

## Every Child a Reader: An example of how top-down education reforms make matters worse

### Reading Recovery for Beginners

- Reading Recovery tuition is the core component of the Government-funded Every Child a Reader (ECAR) scheme
- ECAR is an intensive remedial programme for 6-year-olds who are struggling to read. Pupils are given half an hour of one-to-one tuition a day for up to 20 weeks
- According to local authority figures it costs £5,000+ per pupil (or £105 per hour) and £6,625 for every successful intervention; not £2,400 as had previously been claimed
- There have been no independent evaluations of ECAR in the UK and the international evidence is mixed – yet the Government have committed £144 million to a national roll-out of the scheme
- Schools need independent evidence-based research to help them choose the most suitable reading intervention programmes
- An independent Evidence Review Board should be set-up to commission new research
- Primary tests need to be redesigned to support this research

### Introduction

No one disputes the need for intervention to help poor readers. The personal consequences of illiteracy are devastating: the National Child Development Study found that poor readers are far less likely to find stable, well-paid employment—and this is true, even after controlling for formal academic achievement.<sup>1</sup> The social and economic costs of illiteracy in England are immense: no one really knows what they are, but estimates have ranged up to £10 billion per year.<sup>2</sup> There is a growing consensus, with which we also concur, that early intervention in primary schools is necessary to resolve this problem.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately the Government's response has been to fund one expensive programme, ECAR (Every Child a Reader), to the exclusion of all other available interventions. This decision was taken before a pilot into the programme was completed and in the absence of any independent evaluations in this country.

The lion's share of the ECAR money will be spent on Reading Recovery, a remedial literacy programme which was first introduced in the UK in 1990. If ECAR is expanded to help all of our struggling 6-year-olds, the outlay for Reading Recovery alone would be at least £300 million. A lot of money, to be sure: enough to pay for an additional full-time teaching assistant in every primary school in England and there would still be a substantial residue of pupils needing help—about 20% of Reading Recovery pupils are 'referred on' for more intensive support.

Yet there is no strong evidence that Reading Recovery is more cost effective than anything else. The only analyses of ECAR to date have been by the Institute of Education and accountants KPM G, who are both intimately involved in the programme. Their positive evaluations are markedly at odds with international

studies. For example, KPMG estimate that by the age of 37, each illiterate pupil will have cost the taxpayer an additional £42,000.<sup>4</sup> However, these savings are hypothetical—and the costs are not. KPMG's report is strikingly at odds with an earlier American study which estimated that Reading Recovery returned thirty cents on the dollar, at best.<sup>5</sup>

Yet whether Reading Recovery works is not so much the question, as whether it is right and proper for the Government to tell schools which remedial programmes should be used. There are at least 40 other publishers of early-intervention programmes which are used in England, and they must convince schools and LEA advisers that their materials are worth the money (here, we must declare an interest: we are one of these publishers). Reading Recovery should operate by the same rules as its competition.

This report will argue that the Government's current model for educational intervention is intellectually incoherent, and stifles innovation within the teaching profession. Expensive schemes are launched without the benefit of randomised controlled trials. As Sir Michael Rutter claimed after the Sure Start evaluation, "the reasons are political"; once ministers have invested political capital in new programmes, they cannot be seen to fail. As our investigations into ECAR have revealed, most of the intervention costs are absorbed by administration and training —money which could be much better spent on independent evaluations that would allow schools to make informed choices of available materials.

## What is Reading Recovery?

Reading Recovery (RR) is an intensive remedial programme for 6-year-olds who have not made normal progress in learning to read. Each school day, the pupils selected are withdrawn from their usual classroom activities for half an hour of individual tuition—tailored to their perceived needs—from a teacher trained in RR techniques. This can continue for up to 20 weeks if the pupil has not caught up. After this, between 19-23% of pupils are 'referred on' for further help.

Broadly speaking, RR is an eclectic programme which uses a variety of approaches to improve reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Paired (or guided) reading of texts selected to suit the pupil's ability and interests is combined with discussion of the texts; this will include re-reading stories (and easier material) to promote fluency as well as reading more challenging texts to build vocabulary and word-recognition skills. Pupils also write their own stories and play word games to improve their phonological awareness and letter-knowledge.

