

Democratic Accountability for Schools

The collaborative model

Schools work best when they involve the local community and form part of a "family of schools" that is able to offer mutual support and expertise beyond that of its own staff and governors. Without external involvement schools can become inward-looking and out-of-date.

School improvement and professional development

Most practitioners concerned with raising standards expect staff to collaborate across, as well as within, schools in order to promote best practice and good teaching methods. Good collaboration will involve practical ways of sharing both physical and human resources.

Good governance

Governing bodies need to be trained in their responsibilities and should represent a balance of stakeholders, particularly parents and staff but also representatives of the local community who are chosen in a transparent, democratic and accountable way.

The role of the local authority

Despite substantial cuts to local authorities' budgets, they continue to have many duties and powers apart from education which may impinge upon schools. These include child protection, social services, transport, libraries, waste collection, planning and economic regeneration, housing and licensing.

Local authorities continue to have links to other bodies which can be effective

partners, such as local employers and Higher Education institutions.

Although the language of "*Every Child Matters*" has been banned by Government diktat (and without public consultation), local authorities continue to be responsible for helping schools ensure that children can *Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution* and *Achieve Economic Well-Being*.

Parents value the role of Local Authorities, expecting them to champion their cause and that of their children in respect of admissions and exclusions by ensuring that procedures have been fairly applied.

Crucially, local authorities alone are able to plan for and support the periodic development of large numbers of new school places or their reduction when pupil numbers fall.

Learning from experience

Local Authorities have not always been ideal partners or representatives of the community's voice. Local Management of Schools (LMS) showed how schools might use devolved resources imaginatively and effectively when freed from excessive central control.

Day-to-day responsibility for the management of schools passed from Council officers and Councillors to governing bodies and headteachers. The role of officials was redefined to be one of supporting schools rather than running them.

Without Local Authority support, many locally-based subject advisory services

and peer-group meetings of subject specialists have ceased, with negative effects upon school subject teaching.

In the early days of LMS, school music services disappeared in many parts of the country, demonstrating the inadequacy of a crude market in services. It took central government intervention and funding to revive a valued service.

There are clear benefits, especially for smaller schools, in economies of scale, such as the bulk supply of fuel and IT services or authority-wide insurance cover. "Autonomous" schools must now seek to negotiate comparable terms from a weaker position – or pay more for less.

Experience has also shown how "autonomous" schools, acting without expert advice, may make poor decisions affecting procurement, admissions policies or industrial relations.

While Academies are required to provide detailed returns to the Education Funding Agency based in Coventry, the EFA provides far less support than good local authorities with local knowledge can offer.

Democratic accountability

The role a school plays in its community is important. The lives of pupils and their families are strongly affected – for better or worse – by their schools.

Proponents of "autonomous schools" rely on the assumption that a school is a free-standing entity, rather like a private business, and that it is no concern of others how they are run. This notion is used to justify excluding the wider community from a school's governance.

When a community school becomes an academy, it leaves the public realm and resources such as land or leisure facilities provided by the whole community become the property of private sponsors. This is unacceptable and accountability must be restored.

What CASE thinks

The Coalition Government's policies are undermining the link between schools and Local Authorities. This is creating a fragmented arrangement of "autonomous" schools, mimicking the independent sector, where unfettered market rules apply. There is no evidence that the public at large is in favour of such a radical change.

The Democratic Deficit

Other means of providing some form of democratic accountability have been proposed, such as directly-elected education boards. In 2012, direct elections for Police Commissioners demonstrated that the public appetite for "single-issue" elections was very limited. This would hardly provide a basis for the legitimate oversight of education.

Even with greater public support, it is clear that new, separate bodies would incur considerable extra costs just to run the elections, even before they employ the specialists needed to provide relevant expertise.

CASE is clear that, while there is no published evidence to favour a single model irrespective of whether the population is urban or rural, wealthy or deprived, there must be an accountable Elected Authority overseeing education.

Published January 2013

Copies of this briefing can be downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/CASEbriefings>.

Comments and suggestions welcome via case.campaign@gmail.com

The characteristics of good Elected Authorities

Strategic role

- 1) They provide a strategic framework for planning, monitoring and development.
- 2) They publish this information and ensure that it provides a suitable place for every eligible child.
- 3) They provide a transparent, funding system sensitive to the local needs of schools.
- 4) They make available land and other resources to support school development.

Services to schools

- 5) They support schools in recruiting appropriate and suitably qualified senior staff, especially Headteachers.
- 6) They provide a local, knowledgeable and consistent approach to monitoring teaching standards and organise networks of professionals to help raise them.
- 7) They broker and monitor cost-effective deals with suppliers that benefit schools collectively.
- 8) They respond to calls for assistance from schools in cases of emergency, such as fire, flood and natural disasters, particularly where there is an urgent need for alternative accommodation or additional transport.
- 9) They work with schools to develop and deliver services which schools are not well-placed to deliver individually for reasons of scale, expertise etc

Services to the community

- 10) They act as champions for the rights of parents and pupils in general and run an efficient and impartial admissions system.
- 11) They can provide jargon-free, easy to read information for parents and carers with specific learning difficulties or additional needs.
- 12) They manage school exclusions in collaboration with schools to minimise the disruption to pupils' education.
- 13) They work with other agencies to provide social and medical support for children at risk.
- 14) They ensure that special educational needs are assessed in a professional and timely way and make provision to meet the identified needs.
- 15) They monitor and plan the educational transfers of children and young people with learning difficulties or physical disabilities and develop special educational needs policies
- 16) They conduct objective and transparent consultations in respect of current and future educational provision.
- 17) They broker use of those school facilities which can provide benefits to the community and make community facilities available to schools where appropriate.
- 18) They arrange and co-ordinate cultural events and experiences to enrich the education of pupils and their families.
- 19) They work with Headteachers, Governing Bodies and parents to minimise social conflict and criminality.

Governance

- 20) They provide information, training and advice to school governors on the discharge of their responsibilities.
- 21) They contribute representatives to school governing bodies to link them to the local community.