
Reasons to Co-operate: co-operative solutions for schools

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ABSTRACT The NASUWT's landmark agreement with the Schools Co-operative Society has provided a new spur to co-operation, collaboration and collegiality in schools. Against a background of rapid and radical changes to the education landscape, co-operative schools are viewed by many as a means to maintaining public service ethos and values in education. The article explains why the NASUWT entered into the agreement and describes some of the benefits that it is delivering to teachers and to schools.

In 2012, the NASUWT, the largest teachers' union, and the Schools Co-operative Society, entered into a landmark agreement to help ensure that state schools remain not-for-profit and democratically accountable to the public and parents. This is the first agreement of its kind with a teachers' union, one which has prompted much debate on the future of state education and whether co-operative schools represent a threat to the public service ethos in our education system. The NASUWT believes that co-operative schools provide a vehicle not just to maintain but to reassert the democratic principles and values in public education. Indeed, co-operative schools provide a genuine democratic alternative for schools in contrast to the current agendas of privatisation and marketisation in education.

At the launch of the agreement, the Chief Executive of the Schools Co-operative Society, Dave Boston, declared that:

Co-operative schools are growing rapidly as more and more schools see co-operation rather than competition as the best way of achieving sustainable schools improvement.[1]

Co-operative schools provide a vital alternative in the current landscape of competition in education that sets school against school and puts parents and pupils at the mercy of the free market. Co-operative schools provide a safe place

for teachers and others to work together to focus on securing quality education rather than maximising profit for shareholders. The NASUWT believes that collaboration and co-operation between schools, teachers and the education workforce is always going to be in the best interests of children and young people.

Co-operation makes sense to us not only because of the benefits this can bring to education, but also because the values of co-operators are the same as the values that we hold dear as trade unionists. Co-operators and trade unions come from the same background and traditions, with shared beliefs and values. This is important if we are to understand the qualitative difference between co-operative solutions and other school types.

The Schools Co-operative Society is the national co-ordinating body for co-operative schools and other educational co-operatives. Co-operative schools have grown rapidly since Reddish Vale Technology College became the first co-operative trust with the Vale Co-operative Trust established in 2008. By the start of the new academic year in September 2013, there will be around 500 co-operative schools in England.

The NASUWT is the largest union representing teachers and head teachers throughout the United Kingdom (UK). The Union has been a long-standing opponent of privatisation of education, including in the most recent guise of the coalition government's academies and free schools programme. We believe that quality education is a right for all children and young people and that right is only secure where education operates in the public interest. Co-operative solutions are an important means to achieving this goal.

Educational Benefits

Research shows that it is the teacher's contribution that matters most to pupils' learning. Yet, we should also be clear that quality education demands not only the best from teacher professionals as individuals, but also that effective teaching is possible only in contexts where teachers are able and empowered to work together in a collegiate way within communities of learning and practice. This is an important challenge to the dominant policy-making in England today which is based upon individualised approaches to measuring the performance of schools and teachers and which, as a result, pits teacher against teacher through aggressive and counter-productive systems including the use of merit pay. This is despite the paucity of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of such policies.[2]

Countries around the world with the most effective systems of education understand the importance of engaging with and agreeing education reforms with teachers and their representatives. The annual Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)/Education International Summit on Teaching to which the twenty leading and fastest improving education nations on the planet are invited, is a global forum in which education ministers and trade union leaders work together to assure their country's continued

educational excellence. The UK has been invited to attend the first three International Summit events, but coalition government ministers have appeared less than comfortable with the prospect of attending a Summit on the basis that their place at the table was secured as a result of achievements of the previous Labour government as recognised by the OECD 2010 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study.

Regardless, the wealth of available international evidence reminds us that the best way to deliver high standards for all young people is through dialogue and consensus rather than by imposition. Listening to what teachers say is important; but equally important is the need to create conditions in which teachers are empowered to act: to lead practice, to drive change and to make professional decisions about what is best for children's education. Giving teachers a voice is an important first step to securing high quality educational practice; empowering teachers to take ownership and responsibility is also critical and is at the heart of a genuinely co-operative vision for schools and education. Yet, all too often, teachers do not believe that their voices are listened to and, according to recent research (NASUWT, 2012)[3], the majority of teachers (some 85%) believe that their professional views are not valued or respected. We believe that this must change.

