
Do We Need a Middle Tier in Education?

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ABSTRACT The direction of the UK Government's policy is to remove schools from local authority control, and replace that relationship with private sponsors, undermining their ability, or indeed inclination, to deliver on the 'Every Child Matters' agenda, among many others. The author argues that local authorities have much to give and where they have focused on building effective partnerships, communities of schools can be effective in accepting a much wider range of local responsibilities, from standards to special educational needs. This could be achieved through an enhanced duty to cooperate placed on schools by central government and this should form the basis of any future reform to ensure local schools are once again placed under the control of the communities they serve.

The Coalition Government came to power after a period of extended toil in opposition by the Conservative children's team, reviewing and considering alternatives to the education system they hoped to inherit. At the centre of their vision was a plan to expand the academies programme to all schools and to meet the demand for new places – and for greater choice and diversity – by introducing the largely unproven free school system based on the Scandinavian model. If successful, this would leave the education system in the control of governing bodies, but themselves accountable to a sponsor, contracted to the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver education according to a funding agreement which would have no wider public input or scrutiny. It would also serve to drive down the cost of a school place.

With the default position for schools deemed inadequate or even satisfactory by Ofsted to be 'academisation' with no significant reference to the community served by the schools, where are the local democratic accountabilities? Further, with funding draining away from local authorities to a central government determined to prove it is hard on public expenditure and the services it provides as a message to international financiers, what resource and capability will be left in local authorities to support this system? Indeed,

does the Government even see local authorities as having a role in the provision of education? Couldn't academy chains do the job on their behalf, and do it far better?

There must be clear public value considerations that argue for local involvement in schooling, but are we hearing them? One might argue that a contractual arrangement can displace any moral purpose or indeed sit alongside it, if the contract is so worded. But contracts are between parties, not people; not electors. How do local people remove the administration of an academy or a free school if the service does not meet expectations? Drawing it to the attention of Ofsted is possible but few academies fail inspections and even fewer free schools, not least as they remain exempt from inspections for several years after their establishment. Do parents vote out local politicians now if schools fail? Well, no, not always; but at least they can. There is no public recourse if a free school or academy governing body fails in its duties and already, the links between staff and governors in many free schools is far too close: I am reminded of one free school where the head and chair of governors are husband and wife, and which was, only a short time ago, a fee-paying school for largely the same families who now send their children, well, Free. The change in legislation to allow in the children of 'foundation' governors after the founders of Toby Young's free school discovered they would have to go through a democratic admissions process based on proximity shows that the free school movement is about many things but it is not about serving the local community.

How are local places decided? The model preferred by the Secretary of State would appear to be one where the local authority does the place planning but private firms, free schools and the like, compete to provide those places. The free school model in Finland appears to have done just what many cynics accused the Government of wanting through this model: free schools are for white middle-class children, whilst the state school down the road is under-resourced – funds have been withdrawn to pay the free school provider – half-full and then with children of the most disadvantaged. If education is about equity, it fails on this measure, too. Free schools provide a mechanism for the sharp elbowed to push aside those most in need so their children never need see them. This doesn't just pull the ladder up behind those who find success in the system; it chops it into little pieces and uses the timbers to heat the free school movement.

Who then looks after the most disadvantaged? The model ends decades of consensus on inclusion. We hear ministers and others justify this by claiming inclusion has failed, but what is their evidence? Parents of children with special needs clamour to get their children into outstanding mainstream provision whilst those with profound needs find themselves provided with high-quality special schools, in placements that might cost a quarter of a million pounds a year. This presents an excellent opportunity for the private sector to turn a profit, but on what grounds? Inspections of local authority special schools show them to be of a very high quality. Those given up by local authorities to become trusts continue to offer high-quality provision but the costs in this

sector are ever increasing as children with more complex needs enter the system. Local and regional planning would seem to offer the only realistic way forward, integrating education, health and care. Special educational needs (SEN) would best seem to remain local then and coordinated through local authorities.

The move to children's services was meant to lead to services becoming more closely integrated, and in many local authorities this is indeed the case. However, children's services themselves consist of a dog's dinner of responsibilities, some statutory, some not and some, well, no one is sure: statutory certainly, but quanta? As a consequence, the public sector cuts demanded by central government and now under way are leading to more than a decimation of non-statutory services, with youth provision disappearing, and services to schools closely behind, not through choice but because we must protect safeguarding. As our disadvantaged communities come under greater stress as jobs continue to disappear, wages are driven down along with job security, and welfare reforms make life even harder for those with the greatest needs, more, not fewer, children will need help. Safeguarding and child protection services will continue to expand as a consequence of the pressures on our most disadvantaged families, and we will see more money taken from services to schools and other universal services. And so we hit a vicious spiral, drawing more money from what we would consider vital central functions – place planning, SEN, attendance, curriculum support including music – leaving failure of local authorities as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The pupil premium, although an excellent concept, and an even better sound bite, requires money to be moved from within the DfE to fund it. I am willing to guess that academies and free schools are not near the top of the list of services to be cut. I wonder where local authority grants sit?

But there is a silver lining. Many local authorities have been working with their schools to develop a partnership-based model where schools accept responsibility for children other than their own. Some have done this from a sense of community: others on a *needs must* basis but the outcomes are the same. A collective of schools accepts responsibility for children across an extended neighbourhood and has at its heart the concept that the schools are only as good as their weakest partner. Resources are moved between schools by enlightened head teachers, supported by their governors, to ensure all children have access to high-quality teaching. Schools challenge one another, but are supported themselves by high-quality human resource professionals working to ensure all teachers have the opportunity to become outstanding practitioners. Heads coach and mentor one another, perhaps bringing in colleagues from out of the area to add additional challenge or a new perspective, for example through the National College, and report regularly to their communities about progress and performance. The success of any one school is shared by all.

The local authority can still play a central role. It can serve as a catalyst for change, working with the community to create expectations and a clear moral purpose. It can work with schools to plan places, helping the system expand and contract as necessary, acting as the lungs of the system, bringing in the

oxygen of innovation and challenge, and making the local school system one of which teachers wish to be a part. It can secure collaboration on SEN, incorporating special school provision with mainstream, holding schools to account for example, for a nil exclusions policy, a behaviour partnership by any other name. And finally, it can bring governing bodies together to ensure proper accountability, with representatives of each school sitting alongside elected politicians, giving the democratically representatives of the people a place at the table.

And in answer to the question, can we trust local authorities to do this well, of course we can. The roll-out of Sure Start and the development of Children's Centres has been one of the most effective early intervention programmes ever. Local authorities have not only delivered on the capital programme, but also brought together partners from across the public sector to work for the benefit of children – health visitors, midwives, social workers, early years practitioners, community workers, adult education – the list is almost endless. More's the pity that this model is now being unravelled by central government just as we see such strong evidence of impact.

To reach this point needs few changes and many areas of the country would say, 'This is our model', but other areas might not. Too many academy chains are beginning to look like pre-children's services local education authorities but with no local political accountabilities and easily able to subvert the intentions of the integration of services to children, placing children at risk. Enhanced duties to cooperate would be very easy to introduce, and giving groups of schools collective responsibility for targets in their locality would ensure a new model of cooperation and inclusion was quickly developed. This would be consistent with previous policies but also create daylight between the market-led, profit-driven approach of the Coalition, and a model based on inclusion, fairness and equity from an Opposition; a model that builds on our past but helps prepare us for a future where working together will be needed to unlock the potential of our young people, not a grounding in classics and fjords.

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