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The local authority role in a local education system

Any reasonable person expects a local authority to have a clear role in ensuring its children and young people have access to a good education service and not just because there are more than 200 statutory duties it must fulfil.

When she was secretary of state, Nicky Morgan, set out, in Education Excellence Everywhere, a clear view about the school education system, this included a review of the local authority role. I chaired the education advisory board (EAB) established by her to undertake that review. We were asked to consider three core aims,

- To set out the future role of the LA in relation to children, with a coherent set of expectations and responsibilities
- To ensure LAs have the right powers and levers to carry out those responsibilities effectively
- To consider the necessary transition and implementation arrangements for LAs to help them manage change over the coming months and years.

I presented a report to the new secretary of state, Justine Greening in January 2017. The EAB was brought to an end just before the announcement of the General Election. It will be for the new government to decide how it wishes to deal with the report. As we await that response, I thought it might be helpful to lay out my personal view on the role of a local authority in supporting the school system.

I believe a local authority's role and contribution to the education system should have a principal focus emphasising:

- Ambition and Challenge
- Equity and Cohesion
- Regulation and fidelity

Accountability for the system

Both national and local government have clear accountabilities for the system. A delicate balance operates between the two. While the balance has changed, the pendulum swinging between each over time, no one has seriously disputed the need for a role for each agency.

What is not in doubt is that the balance has changed and will continue to as 24,000 institutions become more autonomous and therefore less subject to ministerial or town hall "management".

There needs to be a recalibration of that balance our to meet new demands, particularly with the objective of ensuring support for the raising of standards of all pupils in all schools.

The starting point has to be what do national and local government want and expect schools to do and pupils to achieve?

- We want all schools to be good and on the way to excellent
- We want all teachers to be performing at the levels achieved by the best in the profession
- We want all pupils to be achieving at or beyond identified potential
- We want parents to have access to a good range of schools for their children, and to be content that even if their first preference is not possible the place they take up is a good one
- We want the breadth and range of pedagogy in our schools to be informed by, and reflective of, the best in the UK and wider world. This should be underpinned by the latest research on how children's brains develop and teaching and learning

The task of central and local government should be to remove any obstacles that lie in the path of these outcomes.

The people who will achieve what we all want are the head teachers, teachers, support staff and governors. No minister, official or education officer will teach the children or resolve the day-to-day challenges in schools.

What support do schools and local communities say they need and how can it be provided most effectively?

- A reliable supply of high quality teachers and school leaders;
- A clear community commitment – from politicians, parents and officials – that education is an absolute priority for our children and young people and it is valued highly locally;
- A predictable and reliable framework of resource allocation over a reasonable planning period, even taking into account the current economic situation;
- Access to information about how schools perform – across all dimensions, not just in examinations;
- Exhortation and encouragement for schools to work in collaborative partnerships. It remains the case, that however independent, autonomous or self-managing a school is, its prime duty is to its pupils on roll, but it has a broader responsibility to the wider community of pupils in the area it serves – particularly those all of us recognise have particular and specific needs or abilities;
- Knowledge that the system is responsive to changes in demand over time and specifically school places are in sufficient supply;
- Information about and access to providers of high quality services such as ICT, Finance and HR; and
- Clear leadership from local politicians on the critical importance of education and the high expectation and ambition they have for all

schools and all students. This is a clear and immutable moral responsibility of elected politicians.

How should central and local government share the task of supporting all schools to deliver the best outcomes for all pupils?

Central government lays out a national expectation for the education service. It should provide,

- the economic case for investment,
- a clear resource base for all schools,
- promotion of the criticality of a successful school system for the future of our economy,
- the framework of standards it expects young people to achieve and the assessment framework of progress toward its levels,
- a reliable supply of skilled teaching and allied staff through a national plan,
- the anchor for the centrality of education for all individuals in the culture of our civil and social society, and
- beat the moral drum for high ambition and the celebration of the success of our school system.

By maintaining a Department of State for Education, an institution itself that should be of outstanding capacity and performance, it creates the framework of governance, equity, planning and aspiration needed to support the school system to function effectively.

Local government

Guided by this script, the job of local government is to ensure national policy can be implemented effectively by ensuring it is delivered through a lens of compound local factors and needs supported by local pride and determination for all pupils to do well in all schools.

The local authority does not run or manage any school, consequently no school (church, academy, free school, community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled, special or nursery) should see the local authority as anything other than the voice of local residents offering support, encouragement and celebration to the community of schools all performing as efficaciously as their design implies.

