



SHOULD PARENTS
SET UP THEIR OWN
STATE SCHOOLS?
DISCUSS

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n the past two years, Lesley Surman has become a campaigner. She has organised a car convoy, a silent protest march through her town hall and the release of 1,000 balloons. With no previous experience – she is an office manager – she has sat through council meetings for up to seven hours and argued with councillors. She has met Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, and his Conservative opposite number, Michael Gove. She has gathered thousands of supporters. It has all come to nothing.

Lesley wants a new school and her local council doesn't want to give her one. But she and other parents in her part of Kirklees have not given up. They plan to start their own state secondary school.

They are not alone. All over the country, from Bristol to Bedford, Durham to London, groups of parents are planning to set up their own schools – smaller than the schools their councils want to give them, or closer to home, with tougher discipline policies or a different curriculum. If the conservatives win the election we are likely to see a rash of them, because the Tories have promised to make it much easier for parents to start their own schools.

Parent-promoted schools are highly controversial. An article by Toby Young about his ambitions to set up a school with his neighbours in Ealing, west London, in the *Observer* last year prompted a hostile response from Fiona Millar ("Don't let parents ruin local schools") and a fierce debate on the *Guardian* website.

The tone of the argument is often angry, although everyone wants the same thing: a good, free, local school for all. What divides opinion is the means to get there. For what might be called the old left (there's quite a lot of political elasticity on this subject) it is admissions policies that are ruining state education, with Byzantine procedures that skew advantage to the middle classes and leave disadvantaged families in schools burdened with children who are harder to teach.

The Conservatives thought at one time that the solution was "choice", about which they talked a good deal, deploying a rhetoric that conflated it with fairness. But since the supply of school places is limited, in practice it is schools which have done the choosing. All very convenient for the articulate, clever and mobile, but it has been a policy that has left the disadvantaged high and dry.

Admissions certainly could be simplified and made less susceptible to manipulation, but no one is suggesting making rich people move into poor areas; any reform of admissions policies would probably only lead to greater selection by house price. Increasingly, more and more people are asking why we don't look at the problem

from the other end of the telescope. Instead of struggling to manage demand, why not increase supply? This has been done in other countries, and in Britain support is growing for freeing up places by letting parents and teachers start their own schools. A thinktank set up last year to campaign for the idea has received hundreds of expressions of interest.

"There's an incredible desire for new schools," says Rachel Wolf, a former adviser to Michael Gove, and the director of the New Schools Network: "We've been inundated, and not just by middle-class parents. Some are concerned that there is no school local enough. Others are worried about poor discipline or attainment, about schools being too vast and classes too big." Others are looking for a different kind of curriculum – which may be traditional (Toby Young's Ealing group are keen on compulsory Latin) or more liberal. "Some parents want to start Steiner schools, or schools in which there is much less box ticking and more freedom to innovate."

Lesley Surman and her neighbours in the four villages of Birkenshaw, Birstall, East Bierley and Gomersall, in West Yorkshire, want a local school on the site of their existing, outstanding middle school. Kirklees Council, which is abolishing its middle schools, wants to divide the children of North Kirklees between two comprehensives, each 45 minutes away. I met some of the campaigners in a pub in East Bierley, an attractive village near Bradford. "Even though Kirklees Council acknowledged that a high school on our site is likely to be outstanding and oversubscribed," said Nicki Woods, "they've told us that since we are parents, we can't be objective about what's good for our children."

There seems to be an underlying assumption among those opposed to parent-promoted schools that, given half a chance, middle-class parents will corral themselves away from everybody else. This lies at the root of much of the invective and blame. "When we started, we thought the argument was about education and children, about them staying together and being able to walk to school," says Neil Auty, a financial services consultant. "But it has become about politics. We have been accused of being white, middle class and racist." This seems odd, because Sobia Bashir, one of the women around the table, is Asian. "When that happened," Lesley says, "a Rastafarian parent shouted at the councillor concerned: 'Don't you dare call me racist!' The councillors also tried to pitch the Muslim community leaders against us. They couldn't believe we'd been talking to them already."

