

Edubusiness – Martin Johnson

A year ago, ATL published 'England's Schools: Not Open for Business'. This is a directory of 30 organisations seeking a radically expanded role in the management of maintained schools in England. Some are charities, some are private companies, others are huge multinational plcs.

A year ago, the coalition government's policy on school organisation was frequently considered to constitute a centralisation of powers to the Secretary of State. The proposition behind this publication was different: that fragmentation of schools would be a prelude to privatisation with the replacement of local authorities by private organisations as intermediate structures between Whitehall and schools.

The purpose of this session is to review that proposition one year on.

The introduction to 'England's Schools: Not Open for Business' included the following:

Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, knows that schools are not large enough organisations to be completely self-sufficient, and he also knows he cannot administer thousands of schools from London.

Mr.Gove does not trust local authorities, but he does know some people he can trust, and they are listed in these pages. They share the beliefs that they can offer expertise in the kinds of services previously provided to schools by local or central government, and that demand for their services is about to take off. This directory describes the kinds of services on offer. Already, prospective 'new wave' academies are being approached by these organisations, which seek to build chains of schools to which they can offer services with economies of scale...

Mr.Gove says he has no problem with private sector entry into state education...

The competing chains will force up quality while the DfE monitors quietly, he will say, careless of the complete lack of evidence that markets ever do that. They will also rake off a 'surplus' that should be spent on our pupils.

In this session I shall present some evidence as to the extent to which 'take-off' and 'rake-off' have occurred. I hope that attendees can bolster the evidence with their own examples.

I shall also discuss two of the principal objections to this policy which would be supported by the people of England regardless of political persuasion.

The first is the question of democratic accountability. England's schools have long been open to scrutiny in a variety of ways. Traditionally, parents and other members of the community have readily approached their local councillor with concerns large and small about their schools – and there is a growing frustration that councillors are unable to deal with issues arising in academies. This deficit is in no way balanced by the statutory responsibility of the Secretary of State for academies, since that office holder is not readily available to meet parents and others to discuss specific matters arising in a particular school.

Another accountability deficit is that chains of academies are responsible for substantial sums of public money, but there is no effective accountability for its expenditure. This is a clear and unacceptable exception to the maxim: he who pays the piper calls the tune.

The second objection is one too often neglected by policymakers in a policy world dominated by neo-liberal economics, but which resonates with the teaching profession. It is the simple belief that education should never be reduced to a commodity. Is this an ethical position, a political one, or an emotional one? Probably, all three. Hardly anyone in this country believes that 'state' schools should be run for profit.