

AEU Leaders' Study Tour

Sweden and England

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Sweden

Background

Free schools have been operating in Sweden since 1991 when the Social Democrats introduced them. In 1992 the Conservatives went further, introducing greater elements of school choice and allowing the establishment of free schools in any location. About 20% of students are in free schools.

Initial remarks

On the surface, the Swedish system has some positive things about it, but there is always a “but”...

- All schools are technically public - but the free schools policy has segregated children according to family income in much the same way as the proliferation of private schools has done in Australia.
- The schools appear to be truly secular – but this is now under threat through the creation of free schools operated by faith groups.
- There are no school fees – but a voucher system means high SES schools have more to spend in real terms.
- Enrolment appears to be non-selective - but there is a disturbing culture of **queuing** from birth, and queuing will always be done better by highly educated and well-resourced families making “active choices”. The broader issue here is that this cultural norm suits the government which can essentially say to parents “If you are not happy with a school, queue for another”, thereby relieving it from guaranteeing an equitable distribution of resources to all schools. As we know, “choice” lets governments off the hook.

For-profit schooling

Companies run the schools for profit, apparently skimming around 15% of a school's revenue for their own profit and expansion rather than reinvesting in the school with increased staff or staff salaries and/or conditions. Most of the companies are private equity firms, hence lacking even the shareholder oversight that exists in a stockmarket-listed company.

Results plummeting

Sweden has been hit by what is being called the “PISA shock”, with student results falling away sharply in recent years. This has become the number one issue in the upcoming Swedish national election. Equity problems have emerged, with the results for low SES students declining markedly in recent tests. Within the OECD, Sweden has gone from having above average equity to below average equity.

After more than two decades of school choice:

- student results on average have declined markedly
- student results are no better in the free schools
- segregation according to ethnicity has increased
- segregation has increased mostly in the big cities and suburban areas.

Industrial relations implications

There is no teacher salary regulation – salaries are market driven. Free schools can pay teachers whatever they like, and salaries vary from 18,000 Krona (\$A3,000) per month to 35,000 Krona (just under \$A6,000) per month depending on what age group or subject one teaches (preschool teachers are generally better paid) and one’s negotiating savvy. On average, teachers earn less in free schools. The Swedish union, Laraforbundet, appears to spend much of its time assisting individual members to negotiate their way through variable conditions of employment. With faith based schools starting up, salaries are being driven down as employees are less motivated by salaries and more out of a religious “calling”.

There are no limits on class sizes and no maximum face-to-face teaching hours.

Principal discretion determines who is paid more as a “premier teacher”. This is determined on an annual basis and there is no appeal mechanism.

Some of the companies who operate free schools have not yet negotiated collective agreements with staff.

If a teacher resigns they can be liable for the costs of replacing them!

The union’s positioning

For the upcoming national election, the union is content to talk up the interests of teachers, arguing that the money made in company profits would be better spent on improving teacher salaries. This appears to be a narrow focus. The union appears to be deliberately dodging a broad campaign about what the free schools policy is doing to both equity and quality in Sweden. Union officials made comments such as “Sweden’s slide in results may have happened anyway.” There is a rival Swedish union which took a stronger philosophical stand in the early 1990s but Laraforbundet’s pragmatic position held sway.

With the “PISA shock” and the collapse at the beginning of 2014 of one of the companies, JB Education (which led to thousands of students and hundreds of teachers being displaced) the free schools policy appears vulnerable. The Greens have apologised to all Swedes for “leading them astray” in supporting the policy. The Social Democrats are determining their position prior to the election. It appears that at the very least opposition should be mobilised around preventing the companies from continuing to make a profit. At this stage it appears Laraforbundet will not engage profoundly with this issue, pointing out that they have 30,000 members in free schools.

There is a philosophical difference here. There is no point denying realities, hence the AEU organises within WA’s Independent Public Schools, signs up Teach for Australia associates and campaigns for a new funding model which sees more money for private schools (at least in the transition phase) **whilst retaining strong policy positions that set out philosophical objections to IPS, TFA and private school funding.** We can understand pragmatism, but it is difficult to accept the avoidance of a policy narrative, for which there is momentum, that eases the country back to a time when Sweden did schooling much better. A powerful union-led campaign would surely have the capacity to bring about a rethink.

For more on the Swedish free school phenomenon, I’d recommend Susanne Wiborg’s paper *Swedish Free Schools: Do they work?* (Copy on request.)

England

Queen Elizabeth II, 2014: *“I congratulate the Government on raising education standards through academies and free schools.”*

Do you reckon she wrote that?

Background for Academies

Blair Labour introduced academies in 2002. When Gordon Brown’s Labour Government lost to the Tories under David Cameron there were 203 secondary academies. Labour had envisaged no more than 400. As is usually the case, however, when reactionary Conservatives are given an inch they take a mile. There are now more than 4,000 academies (primary and secondary) out of approximately 24,000 government schools. They want the lot.

Forced academies

Academy status under Labour was “opt in”. The Tories are forcing academy status upon schools, usually following an unfavourable (Office for Standards in Education) OFSTED report. The OFSTED process has been outsourced to private companies and the results of inspections have become unpredictable. OFSTED keeps moving

its inspection goal posts and there is evidence that it is deliberately being used to “fail” schools. Inspections are often on-the-spot and without notice. “Failing” status gives the Government the opportunity it needs to hand a school over to an academy chain. Another opportunity is provided when schools aren’t 100% full and with a waiting list: i.e. they have failed to be “schools of choice”. Stories of illusory “consultation” are numerous. Schools are offered incentives to acquiesce in the takeover of a nearby school. Schools which are slated for academy takeover don’t usually meet with the academy chain: the government is clearing the way for the companies, actively facilitating the private takeover of public property. Minister Michael Gove simply sacks school governors. Gove is being ably assisted in his quest by the Department of Education (DofE). One tactic of the DofE is to leak information about takeovers to the media, presenting it as a done deal, and thereby undermining confidence and enrolment in the school. This of course makes survival even harder.