Kirklees Council argues that bigger schools can offer a broader curriculum. The Kirklees parents are unimpressed. "We're not that ▶

Fed up with their educational options, more and more parents are determined to build their own local schools. But is this really the answer to our classroom crisis? A special report by Geraldine Bedell



◀ interested in beauty therapy and travel,” Auty says. The issue has become so highly charged that the Conservative administration, which was persuaded to back the parents, has been ousted and replaced by a Labour-Lib Dem alliance.

There are currently only two parent-promoted schools in Britain, one primary (Bolnore School in West Sussex) and one secondary, The Elmgreen School in West Norwood, south London. Both had to win the support of their local authority. “There was a clear shortage of secondary school places in our part of Lambeth,” says Kate Scrase, who was involved in the campaign for Elmgreen. “We wanted a community school, non-selective and fully inclusive.”

This proved much harder to achieve than expected. Legislation had moved towards making local authorities commissioners of schools rather than providers, with the aim of increasing diversity among the local ecology of schools. (This has, however, been allowed to have very little impact on what is taught, or how.) It would have been easier for Lambeth to set up an academy than a maintained community school.

The Elmgreen School was set up on the same basis as a church school, but with parents tak-

“We were naive when we started”: (from left) Nicki Woods, Lesley Surman, Sobia Bashir and Neil Auty, who want to build a high school in North Kirklees

ing the place of the religious body, via a charity set up for the purpose, the Parent Promoters’ Foundation (PPF). Lambeth had already identified a suitable site and the parents lobbied for money from the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) fund. They worked with architects and set up the temporary governing body, which then appointed the head.

The school opened in September 2007 as a coeducational, secular comprehensive with no places set aside for particular “aptitudes”. Last year there were 850 applications for 180 places; one of the original directors of the PPF failed to get her son in because he didn’t live near enough. “The process has been one of gradually letting go,” says Kate Scrase, although the PPF remains custodian of the school’s ethos. It is guaranteed five members of the 20-strong governing body, with a further seven places set aside for parents and carers, who may be members of the 600-strong PPF, but don’t have to be.

The story of The Elmgreen School is one of

a local authority recognising the need for a new school and working with parents to make it happen. Not all parent campaigns are as warmly received. More than 2,000 people signed a petition calling for a new secondary school in south Camden, to serve its five primary schools. Camden Council claimed no suitable site existed and allocated its BSF money to build a new academy in Swiss Cottage, on the far side of the borough.

The South Camden parents found a site, which it turned out the council already owned, but Camden claimed that with the new academy there was no need for more secondary school places. The community lobbied Ed Balls, who promised to fund their school if the council could prove the need for places. Camden’s officers have persistently failed to do this, despite the fact that there is cross-party support for the school among the councillors. As a result, much of the white population of south Camden leaves for schools in other parts of London at 11, segregating teenagers along lines of race and class.

This brings us into the murky territory of the so-called “surplus places rule”, according to which schools cannot expand, and no new schools can be created, if surplus places ▶

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◀ already exist in a local authority. The government denies that it enforces such a rule, but the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) does require local authorities to prove that new places are needed. In Kirklees, this has not proved possible. “Ed Balls made all the right noises,” Lesley Surman says, “but then we got a standard letter from the department saying he couldn’t interfere in a local authority matter.”

Proving the need for places involves statistics, which are inevitably open to interpretation. Camden’s figures don’t take account of children moving across boroughs to school, which happens all the time in London.

Similarly, in Birmingham, where a Sikh community has been trying to open both a primary and secondary school for nine years and claims to have the support of 1,500 families, the City Council insists there are already surplus places. Ranjit Singh Dhanda, who is leading the campaign for the GNNSJ (Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jatha, a voluntary organisation linked to the Sikh temple in Handsworth), points out that this is not the case inside the inner ring road. “These days,” says Dhanda, “everybody thinks you’re in it for yourself. We believe we have

Making music: children at Nishkam Nursery, a Sikh community school in Handsworth, Birmingham

something to offer; we see ourselves as in a tradition – a bit like the Quakers at Cadbury’s – but there is quite a bit of opposition to faith schools. And although recent legislation for new schools theoretically favours parents, it is still linked to the local authority having to give approval.”

