

What I learnt AT SCHOOL

Reformer, writer, and pioneer of the academy schools movement **Andrew Adonis** recalls a secondary education that was low in creature comforts – but gave him opportunities far beyond his expected aspirations...

One of the main things I learned at school was the importance of central heating – because there was none to speak of at Kingham Hill, where I boarded from the age of 11 until I went to university. Located right in the middle of nowhere – the nearest town was a five-mile bike ride away, and when you got there, it was Chipping Norton – and made up of an imposing collection of big, draughty, 19th-century buildings, it was never, ever warm. At least, not as far as I can remember. I can still feel the chilblains, and to this day have been left with a predilection for overheated rooms.

Team sports were considered very important indeed, much to my dismay, so when I wasn't shivering inside I was being dragooned into a game of rugby or something else equally uninteresting to me on the playing fields. However, there were plenty of positives. I loved music, and was able to learn to play the chapel organ, as well as join the school orchestra. And despite the fact that working hard – and even working at all – was frowned upon by my fellow pupils, I was pretty academic, generally near the top of the form, and ended up taking the Oxford entrance in a class of one.

With hindsight, then, I'd say I was happy at secondary school, although most of the pleasure actually came in the latter years, especially the sixth form, where you got the best teachers and smaller classes. The first half a dozen terms or so were pretty grim, with a good deal of indifferent teaching; but I was still better off there than I would have been had the local education authority not given me the grant that enabled me to attend at all, and move out of the children's home where I'd lived since the age of three. I went to a 'good school' and it gave me opportunities to get on. I would certainly never have gone to Oxford otherwise – I actually went to my headmaster about it, who not only persuaded my father to allow me to apply, but also sent me to his old college, Keble, to meet with his old tutor. Not everyone from



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LABOUR PEER **ANDREW ADONIS'** LATEST BOOK, *EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION* (£12.99, BITEBACK PUBLISHING) HAS BEEN VARIOUSLY DESCRIBED AS 'THE MOST IMPORTANT POLITICAL BOOK OF THE YEAR', 'A MUST-READ FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN EDUCATION', AND 'A CLEAR ANALYSIS OF WHAT WENT WRONG WITH BRITISH SCHOOLS AND HOW TO PUT IT RIGHT'.

backgrounds like mine was so lucky – and I'm not sure that it's always fully understood when education is discussed today, just how dramatically things have improved over the past thirty years or so.

Most schools these days are demonstrably reasonable or good. Standards of teaching have gone up massively, the status of teachers themselves is rising (as shown by the increase in applications for training, especially through programmes like Teach First), and there's a work ethic amongst pupils that simply didn't use to be there. When I was at school, bullying – low-level stuff, mostly, juniors against seniors, the strong against the weak – was endemic, and tolerated, and of course, there was corporal punishment, too. I'm not claiming that harassment has disappeared, but it's not accepted as 'one of those things' any more. The whole ethos is much more professional. And even back at Kingham Hill (where I regularly return for prize giving and which remains reassuringly familiar in many ways)

the swimming pool is now covered, and heated.

We will always need schools that are well run, with lots of good teachers. As education minister, I prioritised those things – good governance and leadership, and better teaching – and though we have further to go, there has been great progression on both fronts in recent years. I am still committed to the academies programme, but when it began, I saw it being focused on underperforming schools – and whilst I'm not against successful schools becoming academies, I think the priority should remain addressing those that are not currently achieving as they should, with a range of reforms including outstanding and creative sponsorship. As for how one assesses a school's performance, well, you've got to have a key academic measure, and all I can say is that no one's come up with anything better than 5 A*-C grades including maths and English yet. It's the worst way of measuring schools that we have... except for the alternatives.