

Free schools

Freedom to privatise education

In September, the first 24 of the Coalition's new 'free schools' opened. Tory schools minister Michael Gove claims that they will end a 'state monopoly' in education and give 'freedom' to parents to set up schools that meet the needs of their children. He approved another 55 in October, most of which are aiming to open in 2012.

But Martin Powell-Davies, a member of the NUT national executive asks, what kind of 'freedom' is really on offer from this government of cuts and privatisation?

What are free schools?

Free schools are a new kind of academy school. Like academies, they receive state funding directly from Westminster but are independent of an elected local authority. Instead, they will be run by unaccountable sponsors, predominantly big businesses.

Rather than being converted from existing schools, free schools will typically rely on available accommodation such as empty office blocks. As a result, in Sweden, where free schools were first tested out, many lacked facilities such as libraries and play space.

Government legislation presumes that where new schools are opened, they will be free schools, not local authority community schools. This is a real threat in areas like London where there is a growing shortage of pupil places.

Freedom to make profits out of tax-payers' money

We know that when Tories talk about 'freedom', they really mean freedom for big business to make profits at our expense. Free schools will be no different.

Five of the 24 initial free schools will be run by existing academy chains from the start. As Sweden has also shown, eventually most free schools will end up being taken over by these big 'edu-businesses'.

Academies have not been allowed to be run for a profit but free schools will be different. Under pressure, Gove has stated that free schools are not going to be able to make profit - but only 'at the moment'. But, as in health and other public services, that won't be good enough for the private sector vultures.

Freedom to cut costs and quality

The privateers plan to cut costs by attacking pay and conditions and employing cheaper staff. That's why free school legislation means they won't have to employ qualified teachers. Nor, like all academies, will they have to abide by national terms and conditions.

Claims that free schools will offer 'smaller class sizes' are inevitably an illusion. Swedish free schools have worse pupil-teacher ratios than municipal schools. They also employ a far lower proportion of qualified teaching staff.

Even if the government throws some additional bribes at free schools and academies in the first place, that money is at the expense of other schools as the Con-Dems cut overall expenditure. The £130 million start-up costs for the first free schools have been found by the money saved by cutting the Building Schools for the Future funds that were desperately needed to rebuild underfunded local authority schools.

Freedom from democratic control

Free schools are part and parcel of the



Striking to defend a community school in south London this year photo the Socialist

government's agenda to cut and privatise public services. They hope to remove so many schools and services from local council control that local authorities effectively cease to exist.

When all the main parties in our town halls are voting for cuts, some parents may ask why we should bother to defend elected councils. However, local councillors are still accountable to voters, even if most try to ignore our wishes between elections.

Councils are also able to plan for provision for all pupils across a local area.

Free schools and academies will create a chaotic 'free-for-all' where unaccountable businesses put their interests first. Vital local authority support services will be lost. The academy and free school education 'marketplace' may create a few lucky winners - but most families will lose out.

Freedom over how schools are run?

Parents and teachers are rightly angry at the way both Labour and Con-Dem governments have used tests and league tables to put schools into an educational strait-jacket. But free schools are no solution.

Some are offering extended opening hours, an attractive option for parents working long hours and unable to afford childcare. But many community schools also try to offer breakfast clubs and after-school activities. Free schools however want to do it on the cheap by making teachers work longer hours instead of paying for additional staff to run the extended provision.

Parents, staff and students should have

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Sweden

20 years of the market has led to poorer education

Sigbritt Herbert
Teaching Swedish as a second language in Sweden since 1975

In 1992 the Swedish conservative government launched the "right to choose" reform in the Swedish school system. That meant that all children got a price tag, a set sum of money that they (or their parents) could use to shop around among different schools to get the best possible education that 'suited their needs'. That was one of the explanations for the new education system that was introduced.

Another explanation was that teachers that felt 'stifled' by the oppressive monopoly system must be freed to use the teaching methods that they preferred. That all sounded good. Now, after almost 20 years, we have begun to see the result of the 'reform'.

More and more schools, especially sixth form colleges, have been started, or taken over, by profit-making companies, some with their headquarters abroad.

These companies have realised there is easy money to be made. They get a set sum of money for each student. That sum is the same for each student irrespective of his or her needs. The free schools have the right to say 'no' to a child whereas the council schools can't do that.

League tables

In order to get students, the schools must try to prove that they are a "good" school. Each year the newspapers show tables listing the 'best' schools, ie the schools where the students have got the highest grades.

So an easy way to show that you are a good school is to give high grades to your students. There are set criteria for each grade, but these are free to interpretation. Karl Ågerup, an ex-free school teacher has written in his book *Barnens Marknad* (the Children's Market) about a maths teacher in his school who showed the results in maths in one class to the headteacher. "There are too many 'not passed'. You have to increase the grades," he responded.

It is not just by giving high grades that you can attract students. Many free sixth form colleges also offer laptops for their students. They also offer popular courses that don't cost much money to run, for example song and dance or sports.