The GNNSJ already owns an eight-acre site, large enough for buildings, football pitches, playgrounds and car parks, which the community bought for £7.5m with donations. “We are not rich,” Dhanda says, “but we are generous.” Birmingham City Council has rejected the group’s application to sponsor an academy, and has told the GNNSJ it won’t get any BSF money to build a school. The group now plans to go back to the community to raise the capital to build – about £8m, Dhanda estimates.

All this might become more straightforward if there is a Conservative government. The Tories’ Green Paper on Education promises to end the surplus places rule and free up planning restrictions. At the moment schools are only allowed to use land classified as D1 –

already in public, non-commercial use – but the change would allow new state schools to open, as they do in Sweden and America, in former department stores or office buildings.

For all their radicalism about suppliers, the Tories are much more circumspect when it comes to the curriculum. Yet part of Dhanda’s motivation is to offer a different kind of education. His school would place heavy emphasis on the arts, especially classical music, both Indian and western, and outdoor pursuits and adventure. “Human beings,” he says, “were not meant just to get five GCSEs.”

Supporters of new schools draw inspiration from experiments in Sweden and the US. Under a 1992 Swedish reform, which has cross-party and teachers’ union support, anyone can set up a free school if they agree to promote equality, democratic values, respect for the individual and the environment, and if they promise to stand against bullying and racism.

Beyond that, they can educate as they like. One chain of schools teaches traditionally and prepares pupils for the International GCSE, increasingly popular in British private schools but forbidden in state ones. Another offers a ▶

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The Sikh group want to emphasise the arts – especially classical music, both Indian and western – and outdoor pursuits. “Human beings were not meant just to get five GCSEs”

◀ personalised curriculum to every pupil, allowing students to negotiate their own timetables each week. The criterion for success is not primarily inspection, or exam results, but parental preference. Since funding follows the pupils, schools survive only if parents choose them.

The charter school movement in the US, originally a New Democrat idea, was similarly intended to provide choice and encourage innovation in teaching. Children living in areas of deprivation carry more funding, so there is an incentive for schools to attract them and set up in disadvantaged communities. The charter is a performance contract, detailing the school's programme, goals and proposed measures of success, and is usually granted for three to five years. Founders of charter schools are typically grassroots organisations of parents, teachers and social entrepreneurs.

The evidence for the success of these experiments is not completely clear-cut. Some charter schools have failed. But a recent study found that overall they reduced the differences between the richest and poorest students by 86% in maths and almost 70% in English.

Some have been outstandingly successful. The Kipp (Knowledge Is Power Program) network of 82 charter schools in 19 states was founded by two teachers in their 20s who had experience of teaching in poor areas and knew they could do better. Kipp schools draw 80% of their students from deprived backgrounds, and 90% of them are African American or Hispanic. More than 80% go to university.

Sweden is a more homogeneous society than Britain, making assumptions about the impact of similar reforms here difficult. Even so, white Swedish parents have been accused of taking places at schools originally intended to educate recent immigrants. But there is considerable evidence that the effect of free schools has had a domino effect on their municipal rivals, whose performance has improved.

The fundamental divide over free schools is really between those who believe the money for children's education belongs to parents and that they are best equipped to spend it, and those who hold that it is a community resource and should be spent more or less democratically. Behind this second position lies a fear that parents will always act selfishly, the most resourceful grabbing an unfair proportion of whatever is available.

