

**Remarks to Renaissance Weekend Seminar  
Could British Educational Reforms be introduced into the United States?  
by Sir Cyril Taylor, GBE**

The extraordinary paradox in comparing educational standards in the United Kingdom and the United States is that two of the most important recent English educational reforms – the introduction of specialist schools and academies – both originated in US schools.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Magnet schools, which besides teaching a broad curriculum are centres of excellence in one or more particular subjects, were an important American schools innovation. For various reasons, including their use by the Federal Government in an abortive attempt to integrate ethnic minorities into US schools, Magnet schools became less popular. They have, however, recently become popular again. Magnet Schools were introduced as specialist schools in 1994 in England where they now account for 90 per cent of all schools. Similarly, the British City Technology Colleges, and their successors, the City Academies, emulate US Charter schools. There are now over 3500 charter schools in the United States, but they still only account for 3.5 per cent of all US public schools, whereas the goal in England will be to have at least 400 academies equivalent to nearly 15 per cent of the 3,100 secondary schools.

If these two great American reforms have worked so well in the United Kingdom, why have they been less successful in the United States? Could American schools learn from the way that specialist schools and academies have transformed English schools, as well as from other English reforms such as the introduction of the national curriculum and national accountability started in 1988? Before answering this question, it is necessary to review the current state of public school education in the United States.

As described in Chris Whittle's book '*Crash Course*' the first issue is the sheer size of the American school population, which makes it very difficult to generalise about US educational standards. The total school population in the United States is approximately 49 million children. Each age cohort is over three million children (NOTE: the 49 million estimated children include PK-12, a total of 14 'cohorts'. In addition, the number of students in each cohort is not the same. For example, in 2005 there were 3.6 million children in kindergarten and 3.1 million in 12<sup>th</sup> grade), compared to just 650,000 in England. There are an astounding 14,000 school districts, compared to just 140 Local Authorities with educational responsibilities in England, with 97,000 schools in the public sector of which 73,000 are primary or middle schools (primary schools for

children aged 6 to 11 and middle schools for children aged 11 to 14) and 29,500 are senior high schools for children aged 14 to 17.

Interestingly, there are 29,000 private and parochial schools in the United States – 23 per cent of all schools. 12,000 of these have secondary grades out of a total of 42,000 secondary schools, or 29 per cent. Private schools educate 11 per cent of all US children, compared with 7 per cent in private secondary schools in England.

Chris Whittle, the founder and Chief Executive of Edison Schools, the largest charter school organisation, in his book 'Crash Course', estimates that American schools enrol 50 million pupils in the United States – plus 5 million teachers and support staff – nearly the population of Great Britain. He estimates the average American household pays 4000 dollars in taxes each year to support American public schools.

He says that 15 million American children go to schools with poor results. The US Federal Government National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) shows that 33 per cent of American public school children in fourth grade do not achieve basic proficiency, the lowest classification in reading skills – there are three classifications: advanced, proficient and basic. He further asks: 'Why does the greatest nation in this history of the world allow 33 per cent of its children to languish in functional illiteracy?'

Whittle attributes the low standards in such a large proportion of American schools to many factors including the power of the teacher unions to delay reforms, the absence of national accountability standards, the heavy concentration of children from socially disadvantaged families in particular districts and insufficient funding.

The extraordinary power of the American teacher unions (American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and the United Federation of Teachers) is clearly a factor. In most school districts, every US teacher and school staff member is a member of one of the unions. Their power, particularly over the Democratic Party, which relies heavily upon their funding, is such that it is extremely difficult to introduce radical reforms into many US public schools, especially as so many school districts are small, employing few staff capable of taking on the very large teaching unions. When I have worked with a number of New York City schools, high school principals have told me that it is virtually impossible to terminate a poor teacher's employment, despite Mayor Bloomberg's recent reforms.