In short, RR encompasses many activities normally used in whole-class teaching of basic literacy skills, but as a part of a bespoke programme. There is a growing acceptance of the need for individual tuition for children with learning difficulties—especially at the more severe end of the spectrum—but the RR methodology has been criticised as being inconsistent with the recommendations of the Rose Report on synthetic phonics.<sup>6</sup>

## History of Reading Recovery, 1976-2004

The programme was first developed in New Zealand by the late (Dame) Marie Clay. Following the successful conclusion of pilot studies (1976-1981), it was adopted throughout New Zealand in 1983. The following year, it was adopted by Ohio State University, who now own the US copyright for "Reading Recovery". Since then, it has been used in most American states, as well as in Canada and Australia.

RR was brought to the UK from New Zealand by Marie Clay in 1990. Surrey was the first LEA to adopt it, and in 1990 they sent teachers to NZ for training. In 1992, the Reading Recovery National Network was set up at the Institute of Education in London, and the Conservative Government launched the programme in 20

urban LEAs with three-year funding of £14.2 million.

When this expired in 1995, the cost of rolling out the programme nationwide was estimated at £200 million. The late Eric Forth, then serving as Education Minister, was taken to task by Jeremy Corbyn (Lab, Islington) for failing to underwrite this sum, claiming—very much as KPMG now insists—that this was a false economy. His reply to Mr Corbyn was:

*Whether the estimated £200 million to continue this scheme nationwide is a small amount of money I shall leave to the hon. Gentleman to argue with his Front-Bench spokesmen.... The reading recovery scheme is one of many which deal with pupils in that age group who have reading difficulties. It is interesting that, having looked at the scheme, a number of local education authorities have decided to pick it up and to continue it as one of their priorities. That must be the right way to proceed rather than us dictating from the centre what local education authorities—or, indeed, schools—should do.<sup>7</sup>*

Three years later—in 1998—RR was available in 25 of England's 150 LEAs. However, without the benefit of subsidy, support began to wane; between 2002 and 2003, Cheshire, Greenwich, Halton, Southwark, Stockton on Tees and Westminster all withdrew support. The number of RR teachers in these authorities collapsed from 358 to 7, as local authority advisers appear to have concluded that other remedial schemes offered better value for money.<sup>8</sup>

## ECAR, 2005-2008

Every Child A Reader, or ECAR, started life in July 2005 as a partnership between the DfES, the Institute of Education, the KPMG Foundation and other charitable organisations including the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Indigo Trust, the JJ Charitable Trust and the Shine Trust. The consortium of charities raised £5 million, which was matched by the DfES, for a three-year pilot of RR involving 5,000 pupils—or £2,000 per pupil. The pilot had barely started when, in December 2006, Chancellor Gordon Brown announced that ECAR would be rolled out nationally.

On 28 September 2007, ECAR was linked to Every Child Counts and Every Child A Writer. A total of £169 million was pledged to support these programmes over three years. ECAR is the only one of these 'Every Child' programmes currently operational, with Every Child Counts due to come into effect in 2010 and Every Child A Writer scheduled for 2011. The number of children receiving remedial reading instruction through ECAR should build up to 30,000 by 2010/2011. Some of these pupils are selected for so-called "lighter touch" programmes such as the Early Literacy Support programme—which was developed with DfES funding by the Fischer Family Trust in 2001—but about two-thirds are receiving help from RR. The following table shows the number of pupils involved:

Table 1 - Number of pupils receiving remedial reading instruction			
	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
<b>Children supported – Reading Recovery</b>	9,072	14,220	20,532
<b>Children supported – other interventions</b>	3,834	7,550	11,349
<b>Total children supported</b>	12,906	21,781	31,882

Although the exact numbers of pupils who will be in each Year 1 cohort in the coming years is not known, pupil numbers in England have remained relatively stable in recent years,<sup>9</sup> and they can be expected to be in the region of 600,000. The percentage of pupils who fail to reach the expected standard at 7+ has also remained relatively stable at 16%.<sup>10</sup> By this reckoning, each year 96,000 of England's 7-year-olds fail their reading test. At the present level of funding, ECAR is reaching less than a third of that number. At the moment funds are allocated to local authorities on the basis of need, as determined by National Curriculum English test results, and officials are responsible for drawing up plans to distribute monies to schools. There is a large amount of discretion in this, as RR does not use objective criteria to determine eligibility. Assuming that ECAR were to be made available to all children failing their 7+ reading test, and RR were expanded proportionately in relation to the other interventions, RR would reach just under 62,000 pupils.