In many high-performing education systems teachers do not only have a central role to play in improving educational outcomes, they are also at the centre of the improvement efforts themselves. In these systems it is not that top-down reforms are ordering teachers to change, but that teachers embrace and lead reform, taking responsibility as professionals.[4]

If we are seriously concerned about quality education, then we must also take seriously the current situation in which half of teachers want to quit the profession and 97% believe that current education policy is bad for children's education.

As the largest union representing teachers and head teachers, the NASUWT knows from its work in schools that much of the source of the problem of low teacher morale relates to poor employment practice, the denial of teachers' contractual rights, threats to teachers' conditions of service, and attempts to impose working practices on teachers which are not only burdensome and unworkable but also unproductive in terms of their contribution to improving the quality of education. There can be little doubt that morale has plummeted considerably since 2010 following the irrational decision of ministers to abolish the social partnership between the government, employers and school workforce trade unions which had been the bedrock for good industrial relations, the ending of the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, and which helped to make teaching the profession of first choice for new graduates. All of this resulted in record improvements in educational standards in schools. Teachers and support staff were at the heart of education reform.

Our view is that rebuilding trust and confidence within the teaching profession has to start by respecting teachers and by creating the space for teachers to develop and apply their professional knowledge, skills and expertise as leaders of teaching and learning. This means democratising schools. This is what co-operative schooling is about.

Co-operation in Cornwall

In Cornwall, a group of schools rejected the academies programme and began to seek an alternative that would protect school staff and the values and ethos of state education. The headteachers of three schools have been passionate about how being part of a Co-operative Trust offered a way to remain in partnership with the local authority, while gaining the benefits and flexibility of shared budgets and staffing with neighbouring schools.

Jon Lawrence, headteacher at Sir James Smiths School, Camelford, was the first headteacher in Cornwall to look at the co-operative model. He worked in collaboration with the NASUWT to draw up plans for the Trust, which ensured that national pay and conditions entitlements were retained and trade unions were recognised for bargaining and negotiation. He said:

Making all schools academies doesn't create diversity and promote choice – it is fundamentally anti-local and undemocratic, placing the control of education into the hands of fewer and fewer people. The Co-operative Trust model has provided a lifeline, a genuinely sustainable alternative enabling local people to work together to help the drive for improved standards and, for some small rural schools, survival.

Dr Pat McGovern, headteacher of Helston Community College said:

Education is a public service and a means of offering social justice for all. How dare anybody give our schools away to a small group of unelected self-appointed individuals?

Schools that become academies become independent, work on the principles of the marketplace and, as a consequence, have the potential to create fragmentation of a national system.

The Co-operative Trust is firmly founded on principles of co-operation, social justice, solidarity, fairness and partnership. It is about mutualisation, not privatisation, and groups of schools working strategically together towards a shared vision for

educational advancement with the involvement of the wider community.

Mark Clutsom, headteacher of Upton Cross Primary School, a small rural school with less than 70 pupils, which serves a scattered farming area on Bodmin Moor, came to the conclusion that establishing a Trust was the only logical way of offering the wider curriculum experience that only larger primaries could afford. He said:

The support of the NASUWT is testament to the way that the Co-operative Trusts' ethos underpins all that is good within our system. A Co-operative Trust doesn't alter the terms and conditions under which the staff collaborate, rather it strengthens and formalises the good and excellent work that has been happening across Cornwall.

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The coalition government would have us believe that our state education system is broken and that it is failing. However, the truth is that our state schools and their teachers are amongst the very best in the world. Despite all the ministerial denigration and insults, the truth is we have world class schools.[5] But, in order to drive through many education reforms, teachers have been criticised and their professionalism denigrated in order to undermine their opposition. Painted as vested interests (or 'enemies of promise') teachers and their unions are, in England at least, being caricatured as 'the problem'. [6] Negative and critical claims about our schools and our teachers (and university academics and anyone else who has the temerity to disagree) are central to the reformers' effort, and teachers know it. But, without the support of teachers, education reforms simply won't work and they will never be sustained. We need teachers who are trusted not merely to deliver the further improvements we need in our schools, but who are also entrusted to identify, define and develop what solutions are needed in the first place. That is what co-operation, as a principle and value that is lived in practice in co-operative schools, should be about.

