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Abstract. In this essay David Bridges argues that since most families choose to realize their responsibility for the major part of their children’s education through state schools, then the way in which the state constructs parents’ relation with these schools is one of its primary levers on parenting itself. Bridges then examines the way in which parent-school relations have been defined in England through government and quasi-government interventions over the last forty-five years, tracing these through an awakening interest in the relation between social class and unequal school success in the 1960s, passing through the discourse of accountability in the 1970s, marketization in the 1980s and 1990s, performativity extending from this period into the first decade of the twenty-first century, and, most recently, more direct interventions into parenting itself and the regulation of school relations with parents in the interests of safeguarding children. These have not, however, been entirely discrete policy themes, and the positive and pragmatic employment of the discourse of partnership has run throughout this period, albeit with different points of emphasis on the precise terms of such partnership.

Introduction

In early childhood in particular we normally recognize the child’s parents as having particular duties and rights in relation to the upbringing of “their” child (procreation providing, then, some basis for responsibility and even proprietorship). In the context of the United Kingdom and elsewhere,¹ it has been possible to interpret this responsibility very extensively, since the 1944 Education Act made provision for children to be educated in a school or “otherwise” — including in the family.² A small minority of parents continue to choose to exercise this right to “education otherwise,” though the state has played an increasing part in ensuring that certain national curricular and other requirements are met in the course of this provision, and, as we shall see toward the end of this essay, it has recently lurched quite dramatically toward distrust of homeschooling and introduced a wide range of new controls on this alternative.³

1. Of the four countries of the United Kingdom, Scotland and Northern Ireland have almost entirely independent administrations, and Wales one that is increasingly independent. While some of the policies described in this essay have been applied outside England at different stages during the course of the forty years covered here, it is more accurate to relate my account simply to this one part of the UK.

2. The 1996 Education Act reiterated this principle in a slightly updated form: “The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable — [a] to his age, ability and aptitude, and [b] to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.” Education Act 1996, par. 7; http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1996/ukpga_19960056_en_2#pt, 1-ch1-pb3-l1g7.

But, of course, most parents (93 percent in the UK) exercise a major part of their educational responsibility by availing themselves of the services of professional educators, teachers, provided through a state system of school provision, with a minority of parents choosing private schooling. First, then, a state-managed system of public schooling takes over from parents the major responsibility for the education of their children, albeit, in general, with their consent. Next, it regulates, for example, how much say these parents may have in the conduct of that education; how much information they may receive about the schools that are substituting for their educational role; how much choice they have in relation to which school their child will attend; how much and what sort of information they will receive about the work of the school and about their child’s progress; and what kind of relation they will develop with the teachers who have taken on this role. This is why I suggest that the government's construction of the relation between parents and the schools that function under its authority and regulation represents one of the most significant ways in which it intervenes in parenting.

A 2009 report proposing new regulation of homeschooling began by acknowledging that “parents are the prime educators within or outside of a schooling system” and echoed the first principle declared in *The Children’s Plan* of the UK Department for Children, Schools, and Families that “government does not bring up children — parents do.” This was accompanied, however, with a big “but” signaled by a prefatory quotation from Isaiah Berlin: “the need to sacrifice some ultimate values to others turns out to be a permanent characteristic of the human predicament.” In a sense this essay is a chronicle of these sacrifices, or, more positively, an affirmation of some alternative principles.

My purpose here is to examine the ingredients of educational and wider political policy that have gone into the framing of government’s construction of the relations between schools and parents — and hence its framing of parenting itself — over the last forty years. The sources I have relied upon in undertaking this examination are primarily (1) government white papers (the usual preliminary to legislation in the UK) and Acts of Parliament, (2) statements by government ministers, and (3) reports by government-sponsored committees of inquiry (even if government has not uniformly adopted their recommendations). I should acknowledge that since this period of history coincides with the period of my own professional engagement with education (including a considerable body of


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work on parent-school relations and fourteen years as a school governor) a certain biographical perspective will inevitably intrude.

There is a certain chronological sequence to these different ingredients of policy (which I shall follow approximately), beginning with an awakening interest in the relation between social class and unequal school success in the 1960s; passing through the discourse of accountability in the seventies, marketization in the Margaret Thatcher and John Major years of the 1980s and 1990s, performativity extending from this period into the Tony Blair years and the first decade of the twenty-first century; and, most recently — and prompted by several highly publicized and shameful cases of child abuse and, for example, high rates of teenage pregnancy — more direct interventions into parenting itself and the regulation of school relations with parents in the interests of safeguarding children. These have not however been entirely discrete policy themes, and the positive and pragmatic employment of the discourse of partnership has run throughout this period, albeit with different points of emphasis on the precise terms of such partnership. So too has the theme of parental inadequacy as a legitimation of further government intervention. Let me explore some of these policy themes and their implications for the construction of the role of parents in the education of their children in more detail.

**Parents and Schools: The Great Divide**

In a sense we need to start from the position that was very clearly demarcated in the 1950s and into the 1960s, in which parental responsibility stopped and school responsibility started at the school gates. I know that people sometimes regard these stories as apocryphal, but the local infants school (for children ages five to seven) that my own children attended (even in the late 1970s) had a white line painted outside the school gate and a notice that warned “No parents beyond this point.” This was not just about avoiding crowded entrance halls, it was a reminder that at this point the school took over and that you had better leave them to their work. An annual art exhibition, concert and sports day and an opportunity once a year to meet your child’s classroom teacher (finally reaching the head of a line that wound through the classroom where the children were pinned to their desks, as I recall, and in full hearing of the rest of those in line) served to provide what in the school’s view was all the communication that was needed. It is no surprise that the Plowden Report, for example, was already stating in 1967 that while there was little evidence among parents of dissatisfaction with schools, “about half of the parents said they would have liked to be told more about how their children were getting on at school. Almost a third thought that the teachers should have asked them more about their children.”

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6. This essay draws in places on my earlier writing, in particular, on David Bridges, “Parents: Customers or Partners?” in *Education in the Market Place*, ed. David Bridges and Terence H. McLaughlin (London: Falmer Press, 1994).

