

Labour's big idea: Childcare centres at all primary schools [UK] ^[1]

Author: Grice, Andrew

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EXCERPTS

A nationwide childcare network, based on children's centres at almost every primary school, is expected to form the centre of Labour's manifesto at the next election.

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have asked policy advisers to draw up proposals to give a boost to child care to help Britain's families to juggle the competing pressures of work and raising children.

Ministers believe the plan is the way to reduce inequality and are studying evidence that pre-school help is the best way to enhance the prospects of disadvantaged children.

The national network is seen as the most likely big idea for the manifesto on which Labour will fight to win a third term. Policy advisers believe it could become as important as Margaret Thatcher allowing council tenants to buy their homes and the Wilson government opening the Open University.

Comprehensive child care would cost billions but one option is to charge the better-off for the service while providing it free for the poor. In effect, the middle classes would subsidise the poor, redistributing wealth.

Mr. Blair does not want to raise taxes to expand public services but believes the cost should be shared between the state and the citizen. Another issue to be considered is the high cost of child care in London, where some families pay about £1,000 a month.

The Government would not run the centres -- there would be a mixture of state, private and voluntary provision. But the Government would ensure the current patchy provision was replaced by child care in every area and regulate standards.

The centres could open from 7am to 7pm, enabling many more women to go to work. But they would offer much more than child care, becoming one-stop shops for working and non-working parents by offering advice on health and providing antenatal and parental classes. Existing help for parents is seen as too little too late and is often not provided until children are in trouble.

So far, 32 children's centres have opened and the Government hopes to provide 136 by 2006. Some advisers want to promise a children's centre at every primary school.

- reprinted from The Independent

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