

Towards school autonomy in England: A troubled and far from complete journey

1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the journey towards autonomy for state-maintained schools in England. Firstly, it is important to recognise that a total of four national school systems exist within the United Kingdom as both Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own regulations, whilst Wales has devolved powers which allow for different policy enactments. Secondly, it is necessary to understand the complexity of provision within England that gives legitimacy to independent fee paying, independent state-funded and local authority-maintained schools. The notion of independent state-funded schools has been manifested in the current century through the creation of academies, which are corporatised entities funded directly from central government. At the time of writing independent fee-paying schools account for some seven per cent of the relevant student population (i.e. those of compulsory education ages – currently 5 to 16 years), with the remainder being almost equally split between local authority schools and academies. Academy trusts will be explored more fully later in this chapter, but the story starts with the prolonged attempts between 1870 and 1970 to establish a national school system.

2 The journey begins

Universal basic education did not become a state policy until the latter stages of the nineteenth century when attempts were made to rationalise the range of previous initiatives, largely led by churches, into a managed system of schools. The centrality of the churches to the early development of schools has never been seceded, meaning that the system today is a mix of secular and religious schools. By the end of the century there were over 2500 school boards governing and managing schools, but these were abolished by the 1902 Education Act which gave responsibility for the provision and management of education to local councils as part of a unification of the control of schooling. This democratically elected tier of local government was to establish local education authorities (LEAs) which were given authority over the secular curriculum of voluntary (church) schools (Ball, 2018). The LEAs provided grants for school maintenance, but if a school wanted to provide denominational teaching the buildings had to be paid for by the church.

This attempt to create a national school system operated with only partial success as it did not include secondary education and did little to address social inequality. A key feature of the coalition government in place during the Second World War (1939–45) was to plan for peace time, a process which included addressing social welfare, health and education. For schools the key point was the 1944 Education Act which, for the most part of subsequent

history has been the bedrock of a national system. The act abolished the existing system of elementary schools for children aged 5–14, raised the school leaving age to 15 and introduced state-funded secondary education for the first time. This led to the classification of primary schools for 5–11 year olds and the introduction of compulsory secondary education for 11–15 year olds. Governance and management of schools was a compromise between local and church authorities with most religious denominations becoming part of the state sector. LEAs were responsible for the provision and quality of state-maintained provision which included church schools, although some chose the status of Voluntary Aided (VA) which provided enhanced state subsidies, but retained autonomy over admissions, curriculum and teacher appointments. Overall, however, the system was a national one that was locally delivered with the LEAs being the major controller.

3 School control in 1950s & 60s

Education in England during the subsequent period from 1944 to 1970 was considered a private matter where the state had only a limited role to play (Syriatou, 2009), with most teachers believing that the freedom to teach what they wanted in the way they wanted was a matter of safeguarding democracy itself (Gillard, 2018a). The independence of the headteacher and teaching staff in the sphere of curricula was large and considered “not likely to be diminished” (Barker, 1947: 229) and to be working to a professional consensus (Bassey, 2005).

During this period central government determined the structure and financing of schools, but did not intervene in the curriculum, pedagogy or assessment. Indeed, it is said that when, during that war, Churchill asked the President of the Board of Education, ‘*Can’t you ensure that the schools are more patriotic?*’, R A Butler replied, ‘*I have no say in what is done in schools*’ (Bassey, 2005: 8). Derek Morrell from the department confirmed this autonomy for defining and delivering learning in schools:

We reaffirm the importance of the principle that the schools should have the fullest measure of responsibility for their own work, including responsibility for their own curricula and teaching methods, which should be evolved by their own staff to meet the needs of their own pupils. (quoted in Simon 1991: 313).

