

Parent Power

By Geoff Barton

Education Secretary Ruth Kelly endured a chilly reception from headteachers the other week when she pointed out that parents are important - a touch of what Basil Fawlty called 'stating the bleeding obvious'.

It was the 1988 Education Act that ushered in a brave new world of local management of schools, league tables and a national curriculum. With it came Parent Power. The notion of choice was at the heart of the Act with the parent cast uneasily in the role of customer. Giving parents reliable information about school performance, the argument went, would help them to send their child to the right school. In practice, of course, the early league tables told you little more than the socioeconomic profile of a school's catchment area and oversubscribed schools simply selected the pupils (and parents) they wanted.

Quite why anyone was surprised that a selective girls' grammar school in the suburbs might do better than an inner city comprehensive was a sign of our cultural naivety. Nevertheless an agenda was clearly established: parents were consumers of education, customers who might - like Saturday browsers at the Pick n Mix - select the school that suited them and their child.

It was about parents that Ruth Kelly lectured headteachers at their recent conference, saying:

Just as you have a duty to respond to be listened to on national policy ... so parents have a right to voice how their child is educated.

It's that word "right" that triggers the rising hackles. As headteachers in schools we get endlessly ground down by people quoting their rights. Many heads report that their biggest source of stress is parents banging on the door to defend the rights of their child, almost inevitably before they have heard the school's side of any grievance.

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised by this. You can't watch daytime TV without being bombarded by commercials telling you that any accident you have should lead to compensation: it's your right to get it. Soap operas and magazines emphasise the rights of the individual to express themselves, be defiant, to shout as loudly as it takes to get your own way. Out town centres at weekends heave with tottering, inebriated youngsters quick to quack their rights.

Ruth Kelly exhorts schools to develop mechanisms for surveying parents' opinions and building them into their school improvement plans. Ofsted recently announced that as part of the new quick-hit inspection model, inspectors will write to pupils to give them feedback on their school.

This is essentially good stuff, and many of us are already using questionnaires, websites and various forums to get feedback from parents and pupils. But I think it's important to

establish very clear guidelines. Parents are not mere customers. The relationship based upon entrusting us with their child's long-term development has to go deeper than that.

Customers, after all, owe little loyalty to a business or shop. They look for the best bargain, get what they want, and then move on. The role of client, on the other hand, implies a professional partnership. If a parent chooses my school it should be because of what we have laid down as our principles and values: this is what we stand for.

In a recent survey at my school 98% of parents supported our policy that no child goes to lessons if not in the correct uniform. I can therefore stand up on our open evening and say to prospective parents what the policy is: these are our values. If they think that the child should be able to turn up to lessons wearing trainers, then they are better off looking elsewhere so that we don't get into conflict.

The same applies to the proposed Ofsted letter for parents, and it's good to see that the prototype acknowledges this. What a disaster if the inspectors addressed pupils in the role of passive customer: "this is what we noticed about your school and this is what we believe the staff need to do to improve". It's essential that pupils are seen as active partners in school improvement, not as bystanders. This means the inspectors should tell pupils how they, as well as their teachers, can contribute to the improvement of the school, emphasising their responsibilities in terms of involvement, behaviour and approaches to learning.

Schools are rapidly updating themselves and adopting many aspects of the Government's personalisation agenda. We recognise the need to take the best features of a consumer culture in order make our schools welcoming, responsive and accountable. But we have an important role also in delineating where our values are explicitly not the values of the high street, that we can't be treated like a cashier at the Happy Shopper. The parent – unlike the customer – is not always right.

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