One might have expected some radical changes in this structure as many primary schools in the UK became captured by the language (if not a great deal of the substance) of “progressive” or “child-centered” education in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the no doubt unintended, but foolishly disregarded, consequences of the many innovative and creative educational developments in this period was, if anything, an increasing sense of puzzlement and disenfranchisement among parents in relation to the education of their children. It was not that parents had previously had any very intimate or active involvement with schools, but there were at least, until this period, some continuities with their own school experience. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, a number of developments in curriculum, in teaching approaches, in classroom organization, and in the language used to describe all these combined to reinforce parents’ sense of distance and helplessness. They did not even understand the mathematics that their primary children were engaged with, nor the new approaches to reading; what on earth is an “integrated day” or an “integrated classroom,” and why are they now building schools without walls in which children seem to be wandering around at will in a cacophony of noise? What has happened to the “discipline” of the old days? Parents found themselves puzzled and impotent bystanders to the education that their children were receiving. Ten years after Plowden, the Taylor Report was still warning that “modern developments in curriculum theory and practice have puzzled and worried many people not involved in school education.”

It is not obvious that this sort of relation between parents and schools (or, more accurately perhaps, the absence of a relation) was strictly a matter of government policy or contrivance. Rather it fit within a wider pattern of deferential relations between ordinary people and the educated elite that constituted the professional membership in medicine, law, and for the most part the church. Even if teaching could claim only semiprofessional status there was, nevertheless a widespread acquiescence in the belief that there was a body of academic and professional knowledge involved that was possessed by teachers but not generally at the disposal of parents.

**Considerations of Equity and the Equalization of Opportunity**

The first government interventions in this relation during this period did not so much challenge the authority of teachers, but recognized the limits of what they could achieve in the face of deep-seated social inequalities and educational disadvantage. At this time — and to some degree ever since — the principle of equity was one of the primary drivers for government intervention aimed at parenting in the parent-school relation. The Labour administrations of this period were persuaded by the sociological evidence that the system was operating to reinforce social class inequalities and that children from lower-class backgrounds needed additional support if they were to have equal

opportunities to succeed through the school system. Both the landmark and highly influential reports on schooling published in the 1960s — the Newsom and Plowden Reports — recognized the importance of the parental contribution to children's development and the impact of home circumstances on school achievement. John Newsom, chair of the committee that prepared this 1963 report, quotes headteachers' concerns regarding the impact of parental neglect on the school performance of some pupils: “as one examines the background of these pupils, descending from the more able to the less able, the more one finds them being left to their own devices... parents are often over-generous with material things, and under-generous in giving their time to their children.”

Bridget Plowden observed, in similar terms, that “a strengthening of parental encouragement may produce better performance in school, and thus stimulate the parents to encourage more; or discouragement in the home may initiate a vicious downward circle.” These same sentiments could easily have come out of a twenty-first-century analysis of inadequate “parenting.”

This analysis led to increased skepticism about the use of tests on children aged 11 and over to select for a differentiated system of schooling (on the grounds that this simply reinforced existing social inequalities) and the development steadily over almost the whole country of a system of unselective comprehensive schools. Within these same schools it led by extension to critical examination of the practice of tracking children on the basis of ability and the introduction (patchily) of “mixed ability teaching.” It also led to the establishment of educational priority areas (the most urgent priority in the eyes of Plowden) in which government invested additional resources as a form of positive discrimination in schools in socially deprived areas.

These changes in themselves did not materially affect the relation between parents and schools, except that the introduction of comprehensive schooling did reinforce the idea of a common community school and led to some strengthening of the links between school and community — most clearly manifested in, for example, the Leicestershire Community Colleges and the Cambridgeshire Village College structure.

There was, however, little doubt about where authority in educational matters lay, at least until the watershed of the William Tyndale affair, which appeared to present a picture of a radicalized state school imploding into chaos. If children
were failing educationally, it was the fault not of the school but of economically and culturally disadvantaged parents (or so went the fashionable analysis). The remedy lay in their social and economic improvement and in their being assisted by schools and others in understanding better how to provide home conditions (encouragement, books, conversation, a place to study quietly) better suited to the educational requirements of the schools. This was parental enablement of a kind, but of a kind that reminded them firmly of their subordinate position in the educational process. The observation of inequalities in the conditions that might contribute to school achievement was, nevertheless, and has remained a principled and pragmatic basis for a number of government interventions designed to “remedy” what might in terms of one political ideology be perceived as structural socioeconomic inequalities or, in terms of another, parental inadequacies.

In some ways, perhaps, the most important sequences of legislation and government provision in this effort to counter social inequalities have been those addressed at the preschool years, especially the development of nursery and playgroup provision — a program recommended by Plowden and initiated by a 1972 white paper, and that has been sustained through most of the period covered in this essay. This has carried wider economic benefits in terms of allowing more women in particular to return to work and benefits, thus promoting gender equality. At the same time, this has been achieved by reducing the role of parents in the upbringing of their children in favor in particular of government-provided nursery care, but also private sector facilities. The role of government in early childhood education has been further extended by the prescription of what is effectively a curriculum in the form of attainment targets that preschool children are expected to achieve before proceeding to primary school, assessment of five-year-olds, and a national system of inspection to government-prescribed standards that applies both to nursery schools and playgroups.

The problem is that, given an analysis of the educational disadvantage experienced by some children in terms of the inadequacy of parental support at home, it is always tempting to offer government interventions that further remove the children from the influence of the home. In the late 1990s, for example, when Tony Blair came to power, he introduced “breakfast clubs” in schools to ensure that children started the day with a solid breakfast and were in school on time and “homework clubs” in primary and secondary schools linked to national homework guidelines to enable children to do their homework in a supportive environment without interruption14 — “equalizing” initiatives, perhaps, but ones that in a sense further diminish the role and responsibility of parents in relation to the school and the state.

From Parental Support to the Discourse of Partnership

The notion that children’s educational failure might be blamed on parents’ failure to provide the right kind of home support for their children is, not unnaturally, attractive to schools, which are thus exempted from at least some proportion of the blame for such failure. That parents should support the work of schools in a variety of ways was perhaps even more attractive.

