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## Labour's New Education Policy Document: tensions, ambivalences and silences

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**ABSTRACT** This article critically examines the Labour Party's policies for local school systems, focusing on its proposals for regional Directors of School Standards, for academies and free schools, and for local democracy, and offers an alternative approach.

How different will local school systems be if Labour wins the general election on 7 May? 'Education and Children' [1], the policy document approved at Labour's annual policy conference in September, gives some indications, but it is deliberately vague and ambivalent on fundamental questions of structure and power.

### **The Director of School Standards**

The centrepiece and the main innovation of this area of Labour's education policy is the new position of local Director of School Standards. The idea is imported from the Labour Party's *Review of Education Structures, Functions and the Raising of Standards for All: putting students and parents first* [2], known for short as the Blunkett Review, published in April 2014. 'Education and Children' says, 'We will clearly set out the role and responsibilities of local authorities and Directors of School Standards and the way in which they will work positively together to secure high quality education and well-being outcomes' (p. 79). But the policy document doesn't.

'Labour would give local authorities the powers to appoint and help to hold to account Directors of School Standards' ('Education and Children', p. 79). The Director of School Standards (DSS) would be appointed and apparently employed jointly by several local authorities (LAs) in an area. But how will an LA 'hold to account' the DSS? If – when – there is disagreement,

where does the power really lie? Is the DSS subject to LA policy, or in reality the local arm of the Department for Education?

The function of the DSS is to 'hold all schools to account, regardless of structure, for their performance and intervene in poorly performing schools' ('Education and Children', pp. 79-80). But this task would be delegated to LAs. Their role, according to the Blunkett Review, would be to provide data to the DSS and broker collaboration between schools and with other providers. But the policy document says nothing about what funding would be made available to LAs to do this.

### **Academies and Free Schools**

Equally unspecified is the structure of the LA under Labour. 'Education and Children' states that 'We will also put an end to the fragmented, divisive school system created by this Government' (p. 79). The fragmentation is the result of academies and free schools. The whole case for academies and free schools rests on the claim that they are more effective than LA schools, and all the accumulated evidence shows that this claim is unfounded. Yet Tristram Hunt announced in October 2104: 'We want to see a multiplicity of provision – academy chains, single academies, community schools, parent-led academies' ('Labour's Hunt urges "Hippocratic oath" for teachers', BBC News, 14 October 2014).

'Education and Children' refuses to say that academies and free schools will be incorporated into LAs, or if not, what their relationship would be. The DSS will 'work with governors, parents and school leaders on school improvement in all schools' (p. 80), including academies and free schools – but there is no indication that they will be the responsibility of the LA, and if so, what the LA's powers will be.

### **Local Democracy in the School System**

... a One Nation education system will deliver a radical devolution of power from Whitehall. Labour will empower local communities to have a greater say about education in their area, rather than continue the top-down control approach to schools demonstrated by the current Government. ('Education and Children', p. 78)

The aim is to be desired, but the question is, what structures and procedures will enable local communities to effectively participate in decision making in their local school system? Once again, the 'Education and Children' policy document is silent. The Blunkett Review does contain one innovative and radical proposal for widening participation in policy making: a local education panel.

This would include representation from schools in the area, parents and relevant Local Authority representatives, who would work with the DSS on the development of a long-term strategic plan for

education, ensure commissioning decisions are taken in line with that plan and agree the budget proposed by the DSS.  
(Recommendation 3)

Membership of the panel could be widened to include representatives of governors, school unions, and – in line with LA devolution policies – the local community. However, the idea of local education panels is omitted from the 'Education and Children' policy document.

### **Where Would Power Lie in the Local School System under Labour?**

There is a fundamental three-way tension at the heart of the Review. It is between the role of the DSS, the role of the LA, and the role of other stakeholders in the local school system, including parents and the wider community. The DSS is responsible for driving 'school improvement' and other associated tasks, and could become the local enforcer of government policy. But the DSS is dependent on LAs and schools implementing her or his policies, and is also their employee. In addition, the policy document promises to empower local communities in the school system.

On many issues there may be consensus between the policy actors. But education is a contentious field, especially in the context of an austerity agenda continued by a Labour government. Will we see communities and LAs challenging Labour government education policies? And if so, will a Labour government respond by assigning greater bureaucratic powers to the DSS to assert central control?

### **... and Where Should it Lie?**

The role of the DSS is unnecessary and should be opposed. All of the DSS's functions could be carried out by reformed, resourced and democratised LAs (or partnerships of LAs in the case of small LAs), with oversight by an independent HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) as appropriate.

The continuation of any distinct status for academies and free schools, and in particular the continuation of control of schools by academy chains run by private organisations, should be opposed. David Wolfe, the education law expert, has explained how the power is already available to a Labour secretary of state to reintegrate academies and integrate free schools into a local authority system.[3] It's just a question of political will.

Adequate funding must be made available to LAs and schools to support comprehensive local systems of school collaboration and support.

The idea of local education panels should be supported as potentially providing a structure for local democratic participation by all relevant stakeholders in local strategic education policy making. Local city-wide learning bodies and partnerships should be opened up to participation in a similar way.

If the Review's proposals for Directors of School Standards are implemented by a Labour government, LAs must ensure that Directors of School Standards, who are employees of LAs, act as officers of LAs, responsible for carrying out LA policy, not as dictators over LAs. To achieve this LAs should establish powerful education committees with lay participation as well as elected members.

LAs should also establish local education panels, properly resourced and democratically structured to ensure the maximum participation of parents, teachers, heads, governors, elected representatives of the wider community and other stakeholders, capable of developing a strategic plan for the local education system and shaping the work of the DSS, who should be accountable to it.[4]

### Notes

- [1] 'Education and Children', in Labour Party National Policy Forum Report 2014: Final Year Policy Document, pp. 73-90.  
[http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/NPF\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/NPF_Annual_Report_2014.pdf)
- [2] [http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Putting\\_Students\\_and\\_Parents\\_First.pdf](http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Putting_Students_and_Parents_First.pdf)
- [3] David Wolfe (2013) Schools: the legal structures, the accidents of history and the legacies of timing and circumstance, *Education Law Journal*, May.
- [4] I have made the case for this conception of a local education panel, under the name of an Education Forum, in two earlier articles: R. Hatcher (2011) The Struggle for Democracy in the Local School System, *FORUM*, 53(2), 213-224 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2011.53.2.213>; and R. Hatcher (2012) Democracy and Participation in the Governance of Local School Systems, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44(1), 21-42 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2011.634496>.

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