

An independent free for all is not the answer

In an otherwise excellent five year education plan, the government is in danger of getting one policy rather badly wrong. Calling secondary schools independent, and loosening their ties with LEAs, threatens to fly directly in the face of its plans for children's services.

Not surprisingly, however, some voices within the Secondary Heads Association and the Specialist Schools Foundation are expressing delight. They were never very fond of local authority control, and have so far shown little appreciation of the need to link education integrally with all the other locally managed services for children and young people. For them, independence is the way to achieve excellence, as if somehow LEAs are deliberately setting out to block it. But this disregards the government's own recent experience with primary schools, where a strong delivery partnership on literacy and numeracy between central and local government has proved highly effective in securing real and sustainable improvements throughout the system.

There is no real reason why secondary schools should be so different. Admittedly they are bigger, and tend to believe that they can find all the answers themselves – or at least collaboratively - without an LEA to support them. But the real nub of the issue, as we have known for some time, is the desire of a small but vocal minority of schools to select their pupils, under the guise of encouraging greater parental choice. Sir Cyril Taylor recently commented that 'it seems ridiculous that a child who has an interest and aptitude in languages should have to go to the local technology college because that is their nearest school'. On this premise is built a whole philosophy of independence, with schools running their own admissions, and a 'co-ordinating role' for local authorities (whatever that means).

But the premise itself is false. Parents can already opt for any school they wish on the basis of its specialism, even if it is not their nearest school. In an ideal world all schools in a local area would have complementary specialisms and be equally successful, so the surplus places built into the system would allow all parents to get their child into the specialist school of their choice. But in reality, schools will never all be equally popular. There is a pecking order, and it is almost invariably the school in the most deprived area which ends up as the least popular – not because it offers poor quality education but because most parents want their child in a school with a better socio-economic intake. The real driving factor behind parental choice, in fact, tends to be not specialism at all, but class.

Deregulating school admissions is no answer to this conundrum. It would merely weaken schools in poor areas and put unacceptable pressure to expand on the popular ones. It would inevitably result in more schools in poor areas closing, while successful schools in the wealthier areas get ever larger and more impersonal. The system would become even more polarised than it is now. This is certainly not what the doctor ordered in terms of locally-based, personalised education.

So how do we tackle the increasing polarisation within the system? There is no evidence yet that the very expensive academies programme will provide the answer. A more fundamental system-wide solution is needed which tackles the underlying issues. The prescription for such an intractable problem can never be simple. But in my view it has to include three key elements:

First, we need equitable admissions arrangements. The current system, for all its faults, should not be replaced with the kind of free for all envisaged by the proponents of foundation status. The recent recommendations from the House of Commons Select Committee for improving the way the current system works should be adopted, and the Admissions Code of Practice given more teeth. We should look seriously at the IPPR's idea of basing admissions arrangements on groups of schools rather than individual schools, as a way of constructing more socially mixed catchments.

Second, there should be a stronger expectation that all schools will co-operate with one another and with other agencies as part of a modernised local service for children and young people. The best schools have always recognised that inclusion and achievement go hand in hand. They are the ones which are now the most in tune with the important part they have to play in the creation of locally integrated children's services – one of the most significant developments in social policy for many years. The Children Bill should specifically mention schools in the list of organisations required to co-operate in promoting children's welfare.

Third, we need to take forward the extended schools agenda as fast as possible, in order to build multiple links between schools and their local communities. Ultimately, we need to return to a situation where local schools for local people is again the norm. But in order to get there we need to build back some of the links which have been eroded over the past 15 or so years of schools competing for customers. The extended schools programme opens up all sorts of possibilities, not least the opportunity to share the very real management skills which exist within good secondary schools with the rest of the community.

So let's hope, as the government starts to get into the detail of its five year plan, that it will have the courage to pursue its instincts for social cohesion, and not an independent free for all.

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