The accountants KPMG have calculated the cost of RR at £2,389 per pupil, and this figure has been widely accepted. However, this is merely the cost *to the school* and does not include administration and training. To determine the total cost we have used figures published by Nottinghamshire County Council, which appear to be fairly typical:

Table 2 Indicative costs of Reading Recovery <sup>11</sup>			
	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
<b>Total cost of the project</b>	£ 242,000	£ 688,000	£ 1,590,000
<b>Number of pupils</b>	75	126	301
<b>Cost per pupil</b>	£ 3227	£ 5460	£ 5282

Although it is possible that other local authorities might have different costings, the amount was indirectly confirmed by Parliamentary Under-Secretary Parmjit Dhanda in an adjournment debate:

*“... investing £5,000 under the scheme to enable a five-year-old to learn to read ultimately saves us about £250,000 a year, which is what it would cost if that child ended up involved in the criminal justice system.”<sup>12</sup>*

Using the Nottinghamshire per-pupil expenditure for 2010/2011, the annual cost of RR would be £326,484,000 if ECAR became the universal provision for children failing their 7+ reading test. However, even this figure may seriously underestimate the potential cost as 20% of RR pupils are 'referred on' for further help: one can only guess at how much these unfortunate children will cost the taxpayer in total. Looked at another way, each *successful* intervention in Nottinghamshire will cost £6625.

So the original estimate of £2,000 per pupil—the amount allotted in the 2005 pilot—has already increased by more than 160%. The extent to which costs have ballooned can be judged by the cost for each hour of instruction delivered by a RR teacher. The maximum intervention is 20 weeks, or 100 days at half an hour per day. Some pupils are discontinued sooner (RR does not publish the data on this), so 50 hours can be considered the maximum amount. In Nottinghamshire, this works out at a cost of £105 *per hour*. Since the average primary school teacher works for 52.2 hours per week,<sup>13</sup> 39 weeks per year, and their average salary is £32,800,<sup>14</sup> their average hourly rate is £30.37. In other words, up to 70% of RR spending would

appear to be absorbed by administration and training.

None of this is necessarily the fault of RR; rather, this is just what things cost in a highly-bureaucratic system where political imperatives outweigh efficiency.

## The research base for Reading Recovery

The Government's support for RR rests primarily on the results of research conducted by the Institute of Education. However, as a sponsor of RR, the IoE's study can hardly be considered independent: they now offer an MA course for teachers who are selected to become RR "Teacher Leaders". The need for independent evaluation should be obvious—even with the best will in the world, it is all but impossible to remain impartial when evaluating your own work. At the very least, you will be inclined to use tests aligned to your teaching objectives, or ones likely to demonstrate a favourable outcome. It is worth noting, for example, that the IoE considers a 2C grade on 7+ English SATS as evidence that RR pupils have 'caught up' yet reaching the 'expected' level on 7+ Reading tests does not necessarily mean that a child is a good reader.<sup>15</sup> On the 2004 test—the most recent one available to the public—a child only need answer 7 questions correctly out of 30 to reach level 2C, the minimum 'expected' grade. Sixteen of the questions were multiple choice questions, each with 4 possible alternatives. Thus, random guessing would on average give the pupil a score of 4. More seriously, none of the 'control' pupils received comparable one-to-one tuition using another programme. This is quite a glaring omission, as any child who received half-an-hour of individual help every day for 20 weeks would almost certainly make significant gains, no matter which programme were used.