Indeed the kind of social and political changes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s reinforced teachers’ growing realization that they needed parental support on a variety of fronts: in maintaining discipline and order among a school population less and less inhibited by regard for the traditional authority of teachers; in counteracting the mounting stridency of public criticism of schools from politicians and the press; and in supplementing public funding for schools in a context of decaying facilities and rising expectations for the provision of expensive new equipment such as computers and video cameras. Some schools, threatened with closure as a result of shifting populations, falling enrollment, and the need for local authority economies, came to owe their very survival to parental support. Local politicians quickly came to realize that local council seats could be won or lost on the issue of school closure, such was the voting power of the parental lobby. In a hung council such as Cambridgeshire between 1985 and 1989, it became virtually impossible for the local education authority (LEA) to close a school, whatever the economic and demographic case for doing so. Any party threatening to close one would be faced by two others competing for the local political credit for keeping it open.

Headteachers have often talked with satisfaction and comfort about having “supportive parents” or with frustration about the absence of such support. But what more precisely are the ingredients of such support? Characteristically, perhaps they include the following:

- Parents ensure, as far as this is within their domain, that students act in accordance with school requirements, for example, with respect to dress, attendance, and homework.
- Parents support the school in maintaining its code of behavior and, more particularly, in the event that it needs to take action to enforce that code in the case of a reluctant or “disruptive” child.
- Parents support school events, including concerts, sports days, school open houses, and the like.
- Parents contribute to school fundraising activity either directly (by donating to the school fund, for instance) or indirectly through help at a rummage sale or the sale of raffle tickets.
- Parents play a more overtly political role in defending the school or the school’s interests in the local community, acting perhaps as a pressure group on the local council or the local Member of Parliament.
A number of these principles were later enshrined in the so-called “Home-School Partnership Document” that parents wishing to register their children at a school had to sign.15 It was these expectations — especially powerful in the hands of headteachers of the more desirable schools — that led Gill Crozier to talk of the importance of “getting the right parents”: “Unlike other consumers, the type of parent consumer is important. If parents play a key role in ensuring the smooth running of our diverse education system, and indeed to operate as responsible citizens, then their ‘normalisation’ must be assured.”16 All the more, she might have added, if your school’s performance in the achievement rankings is going to depend on not just on your students’ individual efforts but the driving force behind them of their parents.

The expectation that schools should receive the unreserved support of parents in the kind of terms set out here cannot pass, and of course has not passed, without question. In what circumstances should parents feel an obligation, for example, to support a code of dress or behavior or forms of disciplinary action espoused by the school? Is such an obligation owed automatically to a school? Should parents who are opposed in principle to, say, competitive sports or to a school’s choice of a play that they hold to be offensive nevertheless feel an obligation to support these events? Are parents who do not agree with the school’s code of dress bound nevertheless to oblige their children to conform?

In the normal course of things one would surely expect any such obligation to be affected by, for example, whether or not the parents had any choice in the matter of which school their child should attend; whether or not the values implicit in the school codes were compatible with those of the parents; and whether or not parents were given the opportunity to contribute through some reasonable process of consultation or decision making to the code of conduct that they are now invited to support.

If parents have no choice and no part in the matter, then it is difficult to see how they could be held to feel any moral obligation to support the school, though they might choose to do so prudentially, out of sheer expediency, reckoning that doing so generally serves the best interests of their child.

If parents have a reasonable choice of schools that represent a variety of social values and codes, including ones to which they are basically sympathetic, then it could be argued that in choosing a particular school, they are entering open-eyed into a relation that entails an obligation of support. In practice, of course, the number of parents for whom such choice is genuinely available is negligible.

Similarly, if parents become associated with a school that offers them a serious opportunity to participate in the determination or revision of its “educational

mission,” of its guiding values and social code, then there is a clear case for suggesting that parents incur an obligation to support what was thus determined. As Pamela Munn points out, however, while parents are generally expected to uphold school values, “parental involvement in identifying the values which the school will embody is rare.”

Even where such opportunity is provided, however, it still constitutes no more than a clear case for a parental obligation to support: there is no shortage of argument to explain why participation in fully democratic processes (let alone the quasi-democratic processes that are more typical of school governance even today) might be compatible with disobedience to the decisions that are the outcome of those processes.

Nevertheless, schools themselves have become more conscious that when parental support is needed more than ever before, active support from parents is not something that will come automatically: it needs to be cultivated; it needs to be earned; it needs to be part of a richer pattern of mutual obligation and support. Hence, the notion of a “partnership” between parents and schools.

**PARTNERSHIP AS PARENT POWER**

The Plowden Report had already employed the language of partnership in 1967 — “one of the essentials for educational advance is a closer partnership between the two parties (parents and teachers) to every child’s education” — and no doubt there are considerably earlier references, but the notion really came into its own, with an added note of political realism, with the publication of the Taylor Committee Report in 1977 under the title *A New Partnership for Our Schools*.

The Taylor Report was in my view a wise and carefully balanced document, which deserved more government support than it was in the end to receive. It contained in its argument and recommendations many, if not all, of the key ingredients of what I would argue constitutes a proper parent-school partnership.

First, the report acknowledged the importance of parental support for the school. Taylor recognized the stresses that schools were under and argued, “it is vital, therefore, that teachers have the support of people outside the school in the increasingly difficult task of attaining those (educational) objectives and dealing with those stresses” (*TR*, par. 6.14). The report further emphasized the committee’s “wish to produce a structure within which every parent will have a role in supporting the school and increasing its effectiveness” (*TR*, par. 5.27).

Second, the report recognized that parents are not always as forthcoming with that support as schools would like, but pointed out that schools could do more to help parents understand what they are doing, to address parental confusion, and actively to enlist their support: “We believe that better forms of communication

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20. Its recommendations only ever emerged in a very diluted form in legislation.
will, in time, increase parents’ sense of commitment to their child’s school” [TR, par. 5.27].

Thus far the Taylor Committee was on fairly well-trodden ground, but it entered more controversial territory as it developed the next step in the argument and a third element of the notion of partnership: a more equal distribution of power in the relation between parents and school.

