

UK's "free schools" accelerate privatisation

By Harvey Thompson
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The new academic year saw 24 new "free schools" open in England.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron visited the Free School Norwich last week to highlight the initiative, which he said was opposed only by "an educational establishment" that has let down pupils and accepts failure. In contrast, he went on, "those who support free schools are on the side of parents, charities and committed teachers who are trying to make things better on the side of the choice, freedom and competition that will really drive up standards."

Reiterating the theme of many statements since the August inner-city riots, he declared, "We need parents to have a real stake in the discipline of their children, to face real consequences if their children continually misbehave," including cutting the benefits of "parents whose children constantly play truant."

Cameron's threats to the poor and unemployed serve to emphasise the right-wing social agenda underlying free schools, which are based on a similar model in Sweden, as well as charter schools in the United States.

Free schools are state funded, but privately run, free from local authority control and controlled directly by central Department for Education (DfE). They have even greater powers over the teaching curriculum, pupil admissions and staff pay and conditions than the academies first established under the Labour administration of Tony Blair.

Despite claims to address social and educational deprivation in the inner cities, the first wave of free schools cater to a proportionally wealthier intake. They also have a strongly religious tilt.

A week before the schools were due to open, the *Guardian's* education editor Jeevan Vasagar exposed leaked emails indicating the setting up of fast-track public funding for free schools after "fierce lobbying" from Education Secretary Michael Gove's inner circle of advisers.

The *Guardian* noted August 30 that the first wave includes one school which has the right-wing columnist

Toby Young as its chair of governors, two Jewish faith schools, a Hindu school and a Sikh school. At least three will have a Christian ethos. The Maharishi school in Lancashire, founded by the Maharish Mahesh Yogi, has now become a state school.

The government has refused to reveal the costs of funding individual free schools and has refused requests under the Freedom of Information Act to identify the groups applying to open free schools next year.

Such was the ideological rush to establish the schools that the usual checks and balances were bypassed, the newspaper said. "Civil servants were urged that the New Schools Network (NSN)—a charity providing advice and guidance to set up the schools—should be given 'cash without delay'," the *Guardian* reported.

NSN is headed by Rachel Wolf, a former Gove adviser, and was subsequently given a £500,000 grant. No other organisation was invited to bid for the work. The grant was awarded after an email from Dominic Cummings, a Tory strategist and confidant of Gove, stating: "MG [Michael Gove] telling the civil servants to find a way to give NSN cash without delay."

Cummings was later employed by the charity on a freelance basis.

The *Guardian* described the extraordinary lengths the government went to in order to pass the necessary legislation in time.

"Legislation to enable the creation of free schools was pushed through parliament last summer under procedures usually reserved for counter-terrorism measures. The government held a free schools conference—which David Cameron addressed by videolink—in January," it wrote.

In another leaked email, Wolf is asked by one of Gove's staff to provide the prime minister with a "line to take" after a Tory councillor in Birmingham raised concerns that a free school in his city had the potential to be "socially divisive and undermine ... community cohesion."

Wolf worked as a special adviser to Gove while he was shadow education secretary.

The free schools programme is considered so vital because it is intended to pilot a far broader assault, aimed at ending what remains of the system of comprehensive public education. The comprehensive ethos has long been despised by the Tories and abandoned by Labour because, notwithstanding its limitations, the stated objective was to establish a standard of non-selective, free and universal education for millions of working class children.

In the name of “diversity”, parents and teachers but more likely private companies and religious organisations, can now set up their own schools, funded by public taxes.

The free schools are inherently socially divisive and often animated by either archaic religious teachings or regressive educational philosophies.

Despite public assurances that the next wave of free schools will be in more deprived areas or that free schools will not be run for profit (the Conservatives have refused to rule out allowing free schools to be run for private profit in subsequent waves), the exclusivist agenda is clear.

In a speech to teachers, parents and students, Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said of free schools, “They must not be the preserve of the privileged few, creaming off the best pupils while leaving the rest to fend for themselves, causing problems for and draining resources from other nearby schools.”

This is so much hot air. On August 31, the *Guardian* revealed that “the 10-minute commuting area around the first wave of free schools is dominated by middle-class households...”

According to research by CACI, a market analysis firm, the areas adjacent to the free schools have 57 percent of “better-off, educated and professional households,” compared with the average of 42.8 percent across England.

As an example the *Guardian* cited Priors free school in Warwickshire, with less than 700 households within 10 minutes of the school, of which 94 percent are categorised as “wealthy achievers” with an average household income in excess of £50,000.

In its own analysis, published the day before the schools opened, the government found that just three free schools were in the 10 percent most deprived of areas of England.

Accompanying these inroads into the public education system, Cameron announced that by the end of the current parliament, a school where less than 50 percent of pupils are achieving five good exam results will be deemed to be “underperforming”. By the end of next year, the

government will transform about 150 “failing” secondary schools and 200 “failing” primaries into academies.

More than 1,000 schools in England are now academies, free of local authority control and able to receive corporate sponsorship, up from 203 at the time of the election.

One of the proposals in the education bill now before the House of Lords is to give the secretary of state power to exempt categories of schools from regular inspections. Given the embarrassment previously suffered by ministers when government inspectors have failed academies, free schools and academies could be exempted from inspection while local authority schools are subject to the full and rigorous inspection and subsequent vilification.

Meanwhile the Swedish model of the free schools introduced in the early 1990s, which inspired the present British government, is falling into increasing disrepute.

SNS, a prominent business-funded think-tank, issued a report September 7 that argued the entry of private operators into state-funded education had increased segregation and may not have improved educational standards.

“The empirical evidence showing that competition is good is not really credible, because they can’t distinguish between grade inflation and real gains,” Dr Jonas Vlachos, who wrote the report on education, told the *Observer*.

Students who entered gymnasium [sixth form] from free secondary schools on average went on to get lower grades over the next three years than those who had entered with the same grade from municipal secondary schools. Vlachos said he suspected that, because schools rather than external examining boards mark students, free schools are more generous than municipal schools in the grades they give. “There’s been tremendous grade inflation in Swedish schools,” he said.

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