Interestingly, local authority officials in Southampton have a much higher standard than the DCSF when it comes to evaluation: they will not recommend any programme which lacks an independent research base. They are interested in our *Sound Foundations* remedial programme, but are not prepared to commit without a proper trial. Our initial pilot in 14 schools in Suffolk and Gloucestershire sparked their interest as, of the 86 Reception Year pupils involved, 79 were reading at or above their age after 14 weeks. The total cost to the schools was about £150 per pupil—only 3% of what RR costs—all of which came out of the schools' existing budgets. However they know that this pilot, which was not controlled, could not possibly be taken as anything more than a promising start. It is not possible to say how many pupils would have made good progress without our intervention, or how well they might have done with another programme. However, the results prompted Southampton officials to start their own evaluation in 10 schools, and trials are just beginning in 39 Gloucestershire schools.

RR has been subjected to a certain amount of independent evaluation in other countries, and unsurprisingly the verdict hasn't been quite as positive as RR's own studies. Professor Kevin Wheldall, who was commissioned by New South Wales to evaluate RR, concluded that :

*Reading Recovery was effective for only one in three students. One recovered, one did not, and one would have recovered anyway without it.*<sup>16</sup>

A study by Tunmer and Chapman was even more critical. They found that:

*Results indicated that the RR and poor reader comparison groups had deficiencies in phonological-processing skills during the year preceding their participation in RR, that participation in the program did not eliminate or reduce these deficiencies, and that success in RR and in subsequent reading achievement was closely associated with phonological-processing skills. The RR children showed declines in reading self-concept, in perceptions of*

*ability in reading and spelling, and in general academic self-concept following RR. Teachers of the RR children rated them as having more classroom behaviour problems and fewer adaptive functioning behaviours than the normally developing readers.<sup>17</sup>*

Perhaps the most worrying comment comes from New Zealand, where RR originated:

*Professor James Chapman, organiser of a two-day Dyslexia Conference in Wellington, said the Reading Recovery programme was "past its use-by date" and useless for dyslexic children. "Its claims about effectiveness just cannot be sustained," Chapman, pro-vice-chancellor of education at Massey University, said.<sup>18</sup>*

It is, of course, difficult to reconcile the results of various RR trials, or to compare RR directly with other interventions. Researchers design their studies to answer different questions, and they use a wide variety of measures. They are also limited by the resources at their disposal, and the level of co-operation they receive from participating schools. This doesn't mean that their evaluations aren't useful, but they cannot possibly serve as a reliable basis for determining the relative effectiveness of different programmes. This is not trivial—markets cannot function efficiently in the absence of good information.

## The failure of top-down reforms

*"As the hon. gentleman knows, it is for every school to decide, child by child, how they teach reading. We are implementing phonics and synthetic phonics across every school in the country...."*

Ed Balls, Hansard, 21st November 2007, replying to a question from Nick Gibb

The ability to express two mutually-exclusive ideas in successive sentences may not actually be a requirement for office these days, but obviously it helps. One doubts whether Mr Balls was even aware of the absurdity of his remarks—revealing as they were. The DCSF and Ofsted enjoy such enormous powers of patronage that the *de jure* freedoms enjoyed by local authorities and schools count for little when a new initiative is in progress.

This, in a nutshell, is what is wrong with the current model of education reform. The Institute of Directors recently completed a survey which found that the vast majority of long-serving personnel in business and academia—people who are in the best position to judge the output of our schools—believe that educational standards have continued to deteriorate in recent years.<sup>19</sup> We should not be surprised: most of the reforms initiated by Kenneth Baker in 1988 and expanded under New Labour are based upon a top-down, coercive style of micro-management. Well-meaning as these efforts have been, they have created a culture of 'permanent revolution' which demoralises teachers and discourages talented graduates from entering the profession. As one survey found,

*"...rather than contributing to substantial improvements, adopting improvement programmes may also add to the endless cycle of initiatives that seem to sap the strength and spirit of schools and their communities."<sup>20</sup>*

Education ministers should reflect that the hierarchal model of management common to the public sector—and much of the private sector—is rapidly becoming obsolete. This is not to say that hierarchies

can be dispensed with altogether, but that decentralisation enables organisations to create internal markets which allocate resources rapidly and efficiently, without the need for extensive middle-management structures.<sup>21</sup>