“If ordinary people do not, as some teachers suggest, understand what schools are trying to do,” argued Taylor, “it is in part because they have traditionally not taken an active part in determining the educational policy of the schools” [TR, par. 6.14]. Joan Sallis, a member of the committee, expressed the full equation succinctly in the book she published shortly after the report came out: “The case is essentially that the job schools now have to do cannot be done adequately without more support from parents and the community in general. Support means consent, consent means understanding, true understanding can only come from responsibility.”21

The Taylor Committee rejected the case put to them by, for example, the Assistant Masters’ Association that, in their own terms, the curriculum “best falls within the competence of professionally trained, experienced and practising teachers” [TR, par. 6.13]. “We do not believe,” said Taylor, “that these arguments justify regarding the curriculum at school level as the responsibility solely of the teachers nor are we convinced that it is right for teachers to carry this responsibility alone” [TR, par. 6.14].

The committee went on to argue for an increase in the power of parents in relation to schools as a condition for the development of a real partnership. Parents would have stronger direct representation on governing bodies, and governing bodies should have their power extended to include responsibility “for setting the aims of the school, for considering the means by which they are pursued, for keeping under review the school’s progress towards them, and for deciding upon action to facilitate such progress” [TR, par. 6.23].

These measures, which the report recognized would only involve directly a small minority of parents, sat alongside other recommendations — a fourth ingredient of the new partnership — concerned with encouraging parents’ organizations and giving them access to school facilities [TR, pars. 5.20–5.23] and with ensuring that adequate arrangements are made “to inform parents, to involve them in their children’s progress and welfare, to enlist their support, and to ensure their access to the school and a teacher by reasonable arrangement” [TR, par. 5.28.]. Unfortunately, however, these last relatively modest and commonsensical recommendations, which had practical bearing on relations with all parents, tended to get overshadowed by the reaction (positive and negative) to the recommendations that presaged the development of parent power, or at least power for a minority of parent activists.

Though many schools had in fact already begun to collect governors who were also parents, it was the 1980 Education Act that for the first time formally required that every school should have a governing body that included elected parents (and teachers). A little later, the 1986 Education Act (no. 2) required schools to have (according to size) between two and five elected parent governors; required governing bodies to provide parents with specified information about syllabuses and the like; and required that governing bodies present to parents annual reports at an annual meeting open to all parents.  

The 1988 Education Reform Act gave additional significance to these changes by providing for the extension of the powers of governing bodies, for example, through local financial management. It also provided for schools to be required to admit students up to the level of available capacity, in effect extending (albeit marginally) the possibility for parental choice of school, but we shall turn to this later.

On the face of it, these changes gave a new measure of power to the 75,000 parent governors who took up office in the six-year period between 1986 and 1992. However, research suggests that a proportion of these parents were bewildered by their new responsibilities and lacked the stomach for the sometimes heavily politicized conflicts in which the governing bodies became embroiled: “There is a minority which feels marginalised by manipulative heads, outranked by LEA-nominated veterans, mystified by educational jargon, intimidated by paperwork.”

Let us note that in any case there were only between two and five such governors in any one school — that is, a very small minority of the total parent body. Moreover, elected parent governors remained a minority element on the governing bodies. The proposals contained in the green paper *Parental Influence at School* that parents should elect from among their number a majority of seats on governing bodies had been rejected even by organized parent groups. There is little evidence that other parents (that is, the vast majority of parents) felt or were significantly empowered by their presence on the governing bodies. In most schools only a minority of parents bothered to take part in the elections for these parent governors or to attend the Annual Parents’ Meeting that was the primary vehicle for accountability between governors and parents. The Cambridge Accountability Project had already illustrated how skeptical the broad mass of parents were regarding those who formally represented them on school bodies.

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24. This represents, incidentally, the largest number of voluntary workers in any section of UK society.
27. David Bridges, “It’s the Ones Who Never Turn Up That You Really Want to See: The ‘Problem’ of the Non-attending Parent,” and “Accountability, Communication and Control,” both in *School
For many parents, PTA committees and governing bodies were simply spheres of influence for what one critic called “articulate, adroit and literate ‘political’ people.”28

Perhaps the presence of parents as governors and their modest measure of accountability to fellow parents has contributed to school governors’ and senior professional managers’ awareness of parental opinion and responsiveness to it. Perhaps it is a significant ingredient among others for changing the relation and even developing a partnership between parents and schools, but it hardly amounts to the meat of such a partnership in the routine experience of many individual parents. For that perhaps we need to look in another direction.

In any case, though the legislation passed during the 1980s offered parents greater access to schools, more information, and even some power, at the same time it took away many of the key levers of power with respect to what went on in those schools as government drew more and more control, in particular over curriculum and assessment, to the center. Sheila Wolfendale writes of “a dual philosophy” that appears to run through the legislation of this decade:

On the one hand, the educational process is opened up for parents; they gain access to hitherto arcane and at worst secretive decision making; they appear to have genuine choice in respect of educational spending. . . . These rights increase the accountability to parents of teachers and educational administrators. On the other hand, schooling is now so regulated at each phase that individual parents might find it difficult to penetrate the thicket of National Curriculum and assessment arrangements to seek redress for any grievance they might have.29

**PARTNERSHIP: SCHOOLS AND PARENTS AS COEDUCATORS**

Arguably, an important feature of a partnership in the educational process is a shared recognition of their reciprocal responsibilities and mutual respect between the two partners for the roles that each can play. It is barely sufficient for this purpose to present parents as marginal supporters in an educative task that is otherwise the exclusive responsibility of professional teachers. It also barely accords with the facts. Most children will have achieved their greatest intellectual achievement — mastering the basics of a natural language — under parental guidance before coming anywhere near a teacher. Parents must be regarded — preschool, in parallel with school, and postschool — as a major developmental and educative force in their children’s lives. One constructive dimension of the notion of the school-parent partnership in education (one neglected by the Taylor Committee) is the notion of parents as coeducators with the school — a role for parents that the schools themselves can help parents to develop.