The first attempt at intervention from central government was made in 1959 by the Secretary of State for Education, Sir David Eccles, who commented:

I regret that so many of our educational debates have had to be devoted almost entirely to bricks and mortar and to the organisation of the system. We hardly ever discuss what is taught to seven million boys and girls in the maintained schools. (cited in Taylor, 1989: 62)

His concern was probably based on anecdotal evidence of a ‘cosy consensus’ between the local authorities, teacher unions and departmental officials which seemingly excluded the

Secretary of State for Education, with many policy initiatives emerging and subsequently being implemented without central government involvement:

It was believed that many policy decisions in education were taken over lunch at the National Liberal Club by a troika consisting of Sir William Alexander, Secretary of the Association of Education Committees, Sir Ronald Gould, the General Secretary of the NUT and the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Education. If these three agreed on some item of educational policy, it would, more often than not, be implemented. Such at least was the general belief and, even if it was caricature, it is at least significant that it was widely held. (Bogdanor, 2006: 96)

Although Sir David Eccles had signalled an intention to “sally into the secret garden of the curriculum” (Taylor, 1989: 62), what followed in 1960s was a period of great excitement and creativity, especially in primary education with the publication of the report of the Central Advisory Council for Education for England (CACE) (1967), commonly known as the ‘Plowden Report’ after the chair of the enquiry. The 1944 Education Act had aimed to set up a tri-partite system of secondary education with the ambition for children to be provided with the type of education which most suited their needs and abilities and underpinned by the principle that ‘the nature of a child’s education should be based on his capacity and promise and not by the circumstances of his parent’ (Board of Education 1943: 7). Each category of state-run secondary schools was thus designed with a specific purpose in mind, aiming to impart a range of skills appropriate to the needs and future careers of their pupils. *Grammar* schools were intended to teach a highly academic curriculum, with a strong focus on intellectual subjects, whilst *Secondary Technical* schools were designed to training children adept in mechanical and scientific subjects (although very few were ever opened). Most children were to attend *Secondary Modern* schools, however, where they would be trained in practical skills, aimed at equipping them for less skilled jobs and home management. Gaining entry to a grammar school required success in a standard examination known as the *Eleven Plus* (11+), an end which too often tended to dominate the primary school curriculum and learning process. When it became clear that the selection system was failing most of the nation’s children the government asked CACE ‘to consider primary education in all its aspects, and the transition to secondary education’ (Gillard, 2018b).

By this time, the abolition of the 11+ in many areas was enabling the primary schools to develop a more informal, child-centred style of education with an emphasis on individualisation and learning by discovery: in short, a ‘progressive’ style of education, which Plowden largely endorsed. (Gillard, 2018b)

The transition to a child-centred approach took place under a Labour government through the now infamous Circular 10/65 (Department of Education and Science, 1965) which had signalled, amongst other things, an expectation that the 11+ was to be abolished. With most LEAs taking account of this guidance primary schools tended to be freed from the constraints imposed by the need to ‘get good results’ and teacher-led curriculum innovation became actively encouraged.

A further development that corresponded to the government enquiry into inequity (published as *The Newsom Report*) which made several recommendations for secondary education that were designed to improve the life chances for children who did not go to grammar schools (Central Advisory Council for Education for England, 1963). The key recommendations included a raising of the school leaving age to 16 (later implemented in 1972), a broader curriculum and consideration to reorganising schools. The notion of comprehensive schools as an alternative to the organisation of secondary education had grown in the early 1950s due mainly to the determination of socialist political figures to move toward the concept of meritocracy in a society that stubbornly continued to favour a privileged few. Grammar schools were considered divisive and the province of the middle classes, with senior figures in the Labour party setting themselves the goal of removing them from the state system of secondary education. In addition to seeking abolition of the 11+ the new Labour government signalled an expectation, also through Circular 10/65, that LEAs were to prepare plans to deliver secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines.

Experiments with comprehensive schools in England and Wales had begun earlier than this in the late 1940s with some LEAs having banished tri-partite secondary education in the 1950s. Comprehensive schools were developed because “there were many who believed that educating all local children in a single school, where they would have equal physical facilities and equal access to high quality teachers, would raise the aspirations of all children and teachers, bringing about greater equity within the schools and lead to greater opportunities outside in the world of work” (Pring & Walford, 1997: 2). By 1970, 115 LEAs had had their reorganisation plans approved, whilst 13 had had theirs rejected, and a further 10 had defied the government and refused to submit any plans at all. In 1970, Margaret Thatcher, the Secretary of State for Education in the new Conservative government, ended the compulsion on LEAs to convert to comprehensive schooling, however, although ironically more comprehensive schools opened during her time as Secretary of State than any other.