This is especially relevant in the case of Britain's public services. The education budget for England alone in 2007-2008 was more than £63 billion<sup>22</sup>—twice Microsoft's turnover, and roughly equal to the GDP of Slovenia. The Education Secretary has to control this leviathan with the help of four junior ministers. Considering that much of their attention is necessarily diverted by the need to climb the greasy pole and to win elections, it is nothing short of miraculous that they are able to exert any influence at all. New Labour has relied extensively on management consultants—an expensive boondoggle which exacerbates, rather than ameliorates, the problem of over-management.<sup>23</sup>

The protocols that determine middle-management structures can act as a barrier to the efficient flow of information, both from the bottom-up and laterally. This is certainly the case with England's schools. Several years ago, when officials were under pressure from Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis to replace their National Literacy Strategy with synthetic phonics, Ofsted was told to inspect Woods Loke Primary School in Lowestoft, where this method of teaching reading was producing exemplary results. Such was the inspectorial mindset that Ofsted instead criticised Woods Loke because their youngest pupils hadn't been forced to choose "a favourite author", as demanded by the NLS.<sup>24</sup>

Projects such as ECAR feed the growth of bureaucracy. Managers—and ministers—stake their reputations on the successful implementation of a pet project or idea. No expenditure is spared to ensure that it produces the 'right' results: support structures are put in place, creating yet more salaries that depend upon a successful outcome. When, despite these efforts, results prove disappointing—as was the case with the "Making Good Progress" initiative—the evidence is suppressed or ignored.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, even good ideas—like synthetic phonics—suffer in this coercive process. This remarkably successful method of teaching reading was developed during the 1980s and 1990s by a handful of British schoolteachers, working very much against the grain of policy. It was taken up by the University of St Andrews, and controlled trials sponsored by the Scottish Office demonstrated a huge advantage over the approach dictated by England's National Literacy Strategy.<sup>26</sup> As the evidence for synthetic phonics accumulated, the DfES became increasingly isolated, and by 2005 the NLS had to be abandoned.

Although there were many excellent synthetic phonics programmes in use by then (most of them written by teachers), the DfES insisted on writing its own version, *Letters and Sounds*. This is now being introduced (on a 'voluntary' basis, of course) in schools throughout England. Like the old National Literacy Strategy, it is being introduced without the benefit of an independent evaluation. The NLS failed because it was vastly over-prescriptive, and contained too many teaching objectives, such as the afore-mentioned requirement that all young children choose their 'favourite author'. The inclusion of non-essential objectives serves to reduce the focus on the parts that really matter; a recent Cambridge study found that teachers who were faced with the minutely-detailed National Numeracy Strategy "were selective in implementing the guidelines for calculating methods".<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, the DCSF synthetic phonics programme, *Letters and Sounds*, repeats the same mistake: it is over-prescriptive, and it contains far too many trivial teaching objectives. One can only wonder why ministers thought that existing commercial programmes weren't good enough. Whether *Letters and Sounds* is better than the teacher-developed commercial programmes, however, isn't the only question. Teachers receive the message, loud and clear: don't use your initiative—just do as you are told.

## 'Open reforms' and programme evaluation

Considering the urgent need to eliminate reading failure, one would think that independent randomised controlled trials of the 40+ reading interventions available in the UK would be a top priority. However, such trials aren't even on the agenda, which may be deliberate. After Sir Michael Rutter, one of Britain's most respected authorities on school effectiveness studies, served as an adviser for the evaluation of the 'Sure Start' programme, he stated:

*“Why, we may ask, did the Government rule out any form of randomised controlled trials design, given its superior strength for determining efficacy? It may be presumed that the reason was political...[such trials would] carry the danger of showing that a key policy was a mistake.”<sup>28</sup>*

The value of impartial trials goes well beyond the information they would provide to schools and local authority advisers. Those of us who produce literacy programmes form a rather special fraternity, or perhaps more aptly, sorority. There isn't a lot of money in it, but the knowledge that you are changing children's lives is a powerful incentive. We tend to respect each other's work for this reason, even though we may argue about the finer points of pedagogy. None of us have the slightest doubt that our competitors' programmes might have good ideas that could be adopted, but without knowing which ones produce the best results, no one knows where to look. In fact, the theoretical basis of our programme owes a lot to an American programme called 'SRA' which we chose because it outperformed its competitors in randomised controlled trials (as a part of the 'Follow Through' initiative) conducted in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> As we developed more experience, and worked with other good teaching materials, we eventually decided that we could produce something better.

