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Pocket Watch – The Free School Conundrum

Introduction

Are Free Schools "a huge success story" as the Education Secretary claimed this week, helping to raise standards, offer places for pupils in areas of need and provide a popular choice for parents or are they an expensive, disruptive and unproven experiment driven, in the words of one teacher union, by a Party with an "obsessive ideological focus on structural change?" The arguments which were fierce enough when Michael Gove first expressed support for the model before the last general election have surfaced again this week just months away from the next general election following the publication of a new **report** on the matter by the think tank Policy Exchange and the **announcement** by the Prime Minister that a future Conservative government would "hope to open at least 500 more Free Schools" over the lifetime of the next Parliament. There are clearly strong views on all sides so how do things stand?

The current situation.

Currently 256 Free Schools are now open with a further 156 approved to do so from this September. Along with the 49 new ones announced this week and the 500 proposed, it would take the number of Free Schools over the next five years up to 900; four have closed since 2010. The current capital budget for Free Schools is £1.5bn though both the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee have expressed concerns about 'escalating costs.' Free Schools are inspected by Ofsted and their results are published in performance tables.

The arguments

Free Schools have attracted strong views from the start and it was noticeable that in one of the case studies cited on the Gov.UK website on setting up a Free School, in this case primary, the head teacher decided on a low-key approach: "we tended to keep very quiet about what we were doing." The arguments perhaps revolve around three areas. First about whether they really do help push up standards not just internally but also for surrounding schools. Nick Gibb told the recent Education Committee Inquiry that 71% of those inspected so far had been rated good or outstanding while Policy Exchange, who examined comparative performance data of neighbouring schools concluded that the ripple effect on standards locally was powerful. Critics argue that the evidence base for both assumptions was too small and that other factors need to be considered; Datalab for example suggested that the pupil premium may be just as important. Second whether they're expensive, drain valuable resources and are in areas where there's no problem with places. The New Schools Network claim that actually they 'are eight times more likely to be located in the most than the least deprived authorities' while Policy Exchange argue that 72% are in areas with a projected lack of places in the future. Critics argue that the data is inconclusive and that even the revered OECD has expressed concerns about the dangers of socio-economic segregation. And third, that they're popular and what parents want. The Prime Minister clearly thinks so and Policy Exchange point to the fact that there are 2.7 applicants for every place. Critics argue that demand for places is stronger in some other schools and that regional variations limit comparisons. For many, the issue is local accountability and choice.

And are they a success or not?

The general verdict whether from the Education Committee, 'fact checker' The Conversation or the data cruncher Datalab is that actually 'it's too soon to know.'

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