Yet the average spending per pupil in the US public schools is now over \$9,000 per pupil. In New York City, with just one million public school pupils, the total school district expenditures in fiscal year 2006 were \$15 billion. This means that the average spending per pupil in New York schools is \$15,000, 50 % more than the average of 10,000 dollars per pupil in English schools. Even more interesting is the comparison with per capita fees for US parochial schools (religious), whose fees are typically only \$6500 per annum. Why, despite this spending, are standards in so many American urban public schools so poor?

There are many reasons, and it is difficult to generalise. There are many school districts especially in the white suburban areas where standards are very high. Some States, like Georgia, under Governor Zell Miller, have made substantial improvements to their public schools. However, if my American readers will allow me to comment, there are some fundamental causes for the poor standards in so many American schools. These structural problems would have to be remedied before English style school reforms could be implemented successfully.

In addition to the power of the American teacher unions to obstruct reform, there are other causes of low standards in US urban schools – in 15 of the 50 largest urban school districts less than half of the students graduate from high school.

Possibly the single greatest problem is the lack of effective national accountability standards. Despite the recent bold attempt of the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Federal legislation, which requires all US schools to report on progress for grades 3 to 6 in maths and English in raising the academic standards of their pupils using statistics, there are still no federally supervised tests; in England, every pupil takes nationally supervised tests and examinations at 11, 14, 16 and 18 which provide English parents with statistical measures of whether or not a particular school is a good school. I was told by Bernadine Fong, President Emerita, Foothills College, Los Altos Hills, California, that the chief critics of the No Child Left Behind reforms have been the local school superintendents who complain they have to ‘teach to the test’ – a series of exit examinations by grade level. Yet many schools board schools whose students cannot pass the exit exams can get ‘waivers’ to move their students to the next grade level. The notion of local control of its schools is so deeply embedded into American education that it probably remains the untouchable element of any school reform movement.

Bill Gates in a recent speech at Harvard said he was a strong supporter of national school accountability standards for US schools but he feared they

would be very difficult to introduce for two reasons: First the Republican Party was opposed to anything which had national in its remit, and second the Democratic Party with its links to the teaching unions were against standards.

Time Magazine has reported that state test results for schools have very little correlation student achievement as measured by the NAEP. Using data from the US Federal Government National Center for Education Statistics, it published a chart which showed, for example, that while Mississippi claims that 90 per cent of its fourth graders score as proficient or better in reading, using its own state test, only 20 per cent achieve the same result on the NAEP. Using their own test, Mississippi ranks first in the 50 US states, but using the NAEP it ranks last. By contrast, pupils in Massachusetts scored the best on the NAEP, with nearly 50 per cent of fourth graders scoring as proficient or better in the Federal reading test, only slightly less than the State test result.

Terrence Paul, CEO of Renaissance Learning has written a very interesting paper discussing accountability and literacy tests “Reflections regarding Assessment, and Reading and Maths Instruction in the US and England

Another problem as was mentioned earlier, is the very small size of many US school districts with many having only minimal staff to supervise their schools, yet they exercise great control over their schools. Even the five largest districts are relatively small, compared to the largest US companies.

Despite their size, US school districts exercise great power over their schools. Whittle is particularly concerned over the very low expenditures on research and replication of best practice. School boards are often highly politicised; many elect one third of their members every year with the teaching unions doing most of the campaigning for candidates for office. Another issue is the very high turnover of school district superintendents. Their average length in office is only two years. A considerable number have their jobs terminated by the school districts while others seek positions elsewhere. This is why Mayor Bloomberg has led fellow Mayors in a bid to take control of schools into their offices, in a bid to lift standards, with significant success so far in New York.

Despite the high per capita spending overall, American school principals and their teachers are paid relatively low salaries. The typical US principal of a school earns between \$82,000 and \$92,000 a year – between £45,000 and £51,000. Some English academy principals are earning over £100,000 or \$180,000. The average US teacher earns about \$44,500 dollars or £25,000 whereas an English classroom teacher’s pay rises to £34,000 (\$63,000) with performance pay (even more in London).