1970 was also the year that the basis for universal access was legally established in England when the Education (Handicapped Children) Act was introduced making local education authorities responsible for the education of severely handicapped children, previously considered to be ‘unsuitable for education at school’. This, according to Margaret Thatcher was:

... the first time in history all children without exception are within the scope of the educational system. The act is the last milestone, along the road starting with the Education Act of 1870, which set out to establish a national system of education. (Ball, 2018: 218)

This can thus be considered as the point where there was a national school system in England and a scenario where the LEAs and the teaching workforce were in control of finance, curriculum and pedagogy. As can be seen above, however, this was also the year in which the Secretary of State exerted her authority to stop the development of comprehensive schooling and since then schools in England can be considered to have moved from being the least to the most state-controlled system in the world by the second decade of the current century.

4 The tide turns

As can be judged from the comments of Sir David Eccles (above), there was a growing sense of frustration in central government that, despite funding a huge increase of state-maintained schools, they had little impact on desired outcomes. The first crack in the armour of local government and teacher unions, however, was the establishment of a Curriculum Study Group (CSG) by the Ministry of Education in 1962 consisting of government officials and other experts, but excluding teacher representation. The idea of having a body intervening in the work of the teacher in the classroom was a blow to “the purely twentieth-century English dogma that the curriculum is a thing to be planned by teachers and other educational professionals alone and that the state’s first duty in this matter is to maximise teacher autonomy and freedom” (Bell & Prescott, 1975: 2). The CSG had too little time to make an impact, however, before it was replaced by the Schools Council in 1964 by the incoming Labour government, with the new body staffed in a more democratic and representative way and including people from the whole educational spectrum. The council was set up to establish the official intervention of central state in the curricula, whilst ensuring this process was to be safeguarded by the professionals themselves (Syriatou, 2009). Although the CSG never really gained any momentum because of its limited tenure and the sustained power of the LEAs and teacher unions, nevertheless the seeds were sown for future intervention into the ‘secret garden’ by central government and the department.

Dissatisfaction with the ‘cosy consensus’ and the liberal attitude underpinning progressive education and comprehensive schools led a number of conservative activists seeking to exert influence through the publication between 1969 and 1977 of a series of ‘Black Papers’ (a descriptor deliberately chosen to contrast with government White Papers which are advanced proposals for an Act of Parliament). The Black Papers were strongly critical of what they saw as the excesses of an education system largely focused on individual learning needs, which they dismissively labelled as ‘progressive’, and demanded a return to education of ‘the pursuit of choice’, with LEAs to choose how to organise their schools, of parents to choose the school they felt appropriate for their children and of pupils to choose subjects and areas of study within schools (Cox and Dyson, 1969, 1970a, 1970b; Cox & Boyson, 1975, 1977). This period was also one of national financial crisis which led in many ways to education being considered to be one of the culprits for the weak economy and, at times, the scapegoat for decline. According to Phillips (2001: 13) “some claimed that this new discourse about education ended the educational consensus and the relative autonomy of education from the state”. Indeed, the focus of government attention became more acute when confronted with findings from a report commissioned by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1976 on the William Tyndale School. From 1974 this junior school in the London Borough of Islington had been offering a progressive approach to education which, controversially, had included an element of free choice for children as to what lessons they attended and which parts of the school they used. This resulted in a lack of control, poor behaviour and, ultimately, not only parental complaints, but also withdrawal of large numbers of children from the school. Subsequently ILEA sacked the headteacher and some senior staff, but faced strong criticism itself for its inability to control the school.

This combination of events most probably kick started the increase in government authority over education and a reduction in the autonomy of the local education authorities. The populist view at the time was that state-maintained schools were overly liberal in their interpretation of progressive education and were considered to be not producing a capable workforce during a period of economic depression. What happened next was that Prime Minister James Callaghan commissioned an internal government report which gave the view of the department and HMI on the 'health' of the education system, commonly known as the 'Yellow Book'. This document was a classified document which few have seen and it remains shrouded in mystery. Riley reports that she was not able to gain access to a copy but was able to report the comments of several of her interviewees who had been privy to its contents. One described it in the following terms:

One of the things you don't hear about is what 'The Yellow Book' contained. Overall it was very positive, it recognised the achievements of education, such as the fact that schools had made a reality of secondary education for all, and that educational achievement had been mobilized. There had been a massive and successful rebuilding and restructuring programme after the war. 'The Yellow Book' said to the Prime Minister that "things are not as bad as you thought, although there obviously are issues that need pushing forward". For example, perhaps the Schools Council needed greater clarity. There are also issues in relation to preparation for work. Teachers were not layabouts, but the problem was that they did not necessarily understand the standards ... to be achieved by children. (Riley, 1998: 60)

