

Free Schools in England: the Future of British Education?

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Abstract

On the 18 June 2010, Michael Gove and the conservative party announced that they would allow ambitious teachers and community groups to start their own schools. These 'Free Schools' would be privately governed but state funded. In September 2011, the first 24 Free Schools opened their doors to students and by the end of 2013, 244 schools had been accepted into the program.

Due to a lack of research into Free Schools (which as its best is limited and paints a very confusing picture), little is known about their attainment and motivation. Most writings on the topic are highly politicized and cause frequent storms in the media. Criticisms focus on the high expense of Free Schools, their small year groups and independence from local education authorities (LEAs).

This paper gives a brief introduction to the political and historical background of Free Schools and outlines the reactions to their introduction in the UK. It argues that while some initial claims can be made about their success, more research is needed to determine their impact on the UK education landscape.

1. Introduction

On the 18 June 2010, Michael Gove and the conservative party announced that they would allow ambitious teachers and community groups to start their own schools. These 'Free Schools' would be privately governed but state funded. One of the primary reasons for this change in the UK education system had been that Gove wanted to narrow the gap in provision between poorer families and their wealthier counterparts. 'By allowing new schools we will give all children access to the kind of education only the rich can afford - small schools with small class sizes, great teaching and strong discipline' [1].

Frees schools followed the preceding educational culture of privately-led choice and personal accountability, encouraged and funded by the state. After 44 years of compulsory schooling which encouraged children to attend their local primary schools and then to attempt the Eleven Plus test in order to proceed to a Grammar school, the 1988 Education Reform Act had started to encourage parents to apply for a school of their choice. In order to rank these schools in terms of preferability, a national curriculum and testing system followed.

The Free School vision of the UK was based on the introduction of Charter Schools in the USA and Free Schools in Sweden. Before 1992, 99% of Swedish schools were run by the state. Teachers received their pay from the government, all students had to follow national curriculum and attend an assigned primary and secondary school. Between 1991-1993 responsibility for education was transferred from the state to the local government; giving individual authorities the power to supplement and influence local education. In addition, students had a choice to pick their school as long as the immediate catchment area was catered for. Local government were required to subsidise local private schools but only if these had been approved by the Department for Education, were teaching the National Curriculum and did not hand pick their students. Private Schools lost their right to charge fees but had no restrictions in terms of faith or educational ethos. Today, 10% of Swedish students attend the state-run private schools and are admitted on a 'first come- first served' basis [2].

Toby Young, an author and public figure, was one of the first people to apply to the Department for English Education to start a new school and soon became the flagship person and speaker for their benefits. Opening with a secondary school initially, the West London Academy soon expanded to include a primary school and claimed to become 'a grammar school for all' [3]. Apart from the classical English Baccalaureate subjects, the school's curriculum also emphasised general knowledge and study skills; a combination taken from schools like Mossbourne in Hackney and the Renaissance Arts Academy in Los Angeles.



Although the opening of Free Schools has caused a lot of debates, little academic qualitative and quantitative data has emerged which discusses the foundation and effect of Free Schools. In 2011, the Department for Education at the University of London noted that 'beyond a few high profile cases, we still know relatively little about who is proposing a Free School and what visions proposers have for their schools' [4]. It started an investigation into the Free Schools of England and released its first results in December 2011. These indicated that most of the first Free Schools had been suggested by parents, closely followed by teachers and faith groups [5]. Although the project should have finished its second part in the winter of 2013, no further data has been released since 2011.

2. Controversies

Free Schools have attracted a range of criticism in the past four years, foremost focusing on the creation of a publically funded private education system which is expensive and not monitored correctly. In 2012, the *Guardian* newspaper ran a series of articles claiming that the government had more than 100 civil servants at the Department for Education working on Free School policies and that the capital costs for some free schools were between £10m-£20m [6]. In August 2012, Labour claimed that the coalition had spent £2.3 million on Free Schools which would not open or lacked support from local parents [7]. However, it could be argued that this increased expense should have been expected: when Böhlmark and Lindahl investigated the impact of the publically funded private school system in Sweden they noted that 'more competition from private schools increases school costs' [8].