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In the UK the development of parents as coeducators has tended to focus on preschool education and special education, but already educators in both the UK and the United States were coming to appreciate the benefits to children of, for example, programs for the teaching of reading that had a clearly defined role for parents as well as teachers. In 1975 the highly influential Bullock Report gave its imprimatur to the idea of parents (usually mothers) coming into school to participate in language and beginning-reading activities that could also be extended into the home, confirming encouragingly that "there is room for many such activities."31

Some notable projects produced impressive evidence of the success of partnership schemes.32 They spread rapidly throughout the UK, though they remained largely confined to primary education and to the subjects of English and to a lesser extent math. By 1991 a Department of Education and Science survey celebrated the fact that 75 percent of all primary schools had set up a "formal partnership" with parents to involve them in reading programs.33 In 1993 the Community Education Development Centre claimed "a huge and convincing body of evidence and experience showing that, when teachers and parents work together in a practical partnership towards shared goals, there are real gains in pupil achievement that are both considerable and lasting."34

I do not propose to enter into a detailed evaluation of this evidence, though I suggest that even allowing that some of the claims made may be excessive, it is difficult to pinpoint any other strategy for the improvement of children’s learning with anything like the same evidence of benefit to children’s progress. Moreover, though this must of course be the overriding consideration, the virtues of this kind of very practical partnership do not just end with the benefits to children’s learning. Such schemes do something to restore to parents their alienated role in the education — or, better, upbringing — of their own children; they are acknowledged, valued, and supported in this role. At the same time, the professionalism of teachers is recognized, reinforced, and perhaps extended as they work in support of and in collaboration with parents rather than at a distance from

34. Community Education Development Centre, Parents as Co-educators (Coventry: Community Education Development Centre, 1993), 11.
them. Furthermore, parents gain understanding of various aspects of classrooms and education and more confidence within the school environment and in their relation with teachers.\textsuperscript{35}

What is astonishing is the lack of encouragement and positive support these developments have received from government. The reason is perhaps rooted more in social and political ideology than anything else. The kind of relation between school and parents that I have described here is an intimately collaborative one based on mutual respect, understanding, and support. The Community Education Development Centre picks out four key features:

- the sharing of power, responsibility, and ownership, though not necessarily in immediately apparent ways or on an equal basis;
- a degree of mutuality, which begins with the process of listening to each other and incorporates a responsive dialogue and “give and take” on both sides;
- shared aims and goals, based on common ground but allowing for the acknowledgment of important differences; and
- joint action, with parents, professionals, and pupils working together to get things done.\textsuperscript{36}

But mutuality, responsive dialogue, the equalization of power, joint action, and the ethos of collaboration are a far cry from the social and political ideology that government has brought to education and indeed all other public services over the last three decades. Parents are enjoined not to joint action, but to choice; not to participate, but to discriminate and to complain if they are not getting what they want. Parents are not partners in the educational enterprise but customers or clients for a service that is provided by someone else. It marks the triumph of the individualistic ethos of competition for personal self-interest over the collectivist ethos of collaboration in the interests of general welfare.

However, the limitation of parental involvement programs from this point of view was articulated some years ago by Henry Acland:

The essence of parent participation is that parents come to school, learn about the way school operates and through doing this become more effective so far as their children’s education is concerned. It is clear that parents are there to understand and accept; they are not there to represent their own position if this conflicts with the school. . . . The programmes do nothing to alter the fundamental relationship between home and school. The potential for the parents to make choices or decisions about their child’s education is not increased.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35} See Liverpool LEA, \textit{The Liverpool Policy on Parental Involvement in Education} (Liverpool: Liverpool City Council, 1991), and Warwickshire LEA, \textit{Reporting to Parents} (Warwick: Warwickshire County Council, 1991). Both are quoted extensively in the Community Education Development Centre’s \textit{Parents as Co-educators}.

\textsuperscript{36} Community Education Development Centre, \textit{Parents as Co-educators}, 12.

Whether or not this account does justice to the best of parent-school partnership schemes, it is the pursuit of this element of choice in a free market of educational opportunity, rather than the cultivation of a collaborative partnership, that came to dominate the political agenda.

**Performativity and the Market**

The 1970s saw considerable debate around the idea of school accountability to parents and the forms that it might take. For a short period, schools sought to head off more centralized and bureaucratic forms of accountability with ideas of “self-accounting” schools linked intimately to local communities, but government was already capturing the accountability discourse, defining it as a form of centralized government surveillance and control exercised through

- a national system of school inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, or OfSTED, with publicly available reports; and
- a national system of pupil assessment linked to the publication of performance tables.

This was a system that simultaneously allowed government to “drive up” performance by setting targets for the progress of individual schools in terms of the achievement of students on test scores and to provide the information that it thought parents might require as a basis for choosing a school for their children in a competitive market environment.

The reconceptualization of the parental relation to the school as that of customer to service industry represents a radical departure from any of the other relations described here insofar as it has been linked crucially in government thinking to the notion of parental choice of school. All the other relations I have described have operated in the context in which parents and school were very largely bound to each other by the parents’ accident [or, of course, for some people choice] of place of residence.

For the “new right,” and eventually for the Conservative government, the key conditions for improving the quality of education in schools (as indeed for many other public services, including health and transport) were the introduction of market conditions in which the state monopoly — or in the case of education the LEA monopoly — was broken; information about the character and quality of alternative service providers was available; and parents, the customers in the market place, were given the maximum possible choice.

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As David Miliband pointed out, however, commenting on the Education Reform Act [ERA] 1988, “choice is meaningless in the absence of accessible alternatives. To replicate the virtues of market competition, the ERA had to establish the basis for the differentiation of educational ‘products.’”\textsuperscript{40} Thus, to meet the supply side of market conditions, the government promoted diversity of provision through

- legislation to enable the establishment of City Technology Colleges (CTCs),\textsuperscript{41}
- legislation [and a heavy promotional campaign] designed to enable and encourage schools to opt out of LEA control — followed by increasing liberality in the opportunity given to these schools to determine their own policies on, for example, discipline and, later, selection of students;\textsuperscript{42}
- an Assisted Places Scheme designed to enable a small number of children to take up places in independent schools;\textsuperscript{43}
- the expansion of the CTC initiative to allow schools to offer other areas of specialization, for example, in languages, sport, and the arts and humanities;\textsuperscript{44} and
- legislation enabling parents or other bodies to set up their own schools — later “City Academies” were provided for by the 2002 Education Act — with government support as well as private sponsorship.

To satisfy the demand side of market conditions, the government reduced the constraints on parental choice of schooling. These existed mainly to ensure an economic and manageable allocation of student placements according to the local service’s capacity, so it has not been easy for government realistically to introduce great flexibility in this area while also maintaining its other commitment to take “spare places” out of the system and to reduce unnecessary expenditure. The trouble is that to meet elasticity of demand you need elasticity of supply, and an

\textsuperscript{40} David Miliband, Markets, Politics, and Education: Beyond the Education Reform Act (Education and Training) (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1991), 75. Some seventeen years after he made this statement as part of the Labour Party opposition to Thatcher, Miliband became Minister for Schools and an enthusiastic advocate of “School Academies” with diverse forms of private sponsorship.