Enthusiasts for new schools don't dispute that parents are selfish, but want to harness parental preferences as the engine of improvement. They don't accept that only white middle-class parents want the best for their children, nor that they want to segregate themselves. To do so would be anti-education, and the truth is that it is ethos that most preoccupies parents; look (they say) at all the white middle-class



"We're not rich, but we are generous": members of the GNNJSJ have raised £7.5m and bought an 8-acre site

families desperate to get their children into Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, east London, where white British pupils are in a minority and 40% of children are on free school meals. Parents of all kinds will gravitate to good schools if they are allowed, they argue, and competition will boost performance across the board, as heads can no longer assume they will have a settled intake. There is evidence that this has happened, at least to some degree, in Sweden and America.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no way of testing the proposition for Britain other than by trying it. The consequence could then be that new schools would snatch resources from old, with the less popular losing pupils and funding to the point that they become unviable and have to close. For free marketeers, this is ultimately acceptable.

Schools in decline and closing, with all the implications in terms of disruption for pupils, are bound to worry the rest of us, however; messing about with the supply of places would seem to be highly risky. Except for one thing: the current system isn't working. Despite all the money poured into the education system since 1997, despite the National Curriculum and Ofsted and tests at Key Stages, 10% of children still get fewer than five GCSEs of any kind, at any grade. Only 20% of those eligible for free school meals get five good GCSEs including English and maths, the government's preferred bottom line. And despite the expansion in places, only 17% of those whose parents are in the bottom income quartile go to university. A recent report by the Institute for Public Policy

Research found that socio-economic segregation in the school system is worse than that between neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, a 2007 Unicef report on child wellbeing ranked the UK bottom in a list of OECD countries. Those defending the status quo are backing a system that is deeply flawed.

Mark Lehain, a young teacher in Bedford, who would like eventually to set up his own school, says: "All the evidence from abroad shows that it is the poor who benefit most from over-supply of places. The system is rigged against them now. In Bedford we have seven state secondary schools, as well as six private schools, and the middle classes cluster in the villages. It's selection by mortgage payment. The gap in the market is with the vulnerable and needy kids."

Those who are against parent- or teacher-promoted schools worry that they will load the dice even further against those that are struggling, and stigmatise teachers who are doing their best in very tough circumstances. Differences between schools are, after all, less to do with teachers than intakes. "Good" schools are disproportionately found in better-off areas, "poor" ones in less affluent areas. A recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Trust found that only 14% of the gap in achievement between rich and poor is down to schools.

For Mark Lehain to plug the gap he sees in the market, new schools would need to be given much greater freedom over curriculum and teaching methods: "I have a very clear idea how to provide a better maths education for children who are failing, but we don't even have the discussion at the moment." Since outcomes have less to do with teaching than with pupils, it follows that teachers need freedom to conduct their classes in ways ▶

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◀ that would reach the currently unteachable. This is quite a big step on from current Conservative policy, which seems to assume that traditional methods always work best. Michael Gove's Green Paper on Education asserts that schools currently doing well tend to have strict uniform policies, prefects and a full hour for lunch – all of which seem an inadequate response to deep-seated problems of unteachability.

“Different schools for different types of pupil” naturally raises the spectre of the old grammar-secondary modern split. The debate about new schools is so fierce largely because of fear that choice will lead to the creation of proto-grammars. This is what appears to underlie the accusations of racism in Kirklees, and the objections to what Toby Young and his neighbours call a “comprehensive grammar” in Ealing.

While groups wanting new schools are after different things, all of them emphatically reject the idea of selection in a way that appears, at least, to be sincere. “The only people who complain about white middle-class coterie,” according to Young, “are the white middle classes. When we talk to the local Afro-Caribbean or Somali communities, they are desperate to know how they can sign up. It is very patronising to those people to assume they are not interested in good schools like the rest of us.”

Nick Cowen, author of a Civitas pamphlet on the lessons to be drawn from Swedish free schools, argues that the debate is currently polarised between “choice is good” or “selection is bad”, leading to what a recent Institute for Public Policy Research report accurately described as a dialogue of the deaf. The solution, he says, “is to synthesise these two contentions: choice is good and selection is bad.”

This is what the proponents of new schools hope to prove possible. Maybe, though, parents in flight from their existing schools are unjustifiably fearful of something they simply don't understand. Several commentators have pointed out that Acton High, the school Toby Young is rejecting, is doing well by its highly mixed intake and has had a good Ofsted report.