Some struggling private schools have been rescued by Gove conferring upon them academy status.

Local authorities are no longer permitted to open comprehensive schools unless nobody tenders (and that’s never happened). Thus, under an “academy or free school presumption”, all new schools are academies or free schools.

Local MPs are often barred from getting into academies, thereby reducing scrutiny and accountability. Our tour party was not granted entry to Downhills Primary, now a Harris Federation Academy owned by carpet-selling millionaire Lord Harris, where children are now tested every six weeks. (The story of the brave parents at Downhills who fought to resist academy status can be easily located online.)

OFSTED can inspect academies but not an academy chain. Yet they can inspect a local authority which runs comprehensive schools. It’s not a level playing field.

Horror stories:

- Special needs support has been withdrawn in some academies.
- Teacher requests for leave denied for things such as reconstructive surgery after breast cancer.
- Some academy chains have skimmed 3.5% of the funding for free school lunches so that their subsidiary company can get a greater profit margin.
- Black children were physically abused at one academy and footage of this was obtained. This academy was given three weeks’ notice rather than the standard one week for the resultant OFSTED inspection, so they could get their house in order.
- Some academies are selling off parts of their land to supermarkets like Tesco.

The task has become much harder for teachers’ unions who now have to negotiate hundreds of enterprise agreements (often not legally enforceable) with hundreds of

employers. i.e. each of 450 academy chains along, not to mention local authorities where applicable. Academies determine their own staff pay and conditions (as well as curriculum and student admissions). Generally agreement has been reached to pay teachers at the top and bottom of the scale, but everything in between is based on so-called performance. Devolution is a brazen attempt to bust unions and completely undermine teacher collectivism and collegiality.

Pitch battles

Having visited three schools where staff and parents are battling to avoid the imposition of academy status, one notes the variability in the capacity of school communities to wage a campaign and achieve success. It depends on the resources and skill levels of the parents (e.g. ICT skills, social media skills, lobbying experience, contacts), the composition and support of the local authority (i.e. whether or not it is a Labour-led council) and a range of other factors.

Campaigns at the local level should be supported and wins celebrated.

It is an extraordinary sight to see this Government actively turning its head teachers, teachers, staff and parents into local guerrilla warriors in passionate defence of their school. What loyalty will the educators give their employer once the unseemly battle is over?

However, it struck me that there needs to be **greater coordination of local campaigning**. Despite there being an Anti-Academies Alliance which has had union buy-in, I didn't see strong signs of a national narrative with clear branding and message, nor a sophisticated training package for delegates and community members. There appear to be a thousand flowers blooming (or wilting, or dying) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) appears to be being pulled in dozens of different directions. It feels reactive.

It is of concern that schools have, understandably, started to defend their status quo by pointing to improving SATs (standardised tests) results and improving OFSTED inspection reports. The perhaps unintended corollary of this is that it is acceptable to impose academy status on schools that cannot boast such data. These campaigners have, to some extent, become captive to the measurement obsession so prevalent in the Anglophile nations.

Free Schools

Detaching schools from school systems has been shown not to improve student outcomes. The evidence is clear. Gove and Cameron choose to ignore it.

Gove got the idea for free schools from Sweden. Stories abound throughout the media of their spectacular failures in England: of head teachers who have no teaching experience giving up and going home, of crazy things being taught to students, and of financial collapse. Marketization, which is what this is, opens

schooling up to all the variability and inequity of the market. This leads to an absence of guarantees for students and, eventually, erosion in public confidence.

Thirteen per cent of free school classes are not taught by qualified teachers. (There are fewer unqualified teachers in academies but since July 2012 they have been allowed to employ unqualified teachers also.) The workforce in free schools is largely un-unionised so the employer has been able to drive down salaries and conditions. Heads require no qualifications and the curriculum has been deregulated.

It is heartening that journalists appear to have lined up against free schools and look for horror stories, of which there are plenty. Most education academics are dead against free schools and 83% of the public say this policy is the wrong direction.

Gove and Cameron don't care.

The future

The Tories are likely to go to the 2015 national election with a policy to pave the way for academy chains and free schools to make profit from education (like in Sweden). Currently it is not technically possible for them to make profit, but many academy sponsors bring in their subsidiary businesses (cleaning, IT, catering, etc.) to make profits. The long-term goal is complete privatisation: cost-shifting education over to the free market.

It is pleasing and affirming to see the NUT working hard to establish a genuine organising model across the country. This will undoubtedly assist in allowing the union to take advantage of any opportunities that the new landscape presents, particularly around bargaining. The Cameron Government has gambled that teachers will not organise and will be quickly deflated. We hope and trust they have miscalculated.

One academy chain has folded already so there is cause for optimism.

There is one fact, however, that is really worrying. Teachers are 96% unionised in England, but that is across six unions. The NUT covers 47% of teachers, another union around 40% and the rest are members of other smaller unions often representing school leaders. The NUT is campaigning for convergence or "professional unity". There are real challenges here and progress is modest. The reality is that this is "end game": the Tories are changing the education system for the worse at an alarming speed and with total ruthlessness. Old rivalries will have to be put aside in the interests of government schools across the country, the communities they serve and the students they educate.