

on Education
FOCUS



**GENERAL ELECTION 2005:
LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MANIFESTO FOR
EDUCATION**



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Ensuring a top class education system for our children is one of Government's most important tasks – for the sake of our society, for the sake of our economy and for the sake of each individual's personal fulfilment.

We believe that access to a quality education is the a fundamental right of every child. We can't accept a system which benefits some children but leaves others behind.

We are ambitious for every child. Our focus is on providing every parent and child with a quality local school.

The Liberal Democrats want a fair society in which everyone has the opportunity to make the best of their talents. This requires a high quality education for all, not just the few.

That is why we would scrap tuition fees and top-up fees for students. We should not be saddling our young people with mortgage-style debts as they start out in life. And people from low-income backgrounds should not be put off university because of the costs. Higher education should be based on the ability to learn not the ability to pay.

As a whole our education system is failing many of our children. Our children are tested too much and taught too little. Schools lack qualified teachers. And teachers are having to spend too much time on paper work imposed by Whitehall and spend too little time in the class room.

To begin with we would ensure that core subjects are taught by qualified teachers in every school and that paperwork is reduced so that they can give our children the attention they need.

Too many of our children are left behind because of the rigid traditional academic courses. Academic discipline is important but we must also offer skills and vocational training. We want to see a new diploma system for pupils after the age of 14, which would offer a mixture of academic and vocational education to all pupils. This would give opportunities to those who were turned off by academic learning, while stretching the most academically gifted.

But we must also remember that a quality education begins at the very earliest stages in a child's life because children well taught and cared for in their early years have a better chance of a rewarding and successful life.

The Liberal Democrats would give parents the support they need by ensuring access to high quality Children's Centres with childcare, social care, education and health care delivered as an integrated package. And we would cut class sizes in infant and junior schools and make sure early years staff are well trained.

This manifesto sets out how the Liberal Democrats would address these issues and others in order to ensure that we provide high quality education to all our children, because as Liberal Democrats we are ambitious for every child and ambitious for our nation.

Charles Kennedy



Giving children a flying start

Early childhood is a crucial period in human development. There is compelling evidence that children benefit most from a combination of home care for the first two years of life followed by a fully integrated daycare system where they receive high quality educational and developmental care up until school starting age. Yet many mothers are still not able to afford to stay at home with their child when they're starting a family.

Although the Government has increased the money put into childcare provision since 1997, a large number of parents are still unable to afford any formal childcare, meaning that many children are losing out on its benefits completely. Studies have found that there is still not enough provision in poorer areas and regions where needs are often greatest. This is all a far cry from the promise of universal, quality provision for all. Meanwhile, the Government

has set up the misguided Child Trust Fund, which gives a cash handout to 18 year olds, rather than channelling the resources into helping children in their early years. Instead we would use the money to fund smaller classes for the youngest groups in our primary schools.

To give children the best possible start with professional childcare, high quality early years education and help for mothers staying at home with their child when starting a family, we will:

- **Offer new mothers a Minimum Income Guarantee** - equivalent to the minimum wage of £170 per week for the 6 months after the birth of their first child, as an alternative to Statutory Maternity Pay. This would guarantee at least £4,420 for working mothers when they are starting a family. New mothers would receive sustained support over a period of time, allowing them to effectively plan for their child's first 6 months of life.

- **Reduce class sizes at Key Stage**

one (aged 5-7) from 30 to 20. This would give all children more individual attention, easing the transition into formal schooling and allowing Special Education Needs Pupils to be educated amongst their peers.

- **Implement key elements of the 10 Year Childcare Strategy.** We will:

- Have a total of 3500 children's centres by 2010, providing integrated childcare, early education and family services to the under 5's. Children in isolated rural areas would particularly benefit.

- Extend free part-time early education places for three and four year-olds to at least four hours a day, with more flexibility over hours.

Offer wraparound care to all school-age children by opening schools from 8.00am to 6.00pm. We would make sure that responsibility to coordinate this remained with LEAs, without adding to the workload of individual head teachers.

- **Create a 'Children's Profession'**

of early years workers. This would establish a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher, at the level of current teaching qualifications. It would also set up a professional body for early years staff with the power to strike off the register staff, which break its code of conduct.

● **Create training networks for nannies and childminders in Children's Centres.** We would encourage greater use of childminders, who can offer more flexibility for meeting parents' needs than other provision at fixed hours of the day.