School autonomy and independence

Some ask why in an age of free, self-managing, and independent state schools do we need anything other than great school leadership?

Why, when schools voluntarily collaborate, or form part of a structural chain – (with its own mini “LEA”) – do we need more than mergers, take-overs and ‘buy-outs’ to sort out planning school places, support and challenge schools and purchase support services (payroll, IT, estates, recruitment, HR, finances)?

Some state with great belief that surely, the outstanding schools, allowed to expand and grow, will do away with the existence of underperforming schools and poor teachers. They will deal with the under performing head or ineffective governing body.

Admissions, school places and exclusions will depart from the in tray of politicians, as all parents will choose and get a place at their first preference school and children with a statement of SEN will have access to special or mainstream school as they choose.

Consequently, they argue, independence requires no middle tier, and perhaps even less need for too many regulations by central government or frameworks of inspection by Ofsted.

There can be little doubt that future improvement in the standards our pupils achieve and the improved effectiveness of schools as public institutions will be driven by school leaders and their staff working in a range of collaborative structures.. But that is not in itself enough for a successful school system.

Curtailling independence?

The enthusiasm with which some academy chains talk about centralised systems and consistency of provision across the chain would bring tears to the eyes of some erstwhile “LEA is all” Director of Education. We are likely to see many more grunts and groans from heads of academies about their ‘Chain LEA’.

Some, but by no means all, of the strongest advocates of “*freeing*” schools from LAs see the need for a degree of central organisation and structure outside of a school or chain.

The frustrating point is that as between head teachers, governors, academy chain managers, LA staff, parents and ‘the person in the street’ there is a significant degree of consensus as to the need for the holding of the system in a balance of local/regional accountability and responsibility.

When a student, parent, rate payer, journalist, DfE official, the Ombudsman or even a court of law raise a question about what is happening in a school, why is there a shortage of places, why a child did not get their first preference, or why standards are not improving, they all expect the locally elected body, the Council or elected Mayor, to be in a position to explain what is happening, show how issues are being resolved and demonstrate that the public interest is being monitored and protected where necessary.

The former HMCI was very clear about the important role “good” LAs have played in ensuring the education system continues on a path of improvement that is why all school inspections include a view on the support provided by the LA/Academy chain in the final report.

The LA of the tomorrow (but many of today)

Nobody wants any child to attend a less than good school. The fact is that too many do. The ability to identify whether a school is on the way to failing its students is far more complex than often made out. Few agencies or bodies are in a position to be close enough to intuit impending failure.

One is in a stronger position than the others – the local authority. Why?

I argue that the focus of a local authority can be seen through a lens of,

Ambition and Challenge

To advocate for high standards of pupil attainment celebrate and promote success of the system and to be timely in identifying and ensuring an effective response at the first sign of an institution beginning to struggle.

Equity and Cohesion

To ensure sufficient places and arrangements are available, particularly for vulnerable, able and disabled children; that they are offered on a transparent and fair basis; and for ensuring a range of school types is available for parents to express a preference for.

Regulation and fidelity

To ensure children are attending school or educated otherwise; for child protection issues to be consistently and effectively dealt with; and resources are spent on the purposes they were provided for

This is a moral argument about equity and justice because, through the ballot box,

- it carries the ambition of residents for a local education service,
- it is linked closely to every school irrespective of constitutional status, by virtue of its role as the Children Services Authority,
- it is the body which local people expect to “do something” to ensure public money is used wisely and local children are provided with quality education,
- it has access to funding for capital development via regeneration,
- it has a view beyond the interest of one school or a group of schools,
- its strategic planning reach takes account of what is happening beyond its boundary,
- it has a statutory duty toward each and every child in its area irrespective of the school they attend – “your schools, but our children!”

The General Election 2017

By the time we meet we will know what the new government’s education policy will be for the coming period. Inevitably it must make clear what the role of the local authority is to be. The very dire position of school funding; the serious problems we face in ensuring a continuing supply of high quality teachers (especially in the STEM and language subjects) and head teachers; the increasing irrelevance of the national curriculum indicate the priority areas the new government should focus on. The focus should be on ensuring that what happens in the classroom is of the highest possible standard-many other things to do with structures, national assessment tweaks and teaching style fads are just noise alongside the critical path to a world class school education system. In my view achieving that is made more difficult if local authorities are not the key strategic partner of national government.

Alan Wood 16 July 2017