



Free Schools: David Cameron's Radical Idea

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Peter Gregory investigates the introduction of school choice in the United Kingdom (this article first appeared in the December 2012 edition of the [IPA Review](#).)

For all the criticism it has received, the Cameron government in Britain has undertaken at least one transformative and visionary reform since its inception. That is, the introduction of free schools in the British education system overseen by Education Secretary Michael Gove.

Twenty-four free schools operated throughout the country during the last school year with 55 opened this spring and another 114 to open next year. This builds on the 203 schools opened under the Blair government's academies program. These schools are offering parents and students of all income levels an affordable alternative to Britain's broken state education system—a system that spits out 100,000 pupils each year who are functionally illiterate.

Similar to the Swedish free school program that began in the 1990s and the Charter School program in the United States, a free school is a school that is founded by parents, teachers,



companies, faith groups or other community groups independently of the local state education authority. This autonomy enables free schools to avoid many of the intractable problems in British state education.

The schools are still government funded and free for students. And they still have to comply with the standard admissions code that applies to all state schools. But in taking responsibility for education from politicians and bureaucrats and giving it to local teachers and parents, the similarities between free schools and their traditional state counterparts end there.

Free schools have much greater flexibility over what curriculum they offer students. This not only gives parents choice over what their children are taught, but enables free schools to avoid many of the pitfalls of the standard British curriculum. Conservative journalist Toby Young founded the West London Free School where Latin is compulsory for all students. He describes how, 'critics of the school said it was unrealistic to make Latin mandatory because it's simply too difficult for most children. Better to reserve Latin for the top set and have the rest do media studies.' However, the school's focus on what Young describes as a 'classical liberal education' has contributed to over 1000 children applying for 120 places, making it the most over-subscribed state secondary in Hammersmith and Fulham.

Free Schools are also able to make better staffing decisions as they have been able to remain free of the vice-like grip teaching unions hold over schools in Britain. Katharine Birbalsingh, a former teacher who famously denounced the British state education system at the 2010 Conservative Party conference and who is a champion of the free schools movement, laments that in the last 40 years only 18 teachers have been dismissed for incompetence in the British state system. She says that unions, 'bully head teachers...and degrade the teaching profession by ensuring that poor teachers can remain in their posts and give the rest of us a bad name.'

But free schools don't just offer a higher standard of teaching because they can sack bad teachers; they also attract very good ones. Teachers want to work at free schools because of the dynamic curriculum, improved discipline and renewed sense of mission. Young reports that over 500 teachers applied for the first six full-time positions at his school. And amongst his staff is a former head of classics from the prestigious Bradfield College and a former commander in the Royal Navy Reserve (who has also been head teacher at two independent schools).

But most significantly, free schools excel in the area of the British state education system that has drawn the most criticism, particularly in the wake of the London riots and climbing crime rates. That is, classroom discipline. According to Birbalsingh, the system is rife with what she calls an 'excuse culture'. Students are not held accountable for their behaviour and it is almost impossible to expel those who persistently behave poorly. Schools are restricted by exclusion quotas, the threat of legal action and the spectre of being labelled racist if the student in question is from an ethnic minority.

Alongside this is the reality that less and less is being asked of students academically. 'A' level exams have become easier—Birbalsingh relates the story of students begging her to give them a practice exam from 2005, rather than 1998 because the more recent the exam, the easier it would



be. Indeed, the situation with regards to academic standards has become so farcical, that 'A' level results have improved every year for 29 years in a row.

This is the crux of the problem with British state education. Birbalsingh describes it best when she says that the system 'expects the very least from our poorest and most disadvantaged'. Free schools smash this mould by empowering teachers and pupils, holding them to account for their performance and behaviour, giving parents choice and exposing themselves and the schools around them to competition.

As Prime Minister David Cameron says, 'the free schools revolution was built on a simple idea. Open up our schools to new providers, and use the competition that results to drive up standards across the system.'

Critics of the scheme claim it will drain the traditional state system of the best students and teachers to the detriment of those left behind, and that the problems with the current system can be cured by ever more funding.

Given Michael Gove's first free schools have only been open for one year, it is too early to draw unequivocal conclusions on whether they lead to better results and improved tertiary and employment outcomes for students once they graduate.

However, free schools are important for if nothing else than the fact that they illuminate the stark ideological divide that stalks British education. They offer choice, competition, opportunity, hope and local autonomy and they challenge the one-size fits all status quo that panders to the lowest common denominator and keeps poor people poor.

John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister in the Blair government, once infamously remarked of Tony Blair's academies program (the precursor to free schools), 'if you set up a school and it becomes a good school, the great danger is that everyone wants to go there.' We can only hope.