

'TRUE FREEDOM FOR OUR SCHOOLS'

Stephen Twigg MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education
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Thanks for that introduction, Mags, and I want to begin by paying tribute to the work of the Co-operative College, the Co-op Group and the wider movement. I am proud to be a Labour and Co-operative MP and proud to be part of an agenda for putting people at the heart of our public services.

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN EDUCATION

The veteran education journalist Mike Baker in a recent column for the Guardian made a powerful argument:

That a Conservative led government has nationalised our education system.

Michael Gove's favourite projects, academies and free schools, are entirely reliant on central government for their funding; they are accountable to civil servants and ministers in Whitehall; and they are controlled by seven year funding agreements determined by the Secretary of State.

So the Government's reforms are creating a Whitehall-centric, top-down, statist approach, which is vulnerable to both market failure and suffers from a significant democratic deficit.

When Labour developed the academy programme - something which I worked on in Government between 2002- 2005 - it was targeted at those schools which were struggling and those communities with the greatest social and economic need. We brought in external organisations to help drive up performance and bring fresh ideas and experience into the classroom. All of this was coordinated by officials in London working with Ministers.

This worked fine when we had several dozen academies. But under this Government's plans there will be thousands of academies and Free Schools. Can Michael Gove and Nick Gibb really sit in Sanctuary Buildings in London checking the performance of all these schools?

So what is the answer to this democratic deficit?

It is to create true freedom, not a free for all. To build accountability, not atomisation. To combine autonomy with collaboration.

So that those who hold the levers of power are the heads, the teachers, the school governors and of course, the parents and pupils themselves. They are the true experts on what is happening on the ground.

One of the major challenges of Labour's policy review will be to establish what role there is for local communities in a system where the majority of schools will be funded and established by central government.

How will we ensure that new schools meet the needs of local communities?

How will we ensure that schools are agents of social improvement, narrowing the gap between children and young people from rich and poor backgrounds?

And how will we ensure that schools meet the needs of parents who aspire for a better life for their children?

I have no doubt that the co-operative movement will play a key role in answering those questions, and I welcome your input into our policy review process.

THE CO-OPERATIVE MODEL - FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Co-op trust schools will be part of the answer to this democratic deficit. The numbers of trust schools are growing - from 100 pilots in 2008, to over 200 by early next year. And I pay tribute to the work of Ed Balls in first championing the work of trust schools when he was Education Secretary.

These schools build on what teachers tell me are the fundamental ways of championing success - working closely with colleagues, strengthening relationships with parents and students, and engaging in collaboration and self-help to improve the quality of teaching, and the quality of outcomes.

Releasing the potential of schools to improve themselves is at the heart of the vision. In an age of so many gimmicks in education, the journey of self-improvement is one that proves to be sustainable in the long term, because it builds a sense of a pride and a sense of community that can never be achieved with diktats from on high.

There is a need for more research into the impact of these schools, but the early results are encouraging. Just like the original academies, co-op trust schools have been set up in some of the toughest communities in England. Take the Reddish Vale Technology College, serving a broadly white working class community on the outskirts of Stockport. One of the first to switch and where before co-op status, their GCSE results were in the mid 40s, and now over 70 per cent of pupils get five good GCSEs.

Compare and contrast that with the Free School in Bristol, the second largest secondary free school, which was deliberately set up in an affluent area, and in an area which has a surplus of secondary places. I wish the school every success, but is this really the way to narrow the educational gap or meet local needs?

One of the most important levers to improve expectations and attainment is parental involvement. In many of the areas where the co-op works, where traditional manufacturing and extractive industries have disappeared, parental engagement can be difficult to achieve and sustain. Being a member of a trust can help address that.

The international evidence clearly shows that if we are to raise standards in all our schools, and narrow the gap, we need to ensure not just that there is healthy competition between schools, but that there is also collaboration and co-operation.

The freedom to innovate, but the responsibility to ensure you help those around you.

There are a growing numbers of clusters of co-op schools being established to support each other and raise attainment - not just in inner city areas, but in places like Telford, South Yorkshire and Cornwall.

With support from the Co-operative Schools Society, such schools can access the kind of support services which their local authority may no longer provide, but in a way that provides services which can be designed directly by the users from the bottom up

The schools can get best value for money through joint purchasing arrangements, an environment in which skills swaps can be facilitated, access to new funding through the charitable status of the trust and greater links with the local community.

