

For an empowered, democratised and properly resourced local school system

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The policy document approved at Labour's annual policy conference in September is called *Education and Children*. The policy states that '*We will [...] put an end to the fragmented, divisive school system created by this Government.*'

Bring academies and free schools into a unified local authority system

The fragmentation is the result of academies and free schools. (And of course the question of grammar schools, equally divisive in a different way.) But *Education and Children* is silent on whether academies and free schools will be incorporated into the local authority system, or if not what their relationship would be. And Tristram Hunt announced on 14 October 2014: '*We want to see a multiplicity of provision - academy chains, single academies, community schools, parent-led academies.*' Fragmentation continues, and with parent-led academies as just the Coalition's free schools rebranded.

We need to remember that the whole case for academies rests on claims that they, and especially sponsored academies, are more effective in raising standards than LA schools. All the accumulated evidence shows that this claim is unfounded when you compare like with like. The latest evidence is in the NFER Report on Academy performance, published in October. '*Attainment progress in sponsored academies compared to similar non-academies is not significantly different over time when the outcome is measured as GCSE points, excluding equivalent qualifications such as BTECs.*'

The evidence is clear that academies make far greater use of equivalents.

So the case for academies collapses. But we have paid a huge price for this ideologically-driven experiment - the lack of accountability of Academies to their local community as represented by elected local government.

The first step forward should be the re-creation of fully inclusive local systems of state-funded schools by the re-integration of academies and the integration of free schools. Academies can be brought back in, funding agreements can be rescinded, as David Wolfe the legal expert has shown.

End private sponsors controlling schools

The second step is to put an end to private sponsor chains controlling schools by appointing the majority of the governors. No state-funded school should be controlled by a private organisation – it's a form of privatisation. *Education and Children* says schools can voluntarily leave chains. But how, if the chain has the majority of governors? It has to be the other way round. Governing bodies of sponsored academies should be re-formed to ensure that they have the same composition as maintained schools. If a school wants to continue a partnership with an ex-sponsor, as with any external organisation, it should be able to do so, but this does not require any power to be handed over to it from the reconstituted governing body.

The role of the new local authorities

So, a unified local school system accountable to elected local government. In that, what should the LA's role be? Of course, the control of admissions policy and the provision of school places. And school improvement, now largely the responsibility of the schools themselves. But without central coordination and funding improvement can be patchy. Some schools are left behind. So there is a vital role for the local authority in identifying schools which need additional support, coordinating and providing direction, and funding it.

The role of the local authority has to go beyond supporting schools in difficulties and raising test and exam scores. It should also develop a local vision in a dialogue with schools and communities, and promote progressive innovation. To do all this local authorities need power and resources. That requires an end to the massive cuts imposed by central government and a restoration of an adequate level of funding. This is not about local authorities 'controlling' schools, it's about their capacity to act in the interests of the whole community they are elected to represent, in a new partnership with schools.

Participatory democracy in the local school system

Education and Children says: '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'. The question is, what structures and procedures will enable local communities to effectively participate in decision-making in their local school system? On this the policy document is silent.

Instead its focus is on the new position of local Director of School Standards. According to *Education and Children* the function of the DSS is to 'hold all schools to account, regardless of structure, for their performance and intervene in poorly performing schools.' But how will a local authority 'hold to account' the DSS? Where does the power really lie? Is the DSS subject to local authority policy, or is the DSS in reality the local arm of the DfE, a dictator over local authorities?

The role of the DSS is unnecessary and the proposal should be opposed. All of its functions could be carried out by reformed, resourced and democratised local authorities, with oversight by an independent HMI as appropriate. External support including from government may be needed for a transitional period to enable local authorities to get back on their feet, but this is not to be confused with the permanent structural division of powers between local authorities and DSSs which Labour proposes. In addition small local authorities, such as in London, may need to work in partnership to ensure sufficient capacity to fulfil their roles.

The Blunkett Review does contain one innovative and radical proposal for widening participation in policy-making: a local Education Panel with representatives from schools, parents and the local authority who would develop a long-term strategic plan for education. We would argue for membership of the Panel to also include representatives of governors, teachers, school students and – in line with local authority devolution policies - community representatives. We think this sort of authority-wide Local Education Forum is the way forward. But the idea of local Education Panels has been dropped from the *Education and Children* policy document.

Open up the Cabinet and Scrutiny system to participation

Public participation in discussion of education policy is largely meaningless without the ability to influence local authority policy, and this means opening up the existing structures and processes of local government – the Cabinet and Scrutiny system. It is largely immune to any direct involvement by headteachers, teachers and governors, let alone parents and other citizens. To democratise the present structures the local council should establish an Education Committee. It should comprise not just councillors but lay members elected from the authority-wide Forum, thus ensuring direct public and professional participation. Scrutiny committees should also be opened up to participation.

Public participation in policy-making in local school systems does not mean intervening in issues which are properly matters of professional judgement. Nor does it imply that public views are inevitably progressive. In both cases it is a question of deliberation and negotiation between public, professionals and local authorities, and the mobilisation of collective support for progressive policies.