In many school districts another reason for their low salaries is the high proportion of funding retained by school boards and not distributed to schools, and the fact that in most schools, funding is not tied to the number of pupils in the school as in the UK. Under the reforms introduced in England by Margaret Thatcher in 1988, schools are funded on a per capita basis on the number of children they enrol. More recently the English schools funding, which is largely funded directly by central government grant, has been split into a schools and local authority pot, which limits local authorities spending to 10 per cent of the total school funding paid by the central government. Until recently there were, for example, three different levels of school boards in the New York City schools. Mayor Bloomberg has reduced this to only one. Previously less than half of the \$15,000 per pupil (which was increased from \$10,000 in 2000) available to spend in New York was actually spent in the schools. In 2000, 55 per cent of spending was in the area of 'Classroom Instruction.' Out of the \$11 billion budget in 2000, almost \$2.5 billion was spent on special education needs with little or no accountability to demonstrate the value of this expenditure. In 2000, \$2.1 billion was spent on full time special education and \$400,000 was spent on part time special education with little information on how this money was spent.

Another major issue in urban area schools in the United States is the high mobility rate of pupils with fewer than half in some schools attending all four years of high school in the same school.

Clearly, therefore, there will need to be major structural changes in US schools before school improvement techniques in Britain and other countries to raise standards could be successfully implemented in America.

But this is by no means impossible to achieve. Already many school systems such as those in Philadelphia have converted the majority of their schools to independent Charter schools with resulting improvements in standards.

One particular issue has yet to be resolved. Despite the recent Supreme Court's ruling that parochial schools in Cleveland could receive taxpayer funds, the funding of parochial schools by school boards in the United States is still rare, despite the fact that standards in many American parochial schools are high, while per capita spending is often only half that for public schools.

In England 17 per cent of all secondary schools are schools with a religious character funded by the taxpayer as are 38 per cent of primary schools for pupils aged 5 to 11. Generally, standards in English religious schools are higher than in non-religious schools. They do, however, have to teach the national curriculum and are encouraged to admit children of other faiths.

Clearly, one way to improve US schools would be to establish more tax payer funded parochial schools but there are, of course, constitutional issues on this idea.

Nevertheless, there is increasing acceptance in the United States that the way to improve standards is to increase the autonomy of individual schools and to create partnerships with the private sector such as has been created by the Edison schools. It is therefore not impossible that English educational reforms could be introduced successfully into American schools. Harvard University, for example, is working with 15 schools districts to improve standards using these techniques.

It is a paradox that the principles of accountability, choice and funding per pupil are used so successfully in higher education by American universities and colleges but not in schools. There is a highly effective free market in higher education in the United States with a wide diversity of choice and the ability to switch institutions easily because of the credit transfer system. Sadly the same choice is not available to American school children.

A group of American scholars from the Koret group based at Stanford visited English specialist schools and academies in 2004.

Paul Hill, research professor at the University of Washington School of Public Affairs and Director of its Center on Reinventing Public Education, wrote the report on behalf of his colleagues who included such distinguished academics as Terry Moe, John Chubb, Chester Finn, Caroline Hoxby and Diane Ravitch. Hill concluded that, while the US Federal Government has less leverage than the British Department of Education, US state leaders could, if they wish, act aggressively to implement school reform. They could set standards which required schools to teach core subjects well. Individual states, for example, could introduce a key British reform under which schools are funded on a per capita basis and school heads are given control of spending. Finally, any state, providing it had a determined Governor, could require struggling schools and districts to form partnerships with the private sector. Governors in states that have Charter School Laws (a majority) can insist that charter school organisations take over failing schools, as has happened in Philadelphia and Washington DC.

The Koret Group found that the most important lesson to be learned from Blair's reforms is the importance of good political leadership. They believe that in the United States it would be especially important to gain the support of the Democratic Party which considers itself the prime representative of Government employees, especially teachers and their unions. In England, a

crucial aspect of the success in raising standards has been bipartisan support for major schemes such as specialist schools, academies and accountability for schools. I am confident that under President Obama's inspirational leadership progress will be made.

It is clearly a matter of social justice that every child, whatever their social background, should be able to attend a good school. There are many excellent schools in the United States especially in the suburbs but clearly improvement is needed in many urban school districts.