

## School choice for those who have no choice

**Harry Brighouse** and **Adam Swift** have some advice for the Conservatives if they really want a Swedish-style voucher system to help at least some of the most deprived children

No enormous difference is to be found between the education policy approaches and central goals of the Labour and Conservative leaderships. Both seek to improve outcomes for the lowest third of achievers, and both conceive of those outcomes primarily in terms of basic skills which, they assume, will be valuable in the marketplace. Both are aware that these low-achieving children come from backgrounds that present considerable barriers to their learning. Both take a technocratic, incrementalist, approach, and assume that tweaking the incentive structure will improve the schools attended by such children.

Both are committed to a model whereby schools make day-to-day decisions within a national framework of quite specific national standards, and schools face a moderately competitive market as a result of

parental choice. While neither claims to have a magic bullet to deal with the problems, both, we suspect, oversell their policies, fostering unreasonably high expectations.

The Conservatives' headline innovation is the voucher system. Modelled on one adopted in Sweden, private providers will be allowed to enter a controlled market and access public funds in the form of a voucher, thus competing with schools currently run by local authorities. Both Tory advocates and Labour opponents overemphasise the extent to which this would be a departure from current practice. We see it rather as continuous with the choice reforms that began in the early 1980s, and as a logical extension of specialist schools and academies, and gradual diminution in the influence of local authorities, developed by Labour. Nonetheless, it would be a significant further deregulation on the supply side.

Two standard rationales are offered for school choice policies. Some appeal to claims about parents' rights over their children's education. We have little sympathy with this rationale, and doubt the sincer-

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ity of those who advance it within a framework that is constrained by prescriptive national standards. We believe that parents have very limited rights to control the content of their children’s education, or to seek to advantage them relative to others, and the status quo already provides them with greater scope to do both than they are entitled to.

A second and far more plausible rationale is that choice can play a powerful role in spurring school improvement. A naïve version of this idea claims that parents generally have more information than school administrators about what their children need, and are more motivated to satisfy those needs, so markets will result in better outcomes all round. In fact, markets in schooling are necessarily highly imperfect, and information about what is going on in schools is hard to access.

But the more plausible version of the idea is that parents can generally identify, and are highly motivated to exit, very bad educational situations; whereas administrators, even when they can identify bad situations, are neither highly motivated nor very knowledgeable about how to improve them. Something like this theory is what animated the designers of the Swedish voucher programme, and similar programmes in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington DC in the USA.

Nobody should expect school reforms to have huge effects on student achievement. Children spend most of their waking hours outside school, and the educational experiences and opportunities they enjoy in their families and communities vary greatly, in ways that

track their social-class background reasonably closely. School policy is just one policy lever. But there is some reason to believe that the right kinds of reforms could raise achievement, especially that of working-class and poor children, who are much more likely than middle-class children to be attending low-performing schools.

Whether vouchers can improve outcomes for poor and working-class children depends on the design of the system. We take certain aspects of the Conservative proposals to be fixed. So, we assume that entry to the market will, in the foreseeable future, be restricted to non-profit providers, and that the scheme will operate at the margins of the system. (The Swedish scheme, after 17 years, still enrolls only 10 per cent of children, and we suspect that barriers to entry will be higher in the UK than they were in Sweden.)

Opponents of the proposal will argue that the new schools will select the easiest-to-teach children. In the US some charter schools engage in ‘cream skimming’. In California, in particular, charter schools have been free to cater only to the upper middle classes, thus effectively providing exclusive private schooling funded by the taxpayer. Such an arrangement does nothing to improve the quality of schooling, and a good deal to increase the level of inequality.

But by far the bigger problem with both charter schools and voucher schemes is what, purged of its moralised connotations, might be called ‘dregs sifting’. Even a charter school that only educates disadvantaged children does not educate all such children because the most disadvantaged, those whose parents lack the social connectedness and wherewithal to apply to such schools, do not attend.

This is almost certainly part (but only part) of what explains the success of the largest chain of charter schools in the USA – those belonging to the Knowledge Is Power Program – and the remarkable gains in schools in Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, both of which have influenced President Obama’s approach to school policy. If ‘dregs sifting’ happens, there’s some reason to expect the state schools to suffer, and the new schools to coast. They will show apparent improvement

but some of this will be artifactual, a function of the kind of children they are, and are not, taking in.