Despite the positive nature of the report, however, Callaghan argued for the setting of national standards, the monitoring of increasingly scarce resources and a core curriculum of basic knowledge in his famous speech at Ruskin College in October 1976, although the authors of the Black Papers also claimed the credit for shaping his thinking:

In October, 1976, Mr. Callaghan, the Prime Minister, attempted to steal our clothes, which have always been freely available. He repeated our assertions that money is being wasted, standards are too low and children are not being given the basic tools of literacy and numeracy. (Cox & Boyson, 1977: 5)

During the speech, the PM attacked the "educational establishment" and signalled an intention to launch a 'Great Debate' on education. The significance of the speech is that it once again raised questions about curriculum and suggested that teachers were not the only legitimate group to have an interest in the curriculum:

Ruskin undoubtedly signalled a political change in that national government indicated that it wished to set policy objectives for education and to apply criteria to the public sector. (Riley, 1998: 70)

Callaghan thus seized the educational initiative from the teacher unions and moved the debate to notions of accountability and value for money from schools. In this way it challenged professional control and autonomy and the authority of teachers' unions.

5 Control moves toward central government

Despite this the government took no decisive action and even signalled an intent to maintain the status quo in a letter from the Secretary of State to the Chairman of a parliamentary committee of enquiry (the Taylor Report) in November, 1976:

There is no question of the government contemplating the introduction of a detailed central control of the school curriculum which would deny teachers reasonable flexibility or diminish the contribution which local education authorities and the managers or governors should make to the conduct of the schools. (Department of Education and Science, 1977)

Instead of confronting and changing the school system, it seems the Labour government had "prepared the soil for a breakthrough by the radical right" (Simon, 1991: 454), led by Margaret Thatcher who had been elected as Prime Minister of a Conservative government in 1979. The next eleven years fundamentally shifted the locus of power towards central government. As discussed above, the incoming Prime Minister had previously served as Secretary of State for education and, from unfolding events, seemed determined to adopt a neoliberal approach to policy. This populist approach to running the nation was based on the principle of a market driven capitalist economy under the guidance and rules of a strong state. In truth, Margaret Thatcher did not take much in the way of direct action on the state-maintained school system, other than to abolish the Schools Council which she described as "a lousy organisation" in the 1970s, a move which many educationists marked as "the end of an important experiment in co-operation and pluralism" (Simon, 1991: 405). Instead, she appointed Sir Keith Joseph as Secretary of State in 1981, "a post that he wanted and to which he devoted deep thought, preparing the ground for many changes introduced by his successors" (Bassey, 2005: 22). He was a keen supporter of free-market Conservatism and had worked with the new Prime Minister to set up the Centre for Policy Studies during the 1970s, a think tank to develop policies for a market-driven economy.

His most obvious intervention into mainstream schooling was to introduce the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) in 1982, essentially a curriculum aimed at promoting the capability of the bottom 50 per cent of the school student population to contribute to the nation's economic growth by training them in work-related skills. Importantly, this was the first time funding for education was managed by a separate government department, in this case the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The significance of this move was that it brought specific accountability to schools who were required to perform according to precise contractual criteria and demonstrated a determination by central government to direct the curriculum.

Following his failure to resolve a long running pay dispute with teachers Joseph was replaced by Kenneth Baker in 1986, who on the strength of subsequently settling the dispute (and getting extra funding for this from the Treasury), set about redesigning the school education system, culminating in the Education Reform Act (ERA) 1988. This was:

... the most massive intervention in the education system of the twentieth century and, in terms of curriculum and assessment, totally reversed earlier political notions that these should be left to the teachers, schools and local authorities. (Bassey, 2005: 24)

The act had several key features which radically changed the nature of schooling, as well as endorsing central government control over local authorities. ILEA was abolished, for example, with each of the 13 local councils in central London being required to establish their own LEA. This was part of a wider agenda, driven by Thatcher, to limit the ability of local government to modify policies. The main elements of the act, however, were to establish a national curriculum and assessment system and to free schools from local authority financial control. Control of the learning process in the nation's schools was now firmly in the hands of central government who set up two bodies to oversee curriculum and assessment: The National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the Schools Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC). In terms of finance, schools were either to remain with local councils, yet have almost total control over decision making as part of the Local Management of Schools (LMS), or be directly responsible to central government as a Grant Maintained School (GMS). Tomlinson (2005: 26–27) suggests at this stage “education was to return to its role as an allocator of occupations, a defender of traditional academic values, teaching respect for authority, discipline, morality and ‘Englishness’ and preparing a workforce for the new conditions of flexible, insecure labour markets”.

