

2014/8

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Pocket Watch – Managing the school system

Introduction

At the last count, there were 3,613 Academies currently open along with 174 Free Schools, 17 UTCs and 28 Studio Schools. It means we now have a very differently structured school system in England and it's giving rise to two pretty fundamental questions both of which are being hotly debated in the run-up to 2015. First how should this more diverse school system be managed, the Dept can hardly manage them all so who should? Second, how should schools in this more autonomous system operate, should they work together in partnerships, groups or, no pun intended, in chains?

Question 1: How should the school system be managed?

It's important to remember first of all that the Local Authority still has a number of important responsibilities when it comes to schools including safeguarding children, ensuring provision of school places under the Admissions Code and securing provision for those now staying on under the raising of the participation age. Many people, and Nick Clegg has been one, believe that the Local Authority should retain a strong role in their own right or as part of a new regional tier or as the RSA put it in their 2012 Paper as functional support to the Commissioner role.

Michael Gove for his part is pursuing the concept of Regional Schools Commissioners, one for each of the eight English regions, separate from local councils but working to a board comprised of leading, local head teachers (but not Sixth Form or FE college principals) and with a role of overseeing the new school system in their patch. In answer to questions in Parliament last month, the Schools Minister explained that these Commissioners would be civil servants on fixed-term five-year contracts and with a remit that included: '*monitoring performance and intervening to secure improvement in underperforming academies; taking decisions on creating new academies; and helping ensure there are sufficient sponsors.*' The aim is to have these posts filled from this summer.

Labour has been approaching the issue through a review which is being led by David Blunkett and was commissioned last June by former Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg. The Blunkett remit was "*to review how we improve local oversight of schools...look at the role of the local authority...how best central and local government can work together and how we can give local communities a bigger say when schools are set up.*" That review is due to report next month and as the Guardian reported this week is likely to support the concept of a regional structure that would equally oversee the system at a local level but rooted more closely into local accountability and potentially with a remit to support school improvement. The regional Challenge approach used in London, the Black Country and elsewhere remains a popular model.

Question 2: How closely should schools work together?

This has always been a difficult question with the balance between co-operation and competition never easy to determine. However the Government's enthusiasm for a self-improving model means that partnership in some form is essential. It's an area that the Education Committee is taking a deep interest in with a Report last autumn and just this week the first hearing of a new Inquiry into the procedural arrangements involved in setting up Academies and Free Schools. It will be an interesting space to watch.



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