If you think about it, there's nothing that special about this. In the private sector, this is just how things work—how better goods and services are produced. But if any government were serious about creating markets in education, the first priority would have to be the sponsoring of independent trials of all the programmes and initiatives currently in use (and not just with regard to literacy), and new ones which show any kind of promise. Since randomised controlled trials are expensive and time consuming, it would probably be necessary to have a two-tier approach, with relatively new and untried materials first being subjected to a less demanding evaluation.

As much as one hates to add to the alphabet soup that absorbs so much of our educational spending before it reaches the school gate, the creation of an independent Research Review Board—preferably composed of academics and employers who have to work with the product of our schools—is the only means of providing the information essential to the functioning of an efficient market in educational programmes. This body would be charged with commissioning research to be conducted by university departments that have demonstrated their ability to conduct research fairly and impartially—ones which have no stake in any existing or planned provision.

Assuming that schools were given a large degree of autonomy—and that reading tests were reformed as proposed below—the results of such trials would have considerable impact. Prior to the trials of synthetic phonics in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, teachers were almost universally dismissive; but now they beat a path to our door. Obviously, results of trials would have to be published in a form that is readily accessible to hard-working teachers, but it would be a grave error to restrict funding to 'approved' products: you cannot have an efficient market if you deny access to new providers.



## Testing reading

The process of independent evaluation outlined above requires access to tests that are valid and reliable. Unfortunately, it would be difficult to devise worse tests than our current 7+ and 11+ English SATs. They are opaque, complex and time-consuming, as well as being of dubious validity and reliability. They are also deeply corrupting: teachers are under pressure to produce the 'right' results—if for no other reason than to enable ministers to claim that their policies are working. These faults are now widely recognised,<sup>30</sup> but there is little agreement on what—if any—tests should replace the existing ones. Professor Peter Tymms of Durham's Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring advocates the use of random testing of a small sample of schools each year, but this would only inform us of the overall effect of government policy. This assumes that government, and not individual schools, is responsible for pupils' progress.

Unfortunately, short of a true market in schooling, it is impossible to have any kind of accountability without some form of high-stakes testing. Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove has already proposed the use of simple standardised reading tests at 6+; a similar test at 8+ would provide a more complete picture of schools' effectiveness. Assuming schools were free to delay formal reading instruction—as is the case in Finland—8+ tests would also provide a definitive answer to those who argue that early instruction is harmful. The evidence strongly suggests that it isn't<sup>31</sup>—even RR's critics have to admit that it has focused the profession on the need for early intervention. Reliable tests would also make it much easier to conduct the kind of programme evaluations suggested previously.

Reading tests should be designed to measure word-identification skills only, and not 'reading comprehension'. The influence of language skills on test scores cannot be eliminated entirely, but the current 7+ English SATs (which are explicitly tests of 'reading comprehension') include questions which test children's ability to make inferences.

'Reading comprehension' is a construct which conflates two quite distinct abilities: decoding skill, and verbal intelligence.<sup>32</sup> Decoding skills can be taught to virtually any child, given good teaching backed up by early identification of children with learning difficulties. Verbal intelligence, however, is not something that schools can improve markedly in a matter of a year or two; in other words, genetic and home influences are dominant. Insofar as infant schools can improve verbal intelligence, it is mostly a matter of teaching good decoding skills. The evidence is very robust: children who can read easily are far more likely to read extensively, and this in turn is the major determinant of overall cognitive growth.<sup>33</sup>

Decoding skills can be tested easily with simple standardised tests that can be administered quickly and cheaply. In order to avoid the problems involved with designing new tests each year, it is quite possible to have large banks of weighted test items which can be mixed and matched for each individual test paper. Since no two pupils in any classroom would have identical papers, the scope for copying is nil. It would be impossible to 'teach the test' without teaching the skill.