\textsuperscript{41} Education Reform Act 1988.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. For more on this and the City Technology Colleges, see Geoffrey Walford, “From City Technology Colleges to Sponsored Grant Maintained Schools,” Oxford Review of Education 26, no. 2 (2000): 145–158.

\textsuperscript{43} The Assisted Places Scheme, which enabled children from poorer families to attend private schools, was originally introduced under the Conservatives in 1980 but had, subsequently, a somewhat checkered history. See John Fitz, Tony Edwards, and Geoff Whitty, “The Assisted Places Scheme: An Ambiguous Case of Privatisation,” British Journal of Educational Studies 37, no. 3 (1989): 222–234.

\textsuperscript{44} This initiative was extended under the Conservatives in 1995 and 1996 through funding grant mechanisms. Then, under Labour in 1998, schools were allowed to allocate a percentage of places to children with a particular talent or specialty area under the School Standards and Framework Act; http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts1998/ukpga_19980031_en_1.
impoveryed school system does not have much of the latter. Despite, therefore, the rhetoric of choice and parent power, a consultation paper on school admissions prepared in 1987 by the Department of Education and Science (DES) pledged only that parents “would have the right to express a preference to the school at which they would like their child to be educated.”45 The 1988 Act went a step further and insisted that schools accept as many students as capacity allows, paving the way for potential expansion and contraction in response to market forces. The Parents’ Charter declared in bold type: “You have a right to a place in the school you want unless it is full to capacity with pupils who have a stronger claim.”46 The 1996 Education Act reemphasized the significance of the demand side in the market equation by affirming, in a paragraph headed “Pupils to Be Educated in Accordance with Parents’ Wishes,” that

In exercising or performing all their respective powers and duties under the Education Acts, the Secretary of State, local education authorities and the funding authorities shall have regard to the general principle that pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, so far as that is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.47

But in order for customers to make sensible choices, they need information about the alternatives. A number of government measures were designed to provide such information, even if there has been some controversy about its validity, relevance, and fairness. The Parents Charter promised five “key documents” that would provide information for parents, though it is only really the third and fourth of these that contribute directly to the market information:

- a report about a parent’s own child at least once a year;
- regular reports from independent inspectors;
- performance tables for all local schools;
- a prospectus or brochure about individual schools; and
- an annual report from your school governors.48

The application of this market model to education has of course been widely discussed and critiqued. Some criticism focuses on the inapplicability or incompleteness of the market model in current educational conditions; that is, it demands a fuller commitment to the establishment of a market.49 The more

49. See, for example, James Tooley, Education without the State [London: IEA Education and Training Unit, 1996].
worrying criticisms, perhaps, are those that relate to what happens when the market works “best”:

It is not the imperfections of the market that make it dangerous, but rather its potential to do damage where it works most effectively. . . . “Success” according to the logic established in the ERA’s educational market is precisely what society requires that we avoid — namely an education system marked by (narrowly-based) excellence for an elite but sub-optimal provision for the majority of children.50

In this context, however, what most concerns me are the consequences of the market model for relations between parents and school. It seems to me to present a considerably impoverished view of what this relation could and should be. For example, if parents are “customers,” then this suggests that their responsibility is primarily to make an informed and sensible choice of the school that will provide the educational service. But what of their own educational responsibilities and roles? As customers we expect to employ someone else to get on and do the job for us; we do not expect the plumber to remind us of the part that we have to play in fixing the pipe — that is what we pay him or her to do! Less still do we expect to contribute from our own effort to the service provided by that plumbing firm to ourselves and other customers. The trouble is, as Miliband also pointed out, “under the ERA’s provisions, it becomes more important for parents to battle to get their child into the best school than for them to make possible and work for the improvement in the quality of their local school.”51

We need perhaps to observe here the distinction between two kinds of advantage that education can bestow on children. One is a positional advantage that can only be achieved at someone else’s expense. Thus the school that prepares its students (or some of its students) more effectively for job applications or for university entrance may bestow positional benefit to its own students and may affect the distribution of such benefits, but if schools in general come to carry out this function equally well, there is no net benefit to the wider population of school students unless the employment opportunities or chances of entering higher education themselves increase.

But education also bestows other advantages that are nonpositional and infinitely extendable. It provides insight, understanding, and stimulus to interest, imagination, reflection, and creativity, all of which are viewed as intrinsically worthwhile. Furthermore, these are ingredients of an educated culture from which everyone benefits the more widely and deeply they are extended and shared.52

The problem is that as far as parents and schools are concerned there is a considerable tension between the rational courses of action dictated by allegiance to these two perspectives on education. As a custodian of my own children’s interests, I must naturally seek to advance their access to the positional advantages

51. Ibid.
that education can bestow, even at the expense of other people’s children. It suits me to have unequally distributed educational provision and advantage provided that my children have the better end of the deal. At the same time, self-interest as well as altruism indicates that I and my children will benefit from a school, a community, and a wider society in which the nonpositional advantages of education are widely shared and celebrated — but this will, quite logically, become a secondary priority to parents who can see much more sharply the immediate benefits attached to securing positional educational advantage for their child.

The consequence of this dilemma is that the more a system of schooling offers the opportunity for parents to secure positional advantage for their children, the more they will (quite rationally) exercise their custodial responsibility to secure that advantage for their own children and the less they will concern themselves with ensuring that the system provides nonpositional benefits to all. The richer, educative, and universally beneficial purposes of schooling will become subordinate to the narrower, self-interested function that can benefit some only at the expense of others.

The system of schooling that will most fall victim to these priorities will be one that offers a hierarchy of different schooling opportunities of just the kind that the market requires. The system of schooling best designed to secure the broader educational benefit for all will be a common and comprehensive system attached to a common curriculum, one in which the competition for positional advantage is postponed for as long as possible and one in which early jockeying for positional advantage by either students or parents is actively discouraged.