Ambitious for every child

Labour famously promised to make education the cornerstone of their policies. Yet, several years on, class sizes are still high, there is a real shortage of teachers in core subjects and too many young people are still leaving education, particularly at 16 or 17, with poor or no grades. At present we have an education system that provides about 50% of students, who receive A*-C GCSEs passes at 16, with good opportunities. That means half of our young people are failed by the system. Rigid and frequent testing focuses on reaching targets rather than encouraging achievement. A qualification system, which focuses on a narrow set of academic, exam-based courses has not succeed in bringing out the best in students with different abilities. The skills and vocational training sector has suffered from years of under-investment in training and college facilities. The number of Level 2 vocational qualifications gained by adults in 2001/2 has dropped by 11,000 compared to 1997/8. Problems with truancy and indiscipline are evidence of a failure to include all children in the education process. An Ofsted Report published in December 2004 shows that 10,000 children are 'missing' from education. This cannot be allowed to continue.

We believe that choice in education is about much more than just having a choice about which school your child attends. It is about having choice in what your child learns and offering all young people a system in which they have appropriate choices about which route to follow, where they are supported and encouraged in following the path which is best suited to them. We want a consistently high standard of education on offer to children of all abilities, throughout the country.

The disparity in funding and status between skills and academic teaching must be addressed. At the moment, schools get 10% more money for the same courses than further educational colleges. College buildings dedicated to skills training do not get the same money for refurbishment, that is currently given to schools. On top of the established £15 billion Schools for the Future school refurbishment programme, the Government recently committed over £9 billion for primary school buildings. In contrast, FE colleges have no comparable programme of building refurbishment and were given only £350 million for rebuilds over the next few years in the last budget.

We would put young people at the heart of our schools system, by giving all pupils high quality teaching, learning facilities and a curriculum which allows pupils to combine academic and vocational courses for a rounded education.

We will guarantee:

● **A high quality education for all**

- **First class teaching for every child.** The teacher recruitment crisis has left thousands of children being taught key subjects by staff who are not adequately trained. We would guarantee that all children would be taught the core subjects of English, Maths, Science, Foreign Languages and ICT by suitably qualified teachers by giving

secondary schools the funding for high-quality teacher training courses.

- **Smaller class sizes.** In addition to an average class size of 20 for 5-7 year olds, we would cut class sizes for Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds) in primary schools to an average of 25.

- **Extended schools.** We endorse the Government plans for extended schools and would seek to provide pre-and post school provision from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. for all children whose parents want it.

● **A Curriculum that meets the needs of our young people**

- **Establishing a 'climbing frame of learning'.** School-leavers should be equipped with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. We will combine GCSE, A-level and vocational programmes of study within a new diploma system, stretching the most gifted and engaging those previously turned off by schooling. We will give all students over the age of 14 the opportunity to combine vocational and academic learning, as Liberal Democrats in government in Scotland are already doing

- **World-class skills for a world-class economy.** We are committed to closing the funding gap between schools and colleges, starting by providing equal funding for equivalent courses, wherever they are taught.

- **Replacing the bureaucratic National Curriculum** with a Minimum Curriculum Entitlement - which ensures that all children get the same basic education but which puts much more power into the hands of teachers to design courses which meet the needs, interests and backgrounds of their pupils.

- **Giving all 16-19 year-olds in employment a statutory right to time off for study** to achieve up to a first Level 3 qualification ('A' Levels and their equivalents).

- **Reforming the Connexions Service** to give every student a mentor who will help them choose what courses to take, in

consultation with their teachers and parents, and who will ensure they make the best use of their time.

● More effective assessment

- **Giving teachers time to teach.** The government uses endless tests to collect unnecessary and misleading statistics on schools. We believe that teachers should be given time to teach and that testing should have a clear purpose – to improve learning for individual children. We will reduce the level of external testing - replacing compulsory tests at 7 and 11 with a system of sampling against national standards. Teachers will be expected to regularly assess pupil's performance and use the results inform teaching and give parents accurate information on their child's progress.

- **Reforming the secondary qualification system** so that all students in the 14-19 stage, whether they are studying academic, vocational or workplace training courses are in the same assessment structure and can mix the different styles of learning. We will replace GCSE, A-Level and vocational qualifications with a new diploma system, stretching the most gifted and engaging those previously turned off by schooling.

- **Introducing Key Skills Tests** in literacy, numeracy and ICT – so that all pupils have a good education in these basic skills.

- **Reforming the school inspection system.** As part of a wider review of national inspection bodies, we would replace Ofsted with a dedicated education inspection division, within the Audit Commission. This body would be independent of both government and the teaching profession. Inspections would be less frequent and would offer schools advice on improvement, not merely criticism and would primarily take account of a school's self-evaluation.