And, it is also important that the perspectives of students, parents and others are also listened to and respected. Yet, one of the most profound actions of the coalition government was the enactment of the Academies Act 2010 and the Education Act 2011 which removed the rights of parents and communities to be consulted on the future of local schools in their areas or on the question of whether an existing maintained school should be transferred from public ownership to private ownership, as in the case of academies. Furthermore, these legislative measures afford ministers a raft of powers to drive through reforms of their choosing even if this is against the wishes of local communities. This is at the heart of the academies policy as it stands today and it is the reason why

teachers and many parents are right to be concerned about the future of state education and whose interests are being served.

Nevertheless, on the right and left of the political divide there are those who are determined to enact structural change on a system, to leave behind their imprint which marks their time in office in Whitehall. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the academies reforms are being driven through at breakneck speed, regardless of their cost and regardless of the impact on those working in schools or on the communities these schools exist to serve.

So, what is to be done? Unions can and should oppose these policies and of course we are doing so. But, in the face of unprecedented centralised powers, other solutions are needed, and it is important that we take parents and communities with us at the same time.

Campaigns to expose the failings of the academies programme are an important place to start, if not only because parents confirm that they reject overwhelmingly the very idea that schools should be run by business and commercial interests, and are particularly concerned about the prospect of schools being run for profit.[7] But, whilst these campaigns have a place, we must also attend to the clear and present danger of ministers imbued with a sense of power and righteous zeal and who appear unmoved by adverse public opinion and resistant to contrary evidence if this stands in the way of their ideological purpose.

Coalition government ministers have made clear that they want more providers in the education system. Even Lord Adonis for Labour has spoken with passion on the need to attract the DNA of the private sector into the state sector. But, we should not assume that all providers are the same. There are clear and important differences between them which should interest all who care about the future of our schools.

A Pragmatic Response

The truth is that there has been a diversity of education providers in the English education system for over a century – maintained community schools; voluntary controlled; voluntary aided run by faith groups; comprehensives; grammars; special schools and alternative provision; grant maintained schools; specialist schools; trust schools. All these have been in various ways funded by the state and all bound by national frameworks of entitlement for pupils, including the right to be taught by a qualified teacher. All these schools have been publicly accountable and all were required to cooperate with local authorities. Up to 2010, the same applied to academy schools, save for the application of national frameworks relating to the school workforce.

We have lived with diversity of education providers before, but what is different today is terms on which these providers operate.

The NASUWT has never opposed per se the involvement of the private or voluntary sectors in the education service. The private sector should step up to the plate; they derive the benefits of the public education system. What matters

is the conditions that should be applied to school providers to ensure that the public interest of public education is maintained and to ensure that the national entitlements of all children and young people are properly safeguarded.

Co-operative solutions are one way in which this public interest and children's entitlements can be protected by:

- ensuring national terms and conditions for the workforce, including employing qualified teachers to teach;
- engaging effectively with trade unions in collective bargaining;
- securing the rights of parents and communities to be consulted and engaged in the governance of the school;
- prohibiting schools to be run for profit;
- enabling teachers and other education staff to work together to secure quality educational provision.

Values Matter

Co-operative solutions keep schools safe from predatory private sector sponsors who want to casualise the workforce in order to maximise the profit they can make from running schools.

The coalition government's mantra of localism is interesting, particularly in the context of the drive for more schools to become academies, often with remote forms of governance arrangements. And, we should be concerned about who is behind these new schools.

There is a strong suggestion that the Department for Education has been courting potential school sponsors. But, who are they and what are their priorities and values?

The requirement to vet and accredit new school providers was abolished in 2010 and so now it would appear that almost anyone can set up a new school, though there are some exceptions to this, and some suggestion that the academies programme is not operating in an unbiased and colour-blind manner.[8] Our belief is we should demand the highest expectations of all providers of schools that are publicly funded and we should be arguing the case for providers committed to democratic, inclusive and progressive values.