John O'Farrell, who was involved in the campaign for the non-selective Lambeth Academy, which opened in 2004 and of which he is chair of governors, says: “Parents shouldn't confuse the percentage of GCSEs at a school with what their own children are likely to achieve. In all this talk about parent-promoted schools there is an inherent idea that no one has been trying to improve the school already. Which head teacher doesn't think they're trying to get the best out of every child? The idea that someone from PR or journalism or the City could do it better is a little bit patronising. I think those Ealing parents should go to Acton High and put their effort in there.”

In north London, a group of committed parents has shown that it is possible to transform



“We wanted a community school, non-selective and inclusive”: Kate Scrase and Sandy Nuttgens outside Elmgreen School, West Norwood, London

the reputation of an existing school. Until a few years ago most middle-class families didn't send their children to Queen's Park Community School. “They would use the local primary schools, but then move into private schools or grammars, or leave the borough,” says writer Melissa Benn, a local parent. “For the wealthy and well connected, there are always places to go. Secondary school transfer can become a precursor of a pernicious, class-based divisiveness.”

Over a few years, increasing numbers of local middle-class families, including Benn's, decided to send their children to the school. “What the school most conspicuously lacked was a diverse intake. Above all, it needed parental support,” she says. She and a few others started a writers' programme that has brought in journalists, editors, poets and novelists and the school currently has a writer in residence. Results have steadily improved, and the school is oversubscribed. “A strong local school benefits all the children, not just the well off, and they get a brilliant social education,” Benn says. “My worry about parent-promoted schools is that we could end up with a system that reinforces and promotes social divisions.”

In truth, if parent-promoted schools do take off, it is likely they will be run by businesses (probably not profit-making) and often as chains or federations, as in Sweden and the US. Parents will be much more influential, but chiefly as customers.

Ed Balls counters the new schools movement by saying that it is unworkable in the recession:

“Michael Gove can only pay for his Swedish schools experiment by cutting billions from the budgets of existing schools and slashing our school-rebuilding programme.”

But the advocates of new schools argue that if different kinds of buildings could be used, sometimes rented, the costs need not be insuperable. Recent research from Sheffield Hallam University and the National Centre for Social Research shows that 19% of parents are dissatisfied with the school choices on offer to them. Some 15% of pupils don't get into their first choice of school, rising to 28% in London. In the zero-sum game that is school admissions at the moment, such levels of dissatisfaction and disappointment seem unavoidable.

A study published in April 2005 by the London School of Economics and the Sutton Trust showed that social mobility between generations declined between 1958 and 1970 and remained stagnant from 1970 to 2000. International tables of educational achievement meanwhile suggest that Britain's performance is in long-term decline, measured both against other countries and our own previous attainment. Our education system cannot be described as highly successful. Everyone wants local schools with a diverse mix of pupils who are able to explore and fulfil their potential. Segregation of pupils in “successful” and “failing” schools has exacerbated social divisions, and helped halt social mobility. But anti-segregationist policies may not be enough to solve the problem. Investment and intervention have been tried consistently over the past 12 years and the improvement has not been nearly as marked as it should have been.

To break the deadlock, radical action is required. The obvious avenue is to increase supply rather than try to reorganise demand. This will undoubtedly have its downsides, but the situation is too dire for us to settle for the current stasis. The Conservatives now seem determined to try the supply-side solution, and Rachel Wolf believes that very little legislation is needed: “Mostly it is a matter of changing guidance and rules rather than the law.”

Unfortunately, unless the Tories offer freedom to innovate in the curriculum, Conservative policies could repeat Labour's error of introducing new providers without allowing for any very different kinds of education. If people like Mark Lehair aren't allowed to put into action their plans for a better way of teaching, the incentive for them to start alternative schools will remain limited.

Even so, the Kirklees parents are at the starting line. “As soon as we know the date of the general election we'll be booking trains and hotel rooms,” says Lesley Surman. “We want to hand over our business plan to Michael Gove in person. We aim to be there on day one. Whenever it is, we'll be ready.” ★

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