● Quality learning facilities

- **Investment in schools.** We will build and renovate all schools – not just specialist schools and academies – to make them fit for the twenty-first century, with state-of-the-art facilities, through the Building Schools for the Future programme.

- **World class skills for a world class economy.** To deliver world-class skills world-class facilities are needed. We will implement plans to invest in the modern, high-quality college facilities needed to deliver high-quality skills training.

● Including all children

- **An Open and Fair Admissions System.** We will create a single, joined-up admissions system, operating at a local level, for all schools that receive state funding. Without this, there will be no guarantee that every child will receive an offer of a school place in their local area, which means that many children could simply be left behind.

- **School discipline.** Children need to learn in a safe and orderly environment, where high standards of behaviour are upheld, where bullying is challenged effectively and where teachers are able to teach without disruption. Our smaller class sizes will help reduce discipline problems. To deal with more persistent disruption schools will agree externally-monitored 'positive behaviour plans' with parents and pupils. If necessary, local education authorities' Behavioural Support Units will tackle exceptional problems in particular schools. When all else fails we will guarantee that head teachers will have local education authority support for 'managed transfer' to other schools or special units for pupils whose behaviour remains unacceptable.

- **Special Educational Needs.** Children with special educational needs should be schooled in an environment appropriate to their needs - usually in local schools with appropriate support, or in

specialist schools for those who need them. Parents' wishes must be considered when making decisions about type of schooling. A designated teacher in each school will have responsibility to identify and plan for children with special needs, and act as a contact point for parents and other teachers. We will make sure that all teachers and teaching assistants working with children with special educational needs are appropriately trained. Special schools will act as resource centres to support local schools with their specialist provision. In turn special schools will be linked to research departments in universities so that they can benefit directly from, and be involved with, the latest research in special education.

- **School Transport.** We will maintain the right of children to free school transport when they live more than 2 miles from their designated primary school, and three miles for secondary school children, which is being taken away by the Labour Government. For those who live nearer school, there still need to be safe alternatives to the car; we will promote Safe Routes to School with calmed traffic, safe pavements, good lighting and grown-ups on hand to conduct 'walking buses'.

Fairness for all students

Labour's Higher Education Act 2004 has created a system in which access to higher education depends on your ability to pay, not your ability to learn. Students are deciding whether to go to university based on their ability to deal with large debts, rather than their ability to get a good degree.

There is mounting evidence that tuition fees and top-up fees discourage many potential students from a low-income background from starting a degree. Many students are forced to take up jobs to get through their degree, which means less time for their studies and poorer

grades. Students are also being forced to start their working lives with large debts – as much as £33,000, before they even have their first mortgage. Careers in the public sector with a lower income will be a less appealing option, as many graduates opt for higher-paid jobs to pay off their debts. Tuition and top up fees are wrong in principle– and we will abolish them.

We would also like to see a level playing field for all those who wish to study. That means creating more opportunities for school-leavers who would like to combine academic learning with more vocational, skills-based courses, in preparation for a particular job. We would provide for this growing need by creating more flexibility in acquiring qualifications and allowing students to take a mixture of academic and vocational courses from a choice of universities and colleges. There is also a To make this possible, we would open up more establishments that provide skills and vocational training.

We will:

● **Abolish university tuition fees**

– We will get rid of both the present fees and the top-up fees, due to be imposed from 2006. No one should be deterred from the chance of a university education because of fear of debt.

● **Have maintenance grants of up to £2000**

towards living costs for students from low-income homes. The grant currently offered by the Government to the poorest students will only be enough to cover the cost of fees. Students receiving grants under the Liberal Democrats will be able to use them for their intended purpose – not a penny will have to be spent on tuition.

● **Provide a more flexible and diverse course structure,**

tailored to the needs of the individual student. We would allow students to combine academic and vocational training

by encouraging universities and colleges to design modular programmes, where students can pick and mix courses to make up a fully rounded degree. If a student decided to take a break in studying or wanted to change university, they could carry the credits from their completed modules with them, making it easier for them to re-enter higher education.

● **Fund the commitments to free tuition from progressive taxation**

– from the revenues raised by our proposed 50% income tax band for those earning over £100,000 – the top 1% of earners, 82 per cent of whom have degrees gained at a time when there were no fees and generous grants for those who needed them. We think it right that those who have done so well from the system, should make some contribution to future generations.





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