In such a context the rules can be constructed so that parents’ natural and proper desire to act in the interests of their own children becomes rationally directed to efforts that benefit the wider community as well. They are thus partners with the school and with other parents in a genuinely educational enterprise more than manipulators of the school system and in competition with other parents for the sake of the positional advantage of their own children.

Of course no one should be so naïve as to imagine that this second element of the parental educational enterprise will entirely disappear. But we do not need deliberately to construct market mechanisms in education perfectly designed to maximize the narrowly self-interested pursuit of positional advantage at the expense of the broader socially (including self-) interested pursuit of a widely educative and educated community.

When I first wrote in these terms about education in the marketplace, it was in the later years of the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, which (whatever one thinks about that time) certainly introduced a radical shift in British politics based on the neoliberal economic and political agenda. When Tony Blair came to power in 1997, there was an expectation of an equally radical shift, though

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53. Bridges, “Parents: Customers or Partners?”
perhaps we were less clear than we might have been about the direction of this shift. In practice we received more of the same: “New Labour” began to look remarkably like the Thatcher–Major brand of Conservatism. There was no return to local democratic control over schools; no reaffirmation of the comprehensive ideal [the disparaging rhetoric of the “bog standard” comprehensive school replaced the principle of the “common” school]; no thrust to build parental and community involvement and commitment. Instead, the mechanisms of the market were summoned up in the service of improved performativity measured in test scores. But, as Miliband had anticipated, the market required more opportunities for choice between different kinds of schools — so the Labour government made it possible for new faith schools to be established (including for the first time Muslim schools with state sponsorship), and it initiated a program that has been seeking to accelerate the establishment of “City Academies” with private sponsorship [and a distinctive ethos] provided by individual and corporate-sector support.\(^{54}\) Parents were encouraged to force “poor” schools into closure by removing their children from them and sending them to “successful” schools elsewhere. In this way parental choice became the mechanism by which government sought to drive up school performance.

Here, as in the whole marketization program, the government’s construction of the relation between parents and schools has been not one of engagement, of drawing parents into any kind of direct relation with the education of their children, but rather one of the purchaser to provider.

**Parents as Failures — And “Safeguarding” the Child**

For most parents, our children are everything to us: our hopes, our ambitions, our future. Our children are cherished and loved. But sadly, some children are not so fortunate. Some children’s lives are different. Instead of the joy, warmth and security of normal family life, these children’s lives are filled with risk, fear and danger: and from what most would regard as the worst possible source — from the people closest to them.\(^{55}\)

Nearly all the models of the relation between schools and parents [and government’s manipulation of that relation] that I have discussed so far have assumed at least a minimal level of commitment and responsibility on behalf of parents for the education of their children. Some (for example, the requirement for parents to be coeducators — or even governors) require a very high level of such commitment, and indeed one of the criticisms of the programs that invited heavy involvement of parents even in the classroom was that it favored parents who were willing and able to make such a commitment over those that could not or would not, and thus tended to reinforce existing differentials in the educational advantages that students enjoyed. But what if parents lacked that sense of responsibility or commitment?


One response by government to its growing unease about parental responsibility employed the rhetoric of “home-school partnership” but turned it into a tool with which to achieve a level of compliance by parents with the requirements of the school to which they were seeking admission for their child. The 1997 Education Act introduced the idea of a “home-school partnership document” that parents had to sign and submit to the LEA, initially proposed as a condition of having their child admitted to a school but this was subsequently moderated. The act states that

A “partnership document” is a statement specifying —

[a] the school’s aims and values;
[b] the responsibilities which the school intends to discharge in connection with the education of children admitted to the school; and
[c] the parental responsibilities, that is the responsibilities which the parents of such children are expected to discharge in connection with the education of their children while they are registered pupils at the school; and “parental declaration” means a declaration to be signed by a parent seeking the admission of his child to the school by which he acknowledges and accepts the parental responsibilities specified in the partnership document.

However, educational policy in England and Wales in the first decade of the twenty-first century has been colored by an increasingly strong perception of a more radical breakdown in parental responsibility and the need for more drastic forms of government intervention. Parental shortcomings have been blamed not only for educational failure but also for “the numbers of children who engage in offending or antisocial behaviour, suffer from ill health, or become teen-age parents,” to which is later added “substance abuse.” At one level this has been a matter of parents themselves (including many for whom school provided a humiliating experience of failure) finding it difficult to cope with children who are deeply disaffected from school. Such cases are most clearly evidenced by student absenteeism (often in collusion with their parents) and, as Blair observes, parents’ condoning of antisocial and criminal behavior, but also, no doubt, by the parents’ own unwillingness to participate in school processes and events in the way that is expected of them.

Crozier suggests that “concern about the fragmentation or breakdown of the traditional family structure” was a primary driver of Conservative government policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but this did not change with the change of government in 1997: ‘‘New Labour have been critical of parents’ commitment to their children’s education in general and their ability to look after them properly and have laid [at least] partial blame at their door for children’s poor educational

performance as well as poor behaviour.”59 David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, was reported as saying at a conference in 1998:

> When there is a problem it is all too often because parents claim not to have the time, because they have disengaged from their children’s education or because… they lack even the basic parenting skills. … So far from being a nanny state, we must become an enabling state, which ensures that parents and families have the backing when they need it.60

Among government’s response to this “crisis” (as it was referred to in the official rhetoric61) was a set of measures supported by a £25 million “parenting fund.” These measures have served three main purposes. One has been to seek to extend the range of responsibility that the school can take for the care of children beyond the normal scope of the school timetable. The government’s green paper Every Child Matters calls for “full service extended schools which are open beyond school hours to provide breakfast clubs and after school clubs and childcare, and have health and social care support services on site”62 — in other words, for more universal implementation of the kind of developments introduced in pilot areas in 1998.63

A second set of initiatives has been aimed at encouraging the establishment of “targeted and specialist support for parents,” including what are essentially training programs in parenting. But the third set of measures is more radical: government has legislated to introduce “Parenting Orders” that are “to be used as a last resort where parents are condoning a child’s truancy, anti-social behaviour or offending.” These enable the government to bring persistently offending parents into the criminal justice system and in some cases to prison. The tenor of government’s approach to parenting can be gauged by the titles of the acts in which this legislation has been enshrined as well as the frequency of the extension of the powers that it allows. Parenting Orders were introduced in 2001 on the basis of the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998, and their use was extended by the Anti-social Behaviour Act of 2003, the Police and Justice Act of 2006, and the Education Inspections Act of 2006.64

While these measures have been designed to address cases that might be thought of in terms of inadequate parenting, lying behind them and providing the driving force for some far-reaching legislation have been much darker cases involving dreadful and depraved abuse of children by parents or those acting in the parental role. Lord Laming’s report on the case of Victoria Climbié makes for

59. Crozier, Parents and Schools, 1 and 7.
sickening reading, but she was just one of a string of children listed in the report who have died at the hands of those entrusted with their care.65 These cases stood as an appalling indictment of the trust of parenthood, but also of the failure of the wider community and specifically of child-related government services to provide the children with the protection they were owed.