This was the defining moment of the struggle for control of the nation's schools and was evidence of neo-liberalism, the so-called ‘freedom’ under the guidance of a strong government:

The 1988 Education Act laid the foundations of an education market system of education or what we might call neoliberal education [...] driven by a factory-based model of performance management [...] that is predominantly defined publicly and politically by concerns about underperformance. (Ball, 2018: 220–221)

6 Reorganising local control and school funding

At the beginning of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister of successive Conservative governments between 1979 and 1990 contemporary legislation allowed only one per cent of total spend on education to be directed by central government. Subsequent policy initiatives sought to limit both the power of local government and to direct control of funding to the end users, in this case schools. Various large local authorities were either reduced in size through abolition or reorganisation to increase central government control over local

decision making, whilst seemingly providing a strong steer as to which decisions could be enacted – the paradox of the ‘rhetoric and reality’ which Peter Earley explores elsewhere in this book.

Reorganisation of local authorities included abolition of large local authority conurbations such as the Greater London Council and Humberside, plus the Metropolitan Counties of Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands and West Yorkshire was included in the 1985 Local Government Act. It was clear that this action was taken by a Conservative government which considered these local authorities as opposing and preventing their policies, based as they were on free market principles.

Reorganisation of funding for schools had begun in 1982 for specific, curriculum based, initiatives with the introduction of TVEI (see above) and was followed in 1984 with the introduction of Education Support Grants (ESG). By 1986 funding was identified for teacher development through TVEI related in-service training (TRIST) which fundamentally changed the nature of LEA in-service education, allowing for the appointment of co-ordinators of training and development to direct and fund school-based activities. By 1987 the government had removed the barriers to specific funding for in-service training and development with the introduction of the Local Education Authority Training Grant Scheme (LEATGS), although spending was very controlled through a system whereby National Priorities (i.e. defined by central government) were supported at a higher rate (70 per cent) than Local Priorities (50 per cent), with specified amounts being defined in the grant for certain activities. ESG and LEATGS were combined in 1990 to become Grant for Education Support & Training (GEST) which funded compulsory teacher appraisal from 1991. Thus, we saw a radical shift in the control of school funding over the course of the decade which culminated in almost total devolution to schools following ERA in 1988.

7 Redefining schools

The first step in the process of redefining schools was the shift of power towards greater parental engagement and choice of schools through amending the governance structures through the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts. Each school was required to have its own governing body, responsible for decision-making on key issues, which demonstrated a balance between LEAs, parents and the teacher workforce. Following ERA such decisions included most recurrent expenditure, including staffing. By 1994 this control of expenditure was embedded in all state-maintained schools, following completion of the abolition of ILEA and the inclusion of special schools in LMS. It soon became evident, however, that central government was still dissatisfied with the way in which LEAs maintained their schools and were held accountable. Two actions followed which are still being manifested today as core to the management of the nation's schools; the first, in chronological terms, was the classification of some schools to deliberately take them out of LEA control and the second was the introduction of a national system of school inspection – the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

At the same time Kenneth Baker was planning ERA he also announced intentions to open a chain of 'City Technology Colleges' which were to be science-focused inner-city schools owned and governed by autonomous governing bodies rather than LEAs. The first school was announced in 1987 and fifteen were built in total. Although this did not in its own right constitute a significant increase in the autonomy of the school system it did pave the way for further reforms which steadily reduced the influence of local education authorities over schools (Institute for Government, 2012: 4). Meanwhile, the measure of school accountability was extended beyond the National Curriculum and examination results to include mandatory inspection of schools on a much more comprehensive scale than the previous regime of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). The oversight of school performance was still the responsibility of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI), but determined by much greater rigour and regularity than the previous system which had resulted in episodic national inspection and was more reliant on LEA inspectors and advisers. The impact of this new national agency on schools is well documented elsewhere, but in basing their reports on outcomes and contributory factors, Ofsted established a model of operation and management to which all schools were expected to subscribe (Bolam, 1997).

