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Pocket Watch – School policy lines

Introduction

Head teachers have called for greater stability in the school system, Shadow Education Minister Tristram Hunt wants an end to the '*alpha male*' male approach to education reform while the DfE has issued further guidelines intended to moderate the impact of change under its Workload Challenge protocol but none of this has deterred the rush to get announcements out before Parliament is officially dissolved on Monday. If the latest ones are anything to go by, then four issues seem likely to dominate arguments over schools policy as the election campaign gets under way. This is how it's all looking.

Four school policy priorities

1. Funding. Labour and the Lib-Dems have already made some running here by claiming they would protect budgets up to age 18. At the moment, this is total budgets rather than per pupil costs so could come under strain as numbers rise and costs of pay, pension, NI are factored in. Most commentators have concluded that under any of the Party's plans, schools will still face cuts and it's clear from last week's Budget that the government is looking for further efficiencies. Broadly as the Institute of Fiscal Studies has argued, school funding is now more distributive, more goes to disadvantaged schools although this leaves open the question of what will happen to the pupil premium after the election. There's also the issue of the national funding formula with the professional body ASCL arguing recently that there are still great disparities between best and worst funded schools. MPs debated schools funding two weeks ago and the Schools Minister confirmed the formula was on course
2. School types. The Prime Minister of course recently announced that a future Conservative government would aim to introduce 500 more Free Schools and in its response this week to the Education Committee Inquiry into Academies and Free Schools, the government clearly saw such models as instruments to help schools innovate and improve. Tristram Hunt in his ASCL speech last weekend confirmed that Labour "*would end the existing Free Schools programme*" but went on to argue in many ways for a more expansive model, one that would enable '*innovators*' from abroad to come and work with local schools. The bottom line would appear to be adherence to a more accountable set of criteria
3. Curriculum reform. The issue that has been surfacing for some time here is whether there should be an independent, perhaps profession-led body to take a lead on advising government on curriculum reform. The Lib-Dems for instance have proposed an Independent Standards Authority. Nicky Morgan's recent response that such decisions should stay in the hands of democratically-elected reps, i.e. MPs, may have taken some of the sting out of the argument but the bigger questions around innovation, autonomy and the management of change remain
4. The profession. All Parties have been keen to demonstrate their support for teachers while at the same time suggesting further reform is necessary. Tristram Hunt went so far as to tell the ASCL Conference that raising workforce quality "*was without doubt the most important task of central government in a 21st c education system.*" He has proposed a new dedicated "*school leadership institute*" along with new Leadership Partnerships between schools and businesses, a CPD based career progression path and "*a gold standard qualification for heads.*" The Conservatives have also backed CPD with a new fund and a new expert group to draft standards. They've also backed the College of Teaching.



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School reform lines. March 2015