordance with the particular requirements of his or her parents. The school has to plan its work and activities in accordance with its view of the general interest. This is the basis on which schools have to function. Parents have to trust the

school to proceed with the interests of all its pupils in mind, and the school has to trust parents to make sure that their children will arrive at school ready to learn and ready to behave so that other children can also be taught. Failing this, schools simply become expensive child-minding facilities and those parents who have taken the trouble to prepare their children will rightly resent their children's learning being disrupted by children who cannot or will not behave and cooperate. How else can schools provide young people with the basis for becoming useful adults, able to provide the rest of us with services that we need—whether as National Health Service medics, plumbers, lawyers, electricians and teachers, the sort of people we call on to help us do the things we cannot do for ourselves?

Ed Balls, a former Labour minister, once said, “Parents, pupils and local communities know best what is needed in their area”, and added that “Active parents are crucial to good schools”. Another former Labour education minister, Ruth Kelly, spoke of the need for schools to have the backing of parents: “Only then can we make good behaviour the norm in every classroom”. Did either of these politicians consider whether they really could legislate for parental *backing*, rather than for parental *compliance*? Would there be any point when we never question unsuitable adults who inflict themselves as parents on children?

As far as a child's education is concerned, school provides the first step away from those with primary responsibility for them, the parents. A school finds itself a locus of many demands and expectations. In order to deal with them, and provide its pupils with a good education, a school requires the means and the authority to act. Parents, those whose dependence on a school is most immediate, need most closely to be involved in the school, not merely to meet its expectations of them, but to support it more closely, especially when others, more remote from the school and their children, seek to influence it for other purposes. It is on this basis that my proposals are made.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The matter of funding does not fit in readily with what I have written. In the UK it is a matter for central government, which is the main body responsible for raising taxes and allocating funding. If responsibility is to be centred on schools, then funds should be allocated on a *per capita* basis. Schools could then decide to what extent they spend that money on advice, inspections and other services.

It would seem logical for central government also to decide matters of tax allowances for parents who choose independent school places and whether to contribute to independent schools on the same *per capita* basis, which would enable parents to only contribute a portion of the fees required for an independent school place.

Central government has for some years controlled the school examination system in a way that provides for comparisons to be made between individual schools and groups of schools regarding examination results. With greater responsibility vested in schools, they would require access for their pupils to examination boards that met the needs of pupils, and of organizations that wished to engage with young people as employees or as students. Perhaps we would see organizations that did not wish to use university entrance examinations establishing their own schemes of assessment, in the way that the armed forces and the civil service once did. Those systems that proved successful would flourish.

And finally, where schools are directed by central government regarding inspections and examinations, statistics are produced that provide the simple solutions beloved of politicians. Those more closely involved with children, and with far greater responsibility for them, can do little more with these statistics than use them as generalized guidance. When they come to make decisions about particular children in particular situations generalized information may not provide a basis for sound decisions.

**Autobiographical note:** Peter Inson failed English literature at school. After ten years in agriculture, he trained to teach English and became head of a west London comprehensive school. He left the state system and ran the English department in an international school, where he began writing. He has been an examiner for ‘O’- and ‘A’-level English, Common Entrance and the International Baccalaureate (IB). He has written for *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Express*, *The Times Educational Supplement* and *Children Now*. Heinemann published *IGCSE English First Language* in 2011. His first novel—*dunno*—tells of a disaffected adolescent’s struggle to grow up. (Kimpton, 2004) He is currently working on an English language textbook that focuses on good English for young people who have given up, and for those who wish to help them. He is also working on a dystopic novel set in Essex.