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## Whose System Is it Anyway?

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**ABSTRACT** This adapted abstract from Melissa Benn's new book, *Life Lessons: the case for a National Education Service* (Verso), argues for a fundamental shift in the direction of schools policy in England which rejects US-style market solutions and embraces more community-based forms of accountability.

One has only to look across the Atlantic to see what might happen if we continue to allow a proportion of our schools to operate outwith democratic control. In the USA, charter schools, and the increasingly combative figures that front them, appear to be a law unto themselves, deploying the language of social reform in order to justify everything from standardised testing to increased workload for teachers, radical exclusion policies and a no-excuses behaviour policy. As Diane Ravitch, the formidable critic of charter schools, observes:

'Reform' is really a misnomer, because the advocates for this cause seek not to reform public education but to transform it into an entrepreneurial sector of the economy... [Its] roots may be traced to a radical ideology with a fundamental distrust of public education and hostility to the public sector in general... [It is] really a 'corporate reform' movement, funded to a large degree by major foundations. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 19)

Within this model, schools are run more like businesses, the responsibility for outcomes placed firmly on teachers' shoulders with little reference to widespread poverty, inequality or ethnic segregation. It is worrying to watch elected politicians helpless in the face of evangelical-style calls for change in the name of greater efficiency and a limited conception of social justice, constantly pushed by a well-resourced, cunning and aggressive PR machine (Erickson, 2017).

England needs to decide whether to go further down the American road in which two kinds of 'public' education are perpetually set against one another,

or whether finally to learn the lessons of our European and island neighbours such as Scotland and Wales, which have refused to cut the cords with local democracy, and have devised reform, with varying levels of success, within this model. It is not too late for us to decide once again to administer public education through a reflective and responsive local state.

Such a determination would also allow for the creation of a bigger and fresher *vision* for primary and secondary education: fairer, yes, but also more engaged, more exciting.

When Alberta province in Canada was faced with charter schools and the then-intoxicating narrative of parent choice, its democratically elected school boards called parents together and asked them what they wanted from their local schools. On being told that parents and students wanted greater flexibility in terms of courses provided, the boards created more individual pathways within their schools to satisfy parent and student demand. They also rotate head teachers around schools in a district to reinforce the sense of all the schools in an area working together rather than competing with each other. All of these are good illustrations of democracy in action.

Another example: the original notion of free schools struck a chord with many communities even if, in reality, very few parents or teachers went on to set up free schools. Most are now established by existing providers, faith groups or chains. However, there should be room, within a responsive democratic framework, for parents who wish to set up a new school to work with the appropriate education authority to set one up. The 1944 settlement enabled such a process and several schools were set up in this manner under previous Labour governments. It just was not trumpeted as much or, indeed, at all.[1]

Finally, there is another angle to the accountability issue, one that diminishes the importance of results per se, and of high-stakes inspection. Let's establish a more local inspectorate whose job it is both to keep local schools under friendly scrutiny and to offer them ongoing support. Annual reports on schools could incorporate a far broader set of measures, beyond exam results, concerning school quality, something New Labour sought to do in the latter years of government, under Gordon Brown's premiership. I remain sceptical about how much official bodies can, or should, assess student 'well-being' or 'institutional happiness', but I see no reason why such reports cannot tell us more about the school's counselling service, its school trips, the school orchestra and so on, and canvass parental and student opinion on the school – and why not get the students themselves to produce it?

Brian Lightman, the former General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), identifies two fundamentally different approaches to school improvement, one shaped by ideas of 'liability and culpability' and based on 'blaming headteachers and governors for poor [school] results, sacking heads and teachers if things go badly and bringing in new people to run schools which ran into problems. This is the system currently operated in England and in the United States in particular'. Elsewhere, as Lightman shows, support is 'offered to struggling institutions, with sackings taking place as a last

resort, and where even struggling schools with pockets of good practice could see these being celebrated' (Mansell, 2018).

It is time to end the threatening and counter-productive practice of inspectors swooping down on schools and judging them on paper trails and ever-shifting exam criteria, destabilising too many head teachers in the process. Ofsted or its new, more thoughtful equivalent, the Local School Support and Improvement Office (LOSSIO – it has a good ring about it) could collate information from local inspectors, and become the focus for ongoing discussions on national benchmarks of school quality.

At the same time, assessment of student progress need not be undertaken by a battery of expensively run national tests that too often undermine heads, teachers and pupils, and stress everybody out. As I argue in my new book, a change to the ways that students are judged should shift attention away from results as the only measure of how good a school is. Add to this a more robust system of teacher education and school leadership support and we might be on our way to a workable system in which everyone can breathe a little freer.

### Note

[1] Alexandra Park School in Muswell Hill, North London, now a thriving local secondary, was set up in just this way in 1999.

### References

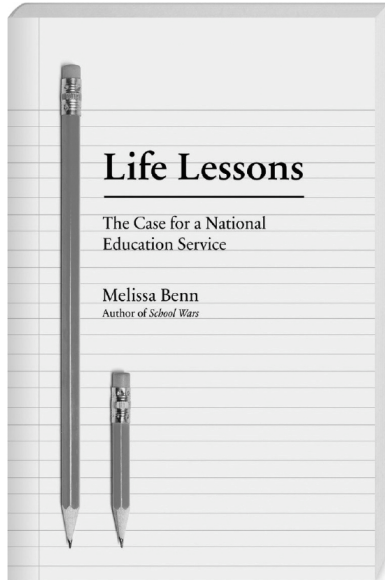
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