

The Government's failing educational 'revolution'

Stephen Lambert (personal capacity)

The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has made 'three Fs' his priority: funding, further education and free schools. The first two are to be welcomed by all those involved in the education of young people and adults. The third - to 're-energise' the Free Schools programme - is not.

Discovery School, the first Free School in Newcastle, closed its doors last summer, following a damning Ofsted report which revealed plummeting standards, weak leadership and dangerous 'riotous' behaviour amongst a significant minority of its pupils.

Despite these failings, the Government has pledged to roll out more Free Schools across the North East region. How and why did they come about in the first place?

Free Schools, a branch of the Academies programme, are based on the Swedish model. The reasoning behind this is that the introduction of Free Schools would devolve power to the local community. If parents, teachers or community groups weren't happy with current schooling they could apply to set up a Free School.

In reality, Free Schools have been handed over to Academy chains or, in the case of Discovery, initiated by Newcastle College Group (NCG) under its former maverick boss, Dame Jackie

Fisher. In many cases they have been imposed on local communities with little consent or consultation.

Though they got off to a bumpy start, by the end of the Coalition government in 2015, 245 Free Schools had been established. For the educationalist Graham Walford, these new Free Schools were another step in the 'diversification' of the educational system, while reducing the role of elected councils in the delivery and management of schooling.

In pushing forward the Free School programme, the Coalition government perpetuated the Thatcherite neo-liberal belief that independence from local education authorities plus competition between providers would boost standards and offer choice and diversity. It was mistrust of local government that ultimately drove this policy.

With the re-election of a Conservative administration under David Cameron a further 500 Free Schools were promised. Free Schools were to be the 'modern engines of social justice' and to be at the heart of state educational policy.

Yet the 'experiment' has failed. A report in 2017 by the National Audit Office concluded that Free Schools have a negative impact on surrounding schools, in some

cases cream off more privileged pupils, and provide poor value for money. From 2011 to March 2012 the government had spent £8.3 billion on the Academies and Free Schools project - £1 billion over budget! Discovery, the brainchild of Dame Jackie, opened four years ago, at a cost of £9 million of taxpayers' money.

With a budget cut of £5 billion, state schools have lost out. Yet Free Schools continue to be funded generously irrespective of performance. According to Diane Reay in her book *Miseducation*, England's Free Schools get 60 per cent more funding per student than council primaries and secondaries.

In 2015 the amount of government funding given to Free Schools was £7,761 compared to £4,767 for state schools. By 2016, Free School Funding was double the original estimates, at a time when many council school buildings were in a poor condition.

The figures for 2016 reveal that places at Free Schools are much more costly to provide than local authority places. A place in a primary Free School opening in 2016 cost on average £14k while a place in a secondary school cost a staggering £19k - double that of a state school place. Free schools are getting preferential funding.

Contrary to popular belief, Free Schools haven't raised standards, nor is their performance superior. GCSE results are no better than for similar state schools. As the educationalist Steve Bartlett notes, there's no convincing evidence to show that Free Schools, or for that matter Academies in general, are any more effective than schools they have replaced or are in competition with.

In 2018 an extensive and damning study by Toby Greany and Rob Higham of London University's Institute of Education/UCL demonstrates that there's been no significant improvement in student achievement under the

extension of Free Schools or Multi-Academy Trusts since 2010. As the authors note, 'government policies are increasing inequality'.

Worst

Discovery, with its bold pledge to be 'the first school of its kind, an industry-driven technical school for 13 to 19-year olds from Tyne and Wear', was the worst performing school in the North of England. For Ofsted, the school offered no arts, humanities or PE lessons and failed to meet students' personal and academic needs. In the words of a lead Ofsted inspector it was 'an

unmitigated tragedy' which has 'ruined' kids' life chances.

Free Schools amount to the application of rigid ideological dogma dressed up as an educational initiative. For many educational practitioners, the expansion of more Free Schools across the region sounds the death knell for the egalitarian comprehensive system pioneered by Labour governments of the sixties and seventies.

