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Pocket Watch – What now for Academies?

Introduction

Education currently lies seventh in the list of voter concerns, wedged between tax and pensions but one issue that may well push it up the list is that of school performance and whether reforms such as the development of Academies and Free Schools have helped or not. This week, the Education Committee, which has been conducting an extensive inquiry into the matter, offered its **verdict** and like others who have gone before, was unable to come down on one side or another: "*current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change.*" It did, however, come up with some key messages.

Key messages from the Education Committee Report

1. Isolating the factors that determine one school's success from another is not straightforward and in the case of Academies which can be of two types (sponsored and converter) and working in different relationships, even more so. The DfE has argued that autonomy is an important ingredient and made it one of the two defining features behind the drive for Academies but as Andreas Schleicher of the OECD and other witnesses told the Committee, "*there are many other aspects at least as important*" to school success. The quality of teaching and leadership was cited as the most important but as the NAHT argued, parental support, capital and human resources, high expectations can be equally so. The Committee supported extending curriculum freedoms to all schools but believed that more evidence was needed about what really determines school success
2. How far the primary sector should be part of the Academy movement remains a moot point. The government has certainly pushed for this over the last couple of years and has put funding behind it but as the Committee heard, academisation can generate new admin burdens and many primary schools have their own successful local collaborative arrangements anyway. The Committee concluded that more research was needed to determine what worked best for primary schools and how far academisation would help
3. Free schools remain controversial and questions about cost, quality and need were all raised in the Inquiry. Over 250 Free Schools are now open and 100+ preparing to but these are early days, only a small number have been inspected and impact evidence is limited. So more transparency and clarity was needed about how such schools are determined, where they fit into the landscape and what impact they appear to be having
4. The question of management and oversight of the new schools system and whether for example a middle tier arrangement between central and local government is needed, remains pertinent. Basically there are concerns about where responsibilities lie and particularly in the case of large Academy chains, where accountabilities lie. The Committee called for the roles of Local Authorities and Regional School Commissioners to be clarified, for procedures for brokerage to be strengthened and for oversight of chains to be improved
5. In terms of the future, much may hinge on which Party is in power after the election as to whether the current trend towards diversification continues or whether schools are brought together into a more coherent system. The Committee was keen that whoever is in power should spell out its vision for the future of the school system more clearly, that greater transparency and accountability by not just the Dept but by agencies such as the EFA should follow and that the pace of reform should be reviewed
6. In all, the Committee came up with 43 recommendations and while acknowledging that many schools were now performing better, warned against any claims as to why until further research and evidence had been generated

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