Of course, testing is a major industry, and interested parties would criticise such arrangements as 'simplistic'. And so it is—and as such, it would be broadly welcomed by teachers, if not their unions.

## Conclusion

Fortunately, most teachers are only too keen to adopt anything that will help struggling readers. No teacher wants to see a child fail, yet at the same time, experienced teachers have weathered so many 'miracle' interventions showered on them from above that they are understandably a little bit sceptical, even about interventions with a proven research base like synthetic phonics. Just to be on the safe side, they tend to continue doing what they've always done. On top of this, the demands of competing initiatives and administrative chores are highly distracting—teachers frequently tell us that they wish they had the time to use our programme with all of their pupils who could benefit from it.

There are no lack of proposed solutions to reading failure—RR is one of dozens. Given the stimulus of a true market, in a decade or two people may wonder why teaching children to read was ever considered a problem. Bearing in mind the nature of our educational system, the only realistic option open to policy makers is to sponsor research to find out which approaches work best, and to give our schools and local authorities the freedom to implement them and to come up with even better ideas. For far too long they have relied upon committees of experts whose advice seems to have done little beyond creating the putative need for yet more committees—committees that have helped produce the 6,000 pages of documents that constituted headteachers' required reading for 2008.<sup>34</sup> That's 30 pages every working day—just reading it would be bad enough, but heads are expected to implement it as well. There could be no better evidence as to the unreality of the world inhabited by our experts in Whitehall.

Ministers must learn that the top-down approach is completely and utterly bankrupt, and that our schools cannot possibly improve without the willing and active consent of teachers. Any government that has the courage to release teachers from their administrative shackles and to give parents meaningful choices will almost certainly be rewarded in the polls. As George Patton once said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

## Endnotes

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## Helping Britain Work: Policy Exchange's Skills Programme

This note is being released as part of a year long programme of work on Skills from primary school to adult learning. Future projects include an overview of Government initiatives to improve basic skills at school level (5-16), research notes on the science and technology skill base and Train-to-Gain and an analysis of work-based learning following the Leitch Review. We are very grateful to the sponsors of this programme: **City and Guilds, Edge, the Financial Sector Skills Council, Microsoft, the Open University and Reed in Partnership**. The views contained in this report are those of the authors.

### Work on Education at Policy Exchange

As an engine of both economic growth and social mobility, education is an important part of **Policy Exchange's** research agenda. We are particularly concerned with using the power of the market to provide a high quality education for the most disadvantaged in society.

Our published work on education includes **Reclaiming our Universities** (2003), which argues for the liberation of British universities from excessive state control; **Hands Up for School Choice** (2004), which examines the performance of school voucher systems abroad; **No More School Run** (2005), which makes the case for a US-style school bus system; **More Good School Places** (2005), which recommends a supply-side revolution in the provision of education and calls for the introduction of an Advantage Premium – additional money for those who have been to failed schools – to enable them to access a good education; **The Leadership Effect** (2007) – which examined how and to what extent head teachers can effect their schools' performance; **More Good Teachers** (2008) – which laid out plans that would increase the quality of teaching by both attracting the right people to begin with and then training them in the most helpful manner; and most recently **School Funding and Social Justice** (2008) – explaining how a "pupil premium" could give more funds to schools in disadvantaged areas and stimulate a true schools market.

For further information about this programme please contact Sam Freedman, Head of the Education Unit, on [sam.freedman@policyexchange.org.uk](mailto:sam.freedman@policyexchange.org.uk).

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### About Policy Exchange

Policy Exchange, an independent educational charity, is Britain's largest centre-right think tank. Our mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas which will foster a free society based on strong communities, limited government, national self confidence and an enterprise culture. In contrast to many other think tanks Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development. Our impact speaks for itself: from housing to policing reform, education to the NHS, our proposals have been taken on board by the main political parties. Registered charity number 1096300.

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