Free Schools have the right to propose a small intake as long as they can justify their long term financial plans. This has resulted in a series of small schools where financial continuity worked out but the set up cost was particularly high. In a letter to Michael Gove in August 2012, the Labour shadow minister Stephen Twigg highlighted the Beccles Free School in Suffolk as a particular problematic project: "£2m has been spent on a school which will serve only 37 pupils, in an area with over 10,000 spare secondary places. 3,000 people signed a petition against the school" [7]. In response to these economic miscalculations, the Department for Education introduced every tighter guidelines which stated that a new Free School has to be at capacity within seven years of opening.

Trying to minimise the set up cost and maximise output has led to the introduction of commercial and non-commercial chain sponsors. This, in turn, has caused great oppositions from unions. The Teachers' Union, NASUWT, strongly opposed Free Schools on the basis that they allowed schools to set their own pay scales and that they undermined the government's responsibility to provide free and quality education for all children. Its primary concerns lay in the possibility for private chains to set up 'for profit' schools. 'Free schools and academies are the clearest example of the intention of the Coalition Government to turn state education into a free market free-for-all and to provide opportunities for the private sector to make a profit out of state-funded schools' [9]. These chains have only recently come under scrutiny for failing standards. In spring 2014, the chain sponsor E-Act 'returned' ten of its Free Schools to the Department for Education due to 'serious concerns' over education standards [10].

In connection with the independence of Free Schools, Mark Brundrett [11] especially laments the loss of local education authorities (LEAs) and their ability to guide, improve and connect. When he mentions 'the suggestion that schools should indeed cooperate when they are outside Local Authority', he does so with increasing irony and only to cite multi million pound Free School chains. Schools, however, don't have to be chains to work together. According to Woodin [12], there are currently 300 co-operative schools which are connected through non-LEA ties.

3. Data

The data that has emerged since the foundation of the first Free Schools paints a mixed picture. In his initial targets, Michael Gove has suggested that 200,000 students would attend Free Schools by 2015. Although critics argued against these high figures as early 2012 [7], the New Schools Network confirmed in 2013 that the figure would be as high as 250,000 students [13]. However, in 2012 it was claimed that only 9.4% of students were on Free School meals compared to the national average of 16.7% [14]. Long term studies on charter schools in the US and Sweden have also shown to increase religious segregation rather than improve it [15].

Whether Free Schools have an impact on attainment is a similarly debated topic. In Sweden, research showed that ‘an increase in the private-school share by 10 percentage points increases average pupil achievement by almost 1 percentile rank point’ [8]. However, this achievement did not translate into more private school students attending university or having greater educational achievements later in life [16]. Other published studies present more contradictory results such as Björklund et al. [17], [18] finding a small positive impact on English and Swedish, whereas Ahlin [19] cites increased attainment in maths. Although most of the previous research on Charter and Free Schools has focused on attainment in education, some studies have looked at alternative implications such as the notion of choice amongst students and parents to pick the school that suits them best. Considering the impact of school choice on students in Tel-Aviv, Israel, Lavy [20] for example mentions positive effects such as low drop-out rates, improved behaviour and satisfaction levels as well as a reduction of disruptive behaviour. Although there is some choice in educational provision in the UK, in the UK only 86.7 per cent of families received an offer of a place at their first or second preference school [21]. In 2013 it was claimed that the average Free School received three applications for every place it had to offer [13].

4. Conclusion

At the wake of the Free School initiative in 2010, Rebecca Allen from the University of London summarised research from Swedish Free Schools and noted that it would be difficult to predict whether the decentralisation of the Swedish movement could give any kind of indication about the success of England’s implementation [2]. In retrospect, her caution seems justified and it is still unclear whether Free Schools have had an overall positive impact on the UK education landscape; maybe only the years to come will reveal their true legacy.

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