The public reaction to these cases (and indeed with increasing regularity the public reaction to any social failure) was to demand government action.66 The small number of dramatic and disturbing cases were, however, used to justify a wide-ranging platform of legislation affecting a much larger group of “failing” parents (some features of which have been noted previously) as well as what was presented as a failing child support system. These structural problems were addressed through radical changes in the organizational structure of the different child support agencies in the UK, including schools and health and social services in particular.67 One of the requirements of this legislation is for a joint report to be published every three years by the eight relevant inspectorates responsible for “Safeguarding Children.”68

This is in itself significant for the theme of our symposium. The public — led by the popular press — does not seem to have any organizational resource capable of addressing even very specific (and relatively isolated) social problems other than to call for government intervention — which usually means hurriedly drafted legislation that everyone has later cause to regret.

Older established discourses continue to shape education in the UK. Even when introducing the consultation document on Every Child Matters: The Next Steps, Patricia Hodge, the Minister for Children, Young People, and Families, set out her position in the following terms: “First, we must sharpen the incentives and accountability for improving outcomes. We will, therefore, rationalize targets and ensure all services are judged on how they cohere to meet common objectives

66. We should note that there is a basis in popular opinion for increasing government intervention.
68. See Christine Gilbert, Safeguarding Children: Third Joint Chief Inspectors Report on Arrangements for Safeguarding Children [London: OfSTED, 2008], for the latest of these; see also www.safeguardingchildren.org.uk.
through a new integrated inspection system." The discourse of performativity and accountability has, however, been joined by another, which explains some of the more recent developments. This is what one might refer to as the discourse of safeguarding (the language that permeates, for example, the 2004 Children Act), fed by what Michael Power so vividly described as a "pathologicality of distrust" that pervades almost every section of public life and every part of the contemporary educational policy agenda.70 The 2007 strategy document *The Children’s Plan* explains, for example, that

Government... has a responsibility to put in place the right framework and systems for safeguarding children and young people, working in partnership with key national and local organizations, and so we will:

- Publish the *Staying Safe Action Plan* in early 2008, responding to the *Staying Safe* consultation; and
- Ensure that schools and local authorities take a proportionate approach to health and safety to allow children to take risks while staying safe.71

In a similar vein, the rationale for a 2009 review of the practice of homeschooling is introduced as follows: "the review of home education... has been triggered by a range of issues and representations, not least being the quite proper concern to ensure that systems for keeping children safe and ensuring that they receive a suitable education are as robust as possible."72

The attitudes of mind that have been associated with these developments have become pervasive, however. They have been fed by a fear of being sued (the government and the corporate world have of course faced large class actions in recent years) but also by a kind of vacuum of social responsibility — and an increasing sense that, whatever the problem, only government has the capacity to address it. The result is that the law book gets constantly expanded to deal with every matter that raises public concern: a wider and wider range of behaviors become criminalized and more and more people end up in the already obscenely congested jails.73 Whether the "social vacuum" is real or imagined is not clear. A report produced by the Von Hugel Institute pointed, for example, to the massive contribution to social welfare made by the churches through all sorts of voluntary and charitable activity, but also to government’s ignorance of this resource and capacity for social care and community development.74


73. The UK has more criminal offenses on its statute books than any other country in Europe and a larger portion of its population in jail than any country other than Turkey.

We have seen, then, successively over this period a failure in the confidence that government had in schools, hospitals, the police, and indeed their own civil servants; a failure of confidence in the professionalism of teachers, doctors, and others; a failure of confidence in social services; and a perceived need to compensate for parents in whom we no longer have confidence. Thank goodness that, on its own view anyway, we can have complete confidence in our government to make everything safe and right and good!

**Conclusion**

Once you have or create a state education system — and especially if the state is effectively the first and major provider of education — it is difficult to avoid a level of government management of the terms of the relation between parents and schools.

Over the period I have been discussing in this essay, the rationale for the terms that governments of different political persuasions have laid down have been primarily framed by concerns for

1. Equity — involving support for parents, the education and management of parents, and ultimately the punishment of inadequate parents as *selectively applicable* measures to engage (with) parents in raising the achievements of and extending opportunities for children who would otherwise be disadvantaged.

2. Raising levels of achievement (a concern that became framed as the discourse of performativity) — using "parent support," "parent partnership," "parent participation," "parent power," and "parent choice" as *generally applicable* mechanisms through which to drive up school and student achievement;

3. Safeguarding — protecting children from, at one end of the scale, abusive parents through to parents who in the view of the officers of the state are simply not providing what in their terms is an adequate or suitable education.

I have been critical of some of the actual interventions of government in this period and also of some of the mechanisms they have chosen. This is primarily because they seem to have shown less than appropriate respect for the role and responsibility of parents for their children’s education — one that I believe parents in general take seriously — but also because, having been captured by the *competitive* ethos of the market, they have missed opportunities to build *collaborative* relations between schools and parents in local communities and between clusters of schools and their local communities.

However, in a collection of essays framed by almost universal skepticism of government intervention, I conclude by asking this: in the context of a state education system, what is the principled objection to government action (intervention) aimed at realizing the highest levels of achievement and a reasonably equal distribution of that achievement among our young people, as well as a level of
protection from the neglect and abuse that is unfortunately what a small minority of parents have to offer their children? This is not to give a general license to “interventionism” — that is, a constant appetite of government for intervention in parenting or in school-parent relations of a programmatic kind. It does, however, point toward some principled grounds for such interventions where other forms of social and educational practice have been found wanting.