The transition to a national policy agenda continued with a New Labour government, elected in 1997, which seemed determined to effect improvement in the performance of underperforming schools in England. Their first attempt to improve schools was through the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act, another major intervention into curriculum and assessment which led initially to directed activities such as the Literacy and Numeracy Hour in primary schools. Although this was later adapted and amended by practitioners, the underlying requirement of improvement in test scores is still evident.

In terms of school provision, however, the government seemed obsessed by a perception that business partners were vital to school improvement. In 1998 Education Action Zones (EAZ) were designated in deprived areas to cover clusters of around twenty schools for which government wanted leadership by a business partner who, it was claimed, had a better understanding of how to prepare students for the world of work. By 2000, however, it was clear that business partners were not engaging in the way envisaged, so the scheme was not renewed and a different attempt was made to enact this policy desire with the introduction of the Fresh Start scheme in which the weakest schools were closed and then re-opened under new management. This was not a success either, however, and in May 2000 Education Secretary David Blunkett said the Government had decided „a more radical approach“ was needed and „substantial resources“ would now be provided for the establishment of City Academies (politics.co.uk, n.d.). This new strategy was to build upon the previous Conservative government initiative of City Technology Colleges (CTC) with the opening of City Academies in deprived areas, to be sponsored by business partners, with CTCs to be encouraged to convert into academies. Three such academies were opened by 2002 and legislation was subsequently applied that allowed ‚City‘ to be removed from the title so that schools in non-city areas could join the programme.

At the same time secondary schools were encouraged to become specialist schools and by 2008 some 90 per cent were operating with specialism in technology, arts, sport, languages, business and enterprise, sciences, mathematics & computing and engineering and receiving additional funding from central government. The schools were to be supported by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) which had been created as a non-departmental government body to be responsible for the delivery of the programme and to support the growing numbers of academies which had grown to a total of 46 by 2006. Growth of academies was not as fast as central government would have preferred, however, and despite changes in regulations about who could act as a sponsor and a public determination to increase the numbers just 207 were established by 2010 when a new Coalition government was elected. Under the determined direction of the new Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, there was a much more aggressive drive towards academisation with less emphasis on business involvement and a greater focus on releasing schools from local authority control. Conversion was now to be open to all schools and by January, 2011 there were already 407 academies, with a further 254 applications in place.

The Academies Act 2010 further allowed for the Secretary of State to require the academisation of any school that was deemed to be underperforming, for which subsequently there were schools which were forced to become academies often against the will of governors, parents and teachers (Elton and Male, 2015). The number of academies or other types of schools 'liberated' from local authority control grew rapidly for the rest of the decade and by May, 2018 there was a total of over 8000 which were open or in the application process. Overall the ratio of state-funded schools no longer under local authority control (academies) was 32 per cent, although the greater proportion were secondary schools which meant that just about half the primary and secondary school population of England were in organisations that were directly accountable to central government (National Audit Commission, 2018).

8 Conclusions

A truism of successive government policies since 1979 is that "school-type diversity, following market ideology, would improve the system" (Courtney, 2015: 799). Whilst that ideology has driven the changes it is difficult to demonstrate school autonomy as an outcome. The one element within individual school control is recurrent expenditure which is directly related to student numbers, yet almost all other issues relating to objectives, organisation and management have been driven by central government. Recent research concluded that:

... any increase in operational autonomy for schools is more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework, which have allowed the state to continue to steer the system from a distance and to increasingly intervene and coerce when and where it deems necessary [...] we conclude that rather than 'moving control to the frontline', the

[government] agenda has intensified hierarchical governance and the state's powers of intervention, further constraining the professionalism of school staff and steering the system through a model we term 'coercive autonomy' (Greany & Higham, 2018: 6, 11).

This outcome is far from the claim made that government policy agenda "is premised on 'high autonomy' and 'high accountability' for schools, with a promise to 'trust' the profession, reduce bureaucracy and 'roll back' the state" (Department for Education, 2010; 216). Rather, what we have in England is a charade of school autonomy, a paradox of liberty and control and a huge difference between the rhetoric and the reality.

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