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How can schools promote social justice?

By Louise Tickle

It's one of the government's pet ideas, but opinions are divided on the role schools should play



The education secretary, Nicky Morgan, says free schools are ‘the modern engines of social justice’. Photograph: Tim Ireland/PA

Social justice is the buzz phrase of education ministers, who maintain

it is being created in schools across the country by all manner of means. Free schools are “the modern engines of social justice” said Nicky Morgan, several

[times](#). The education secretary also believes access to [cultural education](#) is a matter of social justice. So, what else could be done to help bring about social justice via the education system?

Marva Rollins

Headteacher, Raynham primary school, Enfield, London

Social justice is academic for lots of children. Bare survival is the reality for many. At our school we are battling to reduce the impact of social injustice, because I don't know how to eradicate it when our society exists on the premise that some people will have a lot more than others. To improve social justice through education you have to start further back. First, I would ensure that all our families have decent housing. Overcrowding in damp, unhealthy housing is a blight on children's lives. We work in an already very poor area, and on top of that, some of our children whose families have fled dire and terrifying situations have no access to public funds. The effects are wide-ranging and entirely detrimental. They are often hungry. We have to feed them. Without nutrition and safe housing, how can they learn? For schools to be successful they need other parts of the infrastructure of children's lives to be in place.

Alan Milburn

Chair, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

There is something going badly wrong in schools when wealthy low-ability children overtake poor high-ability children. On current trends it will be decades before this attainment gap is even halved. So ministers need to get on with their mission to embed social justice in schools. Getting more good teachers in front of our most disadvantaged pupils is the best means of translating noble intent into positive action. That focus has worked in London's schools, which have been transformed from some of the worst in the country to some of the best. It's time to apply the same approach to every part of the country.

Marc Rowland

Deputy director, National Education Trust

Admissions policies matter. Here in Buckinghamshire we have a large, outstanding grammar that had just two children from a disadvantaged background in its 2014 GCSE cohort. Yes, just two. Money is doing the talking because people with means are paying tutors who will help their child through a selective system. It's social segregation and, shockingly, it's built in. Personally, in an ideal world I'd get rid of selection, but in the real one, a

practical measure to help embed social justice would be to ensure that every school is told it must perform for its most disadvantaged children or it cannot be rated outstanding. And what about the Department for Education funding an independent, external advocate for every disadvantaged child, to help them with their Ucas form, to guide them into stimulating work experience ... just like luckier children get via parents who understand the ropes and can draw on helpful contacts?

Sameena Choudry

Founder, Equitable Education, a consultancy that aims to help schools close the gaps for disadvantaged students

It's positive that ministers are talking about social justice in education and putting some money behind it through the pupil premium, but it feels as if they think that by talking about social justice, everything will be sorted. I don't hear anyone talking about the gaps associated with race or gender or not having English as your first language, and there's increasingly little funding for it: there are still five BME groups that are consistently underachieving, for instance, but race is now completely ignored in funding terms.

Lee Williscroft-Ferris

Teacher and campaigner on LGBT issues, Northumberland

I used to work at a Catholic school, and students were only exposed to organisations that were against abortion. The kids themselves said that they wanted to hear the other sides of the debate. But the school system in general is now so fragmented and fractured that children don't get an equal experience of education, and therefore they don't get the same opportunities to understand what social justice really is. I think their right to that has to be legislated for: the [PSHE \(personal, social, health and economic\) curriculum](#) isn't yet statutory, but even where it is taught there's no commonality of approach. We need a national pledge to say these are all the issues that all students are entitled to learn about.