There are ways to guard against this. We think it is politically unrealistic to demand that voucher schools be more socio-economically mixed than regular state schools; it may also be undesirable if these schools are located where educational needs are greatest. But the scheme should ensure that voucher schools are given substantial incentives to find and take a good number of hardest-to-teach children.

If the scheme operates at the margins of the system, the Conservatives also have to face the fact that it will not cater for the majority of disadvantaged children. Still, this does not mean that the policy is bad or doomed. Any policy that resulted in, say, 20 per cent of disadvantaged children attending better schools without damaging the schools that others attend, would constitute an improvement over the status quo. But, and this seems to us the core justification of the policy, it may be possible for schools in a voucher scheme to exert competitive pressure that improves other schools.

A well-known study of the Milwaukee voucher system is instructive here. Because the voucher schools are no longer required to supply data about their own performance we do not know a great deal about the quality of the education they provide, But, in an econometric study comparing Milwaukee schools with other districts in the same state over time, Caroline Minter Hoxby makes a strong case that the voucher system has

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improved the performance of the regular state schools.

However, she does not distinguish two different mechanisms by which this might have occurred. One possibility is that each of the schools (state and voucher) competed within a quasi-market, and this drove up performance. If this is what happened then the natural policy lesson is that we should introduce more competition and let the chips fall where they may. The other possibility is that the state-school system as a whole was pressured by the voucher system, and the threat of its expansion, to start getting its act together.

Our reading of the politics of education in Milwaukee supports the second mechanism, in which case the lessons are rather different. In particular, it is important that voucher schools are resourced for success, and that the lessons (positive and negative) are learned and applied across the system. The regular state schools will need help to develop the capacity to learn the relevant lessons and make the necessary changes. Smoothing the process by which state schools can learn from the new schools depends on what will inevitably be a very long and difficult process of establishing trust. (Think about how much suspicion there is of academies, even within feeder schools, despite the fact that they are an integral part of the state system.)

Working on our reading of the Milwaukee case, here are some suggestions for designing the scheme so as to give it the best chance of producing the desired effects.


- As with the City Challenge urban regeneration scheme and Sure Start, it makes sense to pilot the scheme in specific areas where it can be supported and monitored effectively.
- The money values attaching to the vouchers must be progressive enough to ensure schools really are willing to take, and able to teach, the most disadvantaged and hardest-to-teach children.
- Admissions to oversubscribed schools must be determined by lottery.
- Much is known about what kinds of spending improve the quality of instruction. Heads and governing bodies (if the schools have governing bodies) need a good deal of freedom to spend as they judge

best, but they need proper training and support to help them judge well.

- We recommend the establishment of a ‘New Schools Support Unit’, which offers high quality continuing training to senior and, perhaps more importantly, middle managers, on what constitutes best practice (especially around instruction and professional development).
- We recommend the establishment of a ‘New Schools Research Unit’ ideally not funded directly by the government (instead by research councils or charitable foundations), whose mandate is to stay close to the schools, establishing what works well and, crucially, what doesn’t work well. These units need to increase understanding on the ground of what changes might yield improvements.

Between us we have written a good deal that is hostile to school choice and sceptical about the likely success of voucher systems in the UK. Does our willingness to offer constructive advice on the design of a scheme that extends school choice represent some sort of volte face? We think not. We remain doubtful that this, or any school reform, will yield large improvements for the most disadvantaged children in the absence of more systematic measures designed to combat poverty. We continue to stress the limitations of an approach that seeks to improve educational standards at the bottom with little apparent concern for equality of opportunity per se, or recognition of the positional aspect of education.

Still, if the Conservatives do find the money to go ahead with their reforms, we want them to achieve their stated goals. We think that the leadership is sincerely committed to improving the achievement of disadvantaged children (consider their willingness to stand up to Tory grassroots opinion on grammar schools). But we’re not yet sure. Enough is known about how to design school-choice policies so that they are more likely to contribute to that goal for us to regard their willingness to do it properly as the real test of that sincerity.



**‘Nor do we know whether SEAL’s unrelenting attention to feelings is creating a nation of narcissists.’**

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