Making money

How do the free schools make money? One way is of course not to accept students that require more resources, like children with disabilities or whose first language is not Swedish.

Another way is to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. Last summer I read a statement from the managing director of one of the biggest free school companies. He explained their lower pupil-teacher ratio by saying that their teachers could spend more time with their students as the company had set computer-based lessons. For me, computer-based lessons would



mean that teachers can't adapt the lessons to the needs of their students or to the composition of the different classes.

Another managing director, Johan Götefeldt for Pyslingen AB, told the magazine *Skolledaren* (for headteachers): "We have more efficient premises and are working more efficiently with costs, less caretaking, less bureaucracy and fewer secretarial posts for instance." That company last year handed out more than four million Swedish crowns (£400,000) to their five shareholders.

The free schools can reduce other costs as well. Many free schools don't have a school library or a school nurse. If the students are in need of transport, because of distance, the free school has no obligation to provide this because the parents have chosen not to use the nearest council school. Yet the council schools have to fund taxi or bus journeys.

Working conditions

The working conditions for the staff in the profit-making free schools are worse than in the council schools. More time with the students can mean less time to do a good job with lesson preparation.

The teachers don't have school holidays, but only five weeks holiday. Is it any wonder that profit-making schools have a higher rate of unqualified teachers, pay lower rates and have a high turnover of staff? Karl Ågerup describes the first question he got asked as he walked into a class: "How long are you staying? We don't want to change teacher again."

With the 'freedom of choice' the Swedish schools have become more segregated, with free schools having more unqualified teachers.

The working conditions of all teachers have deteriorated over the last 20 years, with more work and pay that has fallen behind other professions. The number of students applying for teacher training is now, in some subjects, lower than the number of spaces at college.

The official theory was that competition is good and that the horrible state monopoly schools would improve if they met competition. That should benefit all. What is the outcome after

Some facts on Sweden's school 'reforms'

- The proportion of teachers with a teaching degree in Sweden has decreased by approximately 9% since the early 1990s when free schools were introduced - from 94% in 1991 to fewer than 85% in 2007/08.

- In Sweden the number of qualified teachers in free schools (64%) is lower than in municipal (state) schools (85%).

- In addition, the pupil teacher ratio in Swedish free schools is worse than in municipal (state) schools - almost 8.5 teachers per hundred pupils in municipal schools; just over 7.5 teachers per hundred pupils in free schools.

- Most free schools lease buildings rather than using dedicated school sites. This means many free schools lack facilities for sports, playgrounds,

lunch halls and libraries. Whereas every public school in Sweden is obliged to have a library, free schools are not.

- In Sweden, 75% of free schools are run by private, profit-making companies. The Swedish teachers' union, *Läraförbundet*, believes that company profits come from:

- The companies renting their school buildings and so not being responsible for long term wear and tear;

- Buildings such as disused offices and factories being utilised;

- Lack of overheads on for example sports facilities, dining halls etc.

- A lack of investment in special needs/language facilities and support; and

- The employment of young and inexperienced staff and larger numbers of unqualified teachers.

With the 'freedom of choice' the Swedish schools have become more segregated, with free schools having more unqualified teachers

nearly 20 years?

PISA is an OECD measure of the educational attainment of 15 year-olds in the main industrialised countries. The latest report shows that the educational standard of Swedish students has dropped considerably.

It now worries even the traditional free market proponents. SNS, a business-funded think tank in a report on 7 September dismissed the free school system. The author Jonas Vlachos, has found that students who entered sixth form from free schools performed worse than students from council schools with the same grades.

The reasons behind the failure of Swedish students are many. PISA 2009 had some interesting things to say:

School systems that offer parents more

school choices are less effective in raising the performance of all children.

Segregation leads to lower quality results.

The quality of teaching is key to educational outcomes.

Every politician has over the last 15 years promised better schools, but the result is the opposite. The reason is that no one wants to address the real problem, lack of funding and the spurious 'freedom of choice'.

Even an ex-minister of the Social Democratic party has been on the board of Pyslingen AB. In spite of all evidence about the drawbacks it will take a lot to make the established parties reverse the situation. They are too anxious about losing the votes of middle class voters in the big cities.



The schools minister Gove

No to the Tory schools agenda!

- Everyone should be entitled to free, good-quality education from nursery to university.

- No to academies and Free Schools. All schools to be accountable to a democratically elected local education authority.

- No selection or segregation. For a genuinely comprehensive admissions policy in every area.

- For a mass programme of building work to provide the buildings needed by schools, colleges and universities.

- No to cuts, reduce class sizes. Fund the resources needed to provide a good education for every child.

- No to league tables. For a flexible curriculum that meets the needs of every school student.

- Reduce workload, stop the pay freeze. National pay and conditions to apply to all school staff. Defend pensions.

- Trade union and community action to kick big business out of education.



Free schools help to undermine trade union organisation photo Martin Powell-Davies

Socialism 2011

At the Socialist Party's Socialism weekend there will be a session on the dangers of free schools. Sunday 6 November from 1-3pm at ULU, Malet Street London WC1E 7HY.

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