

HOW STATE SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND IMPROVED RAPIDLY AFTER 2010

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More than a decade ago I was the head of Harrow, a good school but an unusual one being 100% boarding and 100% boys – and private. So when I retired I decided to do a few things which might inform me about state schools, the schools which teach the vast majority of children.

What happened in Oxford

I moved to Oxford in 2011 and that August I looked at the results of state schools in the city. With one exception (the Cherwell School) results were poor, both at primary and secondary level. Even the Cherwell seemed to be no match for its equivalent in Cambridge. So I emailed the county council, who was in charge of all the state schools, and fixed a coffee with the councillor in charge of school improvement. We met in the county council canteen.

I started by clumsily muttering that in Oxford, a city synonymous across the whole world with high standards of education, most state schools got poor pupil outcomes. The councillor looked at me and replied tearfully ‘Barnaby, it so wonderful to hear someone speak the truth’.

In the months which followed I had several meetings with Melinda. She set up a school-improvement group and we began to make plans. But in truth it seemed rather hopeless. The council employed some good people, but they lacked the levers to improve their schools and they certainly lacked any sense of urgency. The poor standard of state schools had been known about for decades but the local authority had struggled to take effective action.

Then Michael Gove appeared on the scene and Oxford schools were encouraged to become Academies – schools which were independent of the local authority. The process began with the Cherwell, the strongest secondary school, led by the former head, Paul James. They brought other secondary schools and many primary schools into their academy trust.

They had freedoms over teacher pay and the curriculum. But more importantly, because of the scale of the trust they were able to employ subject specialists who would examine their schools and make changes. They had a

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good sense of how schools could improve. They started their own teacher training. Gradually the River Learning Trust achieved the improvements that were needed – success where the local authority had failed. As the trust schools began to shoot up the league tables, other schools wanted to join. They opened a brilliant new secondary school, The Swan.

Academisation was a policy which had started under the Tories in the 1980s and was pushed hard by Labour in the 2000s with Andrew Adonis at the helm. Adonis identified some of the worst performing state schools, handed them over to local governors and achieved, in most cases, rapid improvement. So it was no surprise that when the 2010 election saw Michael Gove in the Department for Education, he put rocket-boosters under the academisation programme. Today 80% of secondary school and approaching half of primary schools are Academies – control taken away from local authorities and given to local governors and heads who knew what they were doing.

It was never the case that all schools run by local authorities were weak. In Harrow itself there was at least one really excellent ‘maintained school’ run by a great head teacher who was given plenty of autonomy by the local authority. But many maintained schools lacked the impetus to improve that the academy trusts generated. We saw that in London, where the Harris and ARK academies achieved great improvements in schools with many disadvantaged pupils. I saw it in Birmingham when I became a trustee of the King Edward’s Foundation and we started to take on some weak comprehensive schools and improve them, mainly by employing turnaround specialists and by using our strongest schools to help those who struggled. We did what the local authority could have done but didn’t.

Transformation in East London

In 2009 I went to New York to visit their charter schools – schools set up in the most disadvantaged parts of the city by local teachers who demanded high standards of their pupils and achieved better results than local authority schools in middle-class areas. This was the inspiration for the Gove free schools.

In 2011 I was asked to help Brighton College set up a free school in the London borough of Newham. We had been told by head teachers in the borough that too many pupils with good GCSE grades failed to follow this up with good A-levels, so we opened a sixth-form only school, the London Academy of Excellence, and I was the chairman of governors for the first eight years. We opened in 2012 in a local authority office block and at first it was tough – after all, we had no track record and only modest funding from the government. Many of our pupils were ethnically Bangladeshi, from low-income homes and with parents who knew less about the university application system than the average 11-year-old in a private school. But we had one advantage – six independent schools lent us some of their best teachers to monitor the standard of teaching and help our first cohort of very young staff.

Within three years we reached the point where the average A-level grades of our pupils were AAA and 35 pupils a year won places at Oxford or Cambridge – more than almost any independent schools. Inspired by our success other free schools started to open in Newham and the borough went from being one of the weakest in London to one of the best.

The system worked well: our school had a great deal of autonomy, but we were regularly inspected and were fully accountable to the Department for Education. Our governors and staff were driven by an ambition for our pupils which was not to be found in the local authority.

How the best schools do it

In 2015 I came across a league table of those primary and secondary schools in England where pupils on free school meals made most progress over time (as measured by primary SATs and GCSEs). This shows the value of detailed DfE data. Raw exam results generally just reflect the social class of the pupils, but this table identified schools whose specifically disadvantaged pupils made excellent progress over time. Low-income pupils, great progress. So, I went to visit each of these schools to find out what they actually did to achieve such results and wrote a book about them, *Much Promise*.

The results were thrilling because these schools generally did things that were entirely familiar to me, albeit in the context of independent schools – firm discipline, high expectations of all, a knowledge-rich curriculum, direct instruction, regular testing. None of this was magic, a lot seems obvious, but what they were doing was hard work, demanding on the teachers and very skilful.

Most of these schools were Academies, many were members of good trusts, all had great head teachers who knew what they were doing and drove their schools forward with passion. All had autonomy and used it.

The curriculum and assessment transformed

For much of this time I was on the board of Ofqual, who manage exams in England. Under the Michael Gove and Nick Gibb reforms we made all GCSE syllabuses more demanding so that our children might know as much as children in other, competitor countries. We brought grade inflation to a halt. We scrapped coursework in some subjects because it was boring, often meaningless and there was a great deal of cheating. We made the assessment system rigorous and fair.

In primary schools, the most important part of our education system, the phonics method of teaching raised the reading level of millions of children and mastery maths techniques hugely improved numeracy.

As we know from the international test results (PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS), state schools in England have improved greatly compared to other countries since 2010.

And we know why. Academisation was a cross-party initiative which worked. Free schools lifted standards in the poorest parts of the country. Reforms to the curriculum and teaching methods drove up the standard of education in England.

The Labour government might like to acknowledge this, stop plans which are designed to turn the clock back and focus on the things which clearly do need attention: pupil attendance, the underperformance of the bottom 30% of pupils, special needs support, vocational courses for post-16s, teacher recruitment, school buildings....and funding. If they did that, our upward trajectory could continue.