

The Third Way

Tony Blair's free market policies are the salvation of hundreds of disadvantaged students.
By Paul T. Hill

From the time he took office, Tony Blair has taken a bolder approach to education reform than anyone expected of a Labour prime minister. He led a profound change in British elementary and secondary education, showing that his "Third Way", which transforms public services by mixing in large dollops of private action, is alive and well.

In education, Blair adopted the "Nixon goes to China" strategy, taking initiatives no one would have expected from the leader of his party. Rather than rejecting Margaret Thatcher's moves to devolve funding to schools and weaken unions and local educational bastions of his Labour Party, Blair moved them out of the way so schools could be redesigned around the hopes of families and the demands of the world economy.

One result of Blair's initiatives is the Bexley Business Academy secondary school in far southeast London. Bexley is a brand-new school, built on the ashes of the Thamesmead School, which was known as the "sink school" of its area.

Set in an area of council (what Canadians would call "public") housing, Thamesmead was characterized by graffiti and fighting in the halls, intimidation of teachers, "checked-out" older teachers, and younger ones leaving as soon as they could. The average student was absent nearly two days a week, and fewer than one in 20 could pass the five exams needed for university admission.

Blair's Third Way – and pictures of Blair himself – are evident everywhere at Bexley. When he and private sponsor and real estate tycoon Sir David Garrard cut the ribbon to open the new building, Blair called Bexley "the future of British education".

At Bexley, a new school in every way, private funding mixes seamlessly with government support and people from government and the private sector work side by side.

In addition to a new £30 million building (\$US 54 million at today's exchange rates) designed by a private company that transforms failed schools and for which Garrard donated £2.5 million, Bexley has a new principal, considered the best in the area. The school is free to select only the best teachers who apply and has a young teaching staff including five recent university graduates without traditional teacher training.

Nothing is left of the old sink school. The new building – a three-storey cube with laboratories and classrooms open and visible around a central core, along with a huge wall containing two-foot-square close-up photos of all 1,000 students – says "This place is about you".

Teachers and students in their laboratories and classrooms see one another engaged in earnest work; this is a place for learning, with no time for anything else. Students who attended Thamesmead say they are living in a new world, one where they can take school seriously without being called nerds and where there is no place for noise, disruption, or intimidation.

As principal Tom Widdows says, the school was designed to give children a look at a life that is different in almost every way from the rough neighbourhoods in which they live. It works because of serious student orientation to the Bexley way, uniforms that would look smart in a wealthy prep school, and instant teacher intervention to stop disruptive behaviour.

The school operates 12 hours each day, giving students a place to study and socialize from early morning to past dinnertime.

Bexley was also designed to challenge disadvantaged students intellectually, drawing them into science via the physics of musical instruments and into math via calculations of power consumption on the school's national-endurance champion "green" racecar.

Fifteen- and 16-year-olds also study rhetoric and persuasive communication – subjects normally taught only in elite schools – starting with close analysis of the brilliant Monty Python "Argument Clinic" exchange between a man who wants a good argument and Mr. Vibrating, who doesn't know how to give it to him.

Man: I came here for a good argument.

Mr. V: No, you didn't, you came here for an argument.

Man: Well, an argument's not the same as contradiction.

Mr. V: It can be.

Man: No it can't. An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition.

Mr. V: No it isn't.

Man: Yes it is. It isn't just contradiction.

Mr. V: Look, if I argue with you, I must take up a contrary position.

Man: But it isn't just saying "No it isn't."

Mr. V: Yes it is.

Man: No it isn't, an argument is an intellectual process ... contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says.

Mr. V: No it isn't.

Bexley gets results. Despite a dramatic growth in student population and an increase in the proportion of very low-income students, test scores are up dramatically. Thirty percent of Bexley students now pass the five exams that are crucial for university entry, compared to 1% at Thamesmead.

Student attendance rates exceed 95%, and the school has a waiting list of more than 400. This is a big change from the old Thamesmead school days, when savvy parents avoided the place and there were hundreds of empty seats.

(Adapted with permission from Policy Review, June/July 1005, www.policyreview.org.)