We should argue, too, that local communities be put centre-stage and entrusted alongside teachers and the education workforce to be the architects of educational developments and practice and to be the driving force in educational reform. This requires teachers to become co-producers – co-operators – in public education.

What Our Agreement Means

The NASUWT is a trade union that is led by teachers for teachers. We recognise that our mission to put teachers first, by ensuring teachers have the conditions of service, resources, training, advice and support to do their jobs effectively is all about empowering teachers in ways that enable them to ensure

that pupils are able to progress and achieve their full potential. Fundamental to our mission as a trade union is trust in the professionalism of teachers.

Co-operative schools are run by their members for the benefit of their members and the wider community. Co-operative schools have a commitment to meeting the needs of their members and are accountable to them. These operating principles also apply to the NASUWT.

The Schools Co-operative Society and the NASUWT share a fundamental commitment to quality public education that is democratically accountable and which operates in the public interest. As member-driven organisations, we recognise the critical importance of ensuring that our members are the drivers of education reform, not mere delivery agents. Our member focus means that it is in our collective interest, and in the interests of individual schools and their pupils, to promote the widest possible engagement of teachers in schools – giving teachers a stake in the schools where they work and, in so doing, recognising that effective teachers are and have always been co-operators. Collaboration and co-operation is what teaching is all about.

Reasons to Co-operate

- Co-operative schools have co-operative values of commitment to collaboration, collegiality and cooperation which are key to building successful schools and to fostering the best conditions for pupils to learn and achieve.
- Co-operative schools are democratic schools, built on sound ethical principles. Co-operative schools recognise the value of involving all stakeholders – pupils, parents, staff and the local community – in building successful learning communities.
- Co-operative schools embed co-operative learning – co-operative schools put their values into practice in everything that they do, including the curriculum.
- Co-operative schools serve the local community and are dedicated to ensuring equality for all children. They encourage all stakeholders to have a say in the governance of their schools. Furthermore, co-operative values help schools secure high educational standards and opportunities for pupils to access a broad and balanced curriculum. Co-operative schools give pupils opportunities to develop a practical understanding of their role as citizens and how they can help build a fairer society.
- Co-operative schools are the single fastest growing model of schools. More and more schools and communities are recognising the potential of co-operative solutions.

As committed and active members of school co-operatives, members of the NASUWT are once again acting as powerful advocates for schools, their pupils, and for the ethos and values of public education.

Co-operative schools are supported by the wider family of co-operative schools in the UK and worldwide. They are democratic and inclusive schools. Co-operative schools put teaching and learning – teachers and learners – at the heart of everything they do. Co-operative schools are schools where teachers are respected as professionals, not least because these schools are accountable to the teachers who lead them. The NASUWT's support for co-operative solutions for schools is all about putting teachers first, working in the interests of our members together with parents and the wider community. Through their commitment to collaboration and co-operation, teachers in co-operative schools are being empowered to lead teaching and learning for the benefit of all children and young people.

Notes

- [1] NASUWT and Schools Cooperative Society agreement.
<http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/cooperatives>
- [2] L. Figazzolo (2013) *The Use and Misuse of Teacher Appraisal: an overview of cases in the developed world*. Brussels: Education International.
- [3] NASUWT (2012) *The Big Question*. Birmingham: NASUWT'
- [4] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2011) *Building a High-Quality Teaching Profession: lessons from around the world*. Background Report for the International Summit on the Teaching Profession, p. 5. Paris: OECD.
- [5] NASUWT (2013) *Maintaining World Class Schools*. Birmingham: NASUWT.
- [6] M. Gove (2013) I Refuse to Surrender to the Marxist Teachers Hell-Bent on Destroying Our Schools: Education Secretary berates 'the new enemies of promise' for opposing his plans. Mail Online, March 23.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>
- [7] NASUWT/Unison (2010) *Who Should Run Our Schools?* Birmingham: NASUWT.
- [8] E. Stokes, E. Walker, E. Rees, F. Sultana, M. Casertano. & B. Nea (2012) *Inclusive Schools: the free schools monitoring project*. London: ROTA.

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