Take Cornwall, which has a number of small schools - many fewer than 120 pupils - that want to protect and preserve their unique character. They are close to becoming the first local authority to have the majority of schools come together to form a co-operative trust across the county to ensure decisions are made by the local community.

And in Burton upon Trent, a co-operative learning trust is enabling local schools not just to pool resources, but to share expertise and facilities with Derby University, which will support teacher recruitment, develop training and ongoing development as well as allowing pupils to use their facilities.

As well as promoting parents and teachers as active citizens, the co-operative model can encourage pupils to become engaged in shaping their own destinies. A great example of learning through your brain and your hands. With changes to the curriculum including co-op citizenship studies, pupils can see and discuss new ways of getting involved. At the same time students can get involved directly - by setting up their own co-operative businesses in school - selling fair-trade products for instance, and through participation in the running of a major social enterprise - their school.

THE CO-OPERATIVE RENAISSANCE

The co-operative movement is clearly experiencing a renaissance. From local government, with co-op councils being established in places like Lambeth, Liverpool and Telford; to the global stage, with 2012 being endorsed by the UN as the international year of co-operatives.

As we know, the vision is not a new one. We owe a huge debt to Robert Owen, the reformer, philanthropist and great grandfather of co-operative education for establishing the principles of early years' education in this country.

Although a generalist, Owen always saw early education as the primary moving force in reshaping the social order.

'it must be evident to those who have been in the practice of observing children with attention, that much of good or evil is taught to or acquired by a child at a very early period of its life; that much of temper or disposition is correctly or incorrectly formed before he attains his second year; and that many durable impressions are made at the termination of the first 12 or even 6 months of his existence'.

The principles that drove Owen to establish schools in his factories, are the same principles that drove a Labour government to invest in early years' education, to create Sure Start and to support children's centres and tax credits for hard working families.

And so much of that is being undermined by the current government, whether through the removal of the ring-fence on Sure Start funding threatening 250 children's centres when David Cameron promised to protect them, to the cuts to early years funding which means the closure of playgrounds and one Breakfast clubs across England.

Many of the businessmen who invested in Robert Owen's community mills in New Lanark grew tired of his philanthropic efforts and the decision to educate his young employees rather than just send them to labour.

Some argue that his heyday came when he decided to bring in new supporters such as the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham and the Quaker, William Allen. The model they established would inform social reformers across the world, the ideas informed the Factory Act of 1817. And critically the business they operated was a commercial success.

Socialist Owen and Liberal Bentham, working together for the common purpose. Each benefitting from the wisdom of the other. Although they eventually parted ways, here was an example of competing ideologies co-operating for the common good.

MODERN EDUCATION CHALLENGES

And that is why I will put evidence at the heart of Labour's education policies.

So we have set specific tests for free schools. We oppose the imposition of such schools, and the cuts to other schools budgets to fund them. But we want to see good schools that extend opportunities, particularly in deprived areas, drive up standards in their localities, and close the attainment gap between children from rich and poor backgrounds. That is the basis on which we will assess free schools.

In the same way that the Co-operative group has said it will only support free schools that meet the test of promoting co-operative values.

But my fundamental point is this: when it comes to free schools or co-op schools, Labour must never be against the principle of allowing parents and successful education leaders to set up schools and we must never be against the idea of local communities running their own schools.

This isn't just about schools, it runs to the heart of what we as a Labour party and a co-operative movement feel about the essence of the state.

We must never cede the arguments around freedom or localism to the Tories - those are Labour values. We should never seek to be defenders either of the status quo, or business as usual.

The big versus small state is a false dichotomy. The state will always have a role - as a protector, a nurturer, an enabler. The key is to have a smart state that allows citizens to reach their full potential, to self-improve and to shape services that suit their needs.

And I believe fundamentally in greater autonomy for schools to set their own destiny. So I issue this challenge to Michael Gove today. If you claim to support greater freedom for schools, why not allow all state funded schools, whether community, trust, faith-based schools or academies to establish co-operative governance structures, should they wish to do so?

True autonomy for schools should include the freedom to adopt models different to those favoured by the Secretary of State.

I am delighted to be here today. I look forward to visiting Co-Op Schools across the country over the coming months- starting next Thursday with a visit to the Co-Operative Academy here in Manchester.

Education is a core value of the Co-Operative Movement. This Movement is well-placed to make the case that autonomy and collaboration go hand-in-hand.

I pay tribute to the existing network of Co Op Schools. I will work with them to maximise their success and I will focus on developing an education policy that promotes high standards for children from all backgrounds.