

DEMISE OF THE LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES: COULD THEY BE REPLACED BY NON-POLITICAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATIONS INDEPENDENT OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES?

Michael Bassey

Emeritus Professor of Education, Nottingham Trent University

ABSTRACT Recently, a letter in *The Guardian* (31 March 2010) from 14 professors of education put the case for depoliticising education. Among the proposals was a call for *rejuvenated* local authorities. This article develops this idea and argues for local education administrations which would act as politically independent bodies linking schools to national government.

LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES 1902-2009

Local government is responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient schools for the young people of their area, organising the flow of state funding to schools, ensuring that there is proper support for pupils with special needs, allocating the number of places available to each school, and employing most of the teachers. From 1902 until 1 April 2009 the responsible sub-set of local government was known as the Local Education Authority (LEA). The LEAs have always been under the ultimate jurisdiction of national government but since the Education Reform Act of 1988 (of a Conservative government) national control has tightened and increasingly so since 1997 when Labour came to national power. LEAs were a committee of the local authority council, consisting of locally elected councillors with a few lay members. LEAs appointed a chief education officer (some being called directors of education) and needed a substantial staff, often with area education offices and senior officers in charge and local advisers or inspectors to support the work of their schools. Some of the chief education officers were outstanding, with names like Alec Clegg of West Riding, Michael Harrison of Sheffield, Peter Newsam of Inner London, and Tim Brighouse of Birmingham being legends in their time. But others were mediocre, stuck in bureaucratic practices and struggling with the internecine feuding between their Committee and the other committees of the Council. By and large local government's handling of education won few plaudits.

One problem was that elected members were elected as councillors-in-general and then some found themselves on the education committee without initial insight into school issues. Another was that the education budget was much larger than any other section of the Council's financial business and the education committee had to ensure that schools got their appropriate share. Probably a more serious

problem was when the political colour of the local authority was different to that of the national government and so there was a tendency to undermine national initiatives on the part of the local authority and a suspicion that national government was partial on funding special projects.

While the Act of 1988 transferred much of the financial control of schools from local authorities to governing bodies, and the 1992 Act in effect reduced the inspection powers of the local authorities by creating the national inspection service Ofsted, other Acts slowly eroded the powers of the local authorities in other directions, while subjecting schools to a constant barrage of new regulations. The rain fell on the competent and the incompetent alike, with both Conservative and Labour administrations alleging that they were culling local bureaucracy - but were seen to be installing a more far-reaching national bureaucracy instead.

CHILDREN ACT 2004: EDUCATION MERGED WITH CHILDREN'S WELFARE SERVICES

In 2004 a momentous change was made with the passing of the Children Act. Each local education authority was to be merged with the authority responsible for children's services and with a 'director of children's services' to be in charge. From 2009 they were to be universally known as 'local authorities' and 'education' was deleted. Some saw this as symbolic, especially as the former Department of Education and Skills in 2007 had been renamed the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Ed Balls became the secretary of state for this much enlarged department. In most local authorities two people were competing for one job - the former director of children's services and the former director of education. Subsequently there were many reports of the new department boss either not effectively understanding the children's services' side of the work or the schools' side. In schools it certainly escalated the concern that neither national government nor local government understood many of the problems that teachers were facing.

DEPOLITICISATION OF EDUCATION

Many would like to see politics taken out of education. A letter from 14 professors of education in *The Guardian* on 31 March 2010 argued that:

- Parliament should (as now) fund national education and control its overall systems and structures.

- Schools and colleges should shape classroom practice. What is taught (curriculum), how it is taught (pedagogy), whether it is learned successfully (assessment), and how effectively each school tackles its tasks (evaluation) should properly be the local province of teachers, working collegially and supported by school governors, neighbouring schools, parents, a constructive inspectorate and, nationally, educational researchers.

But the professors recognised that in between these two levels of responsibility must be a third, which would ensure accountability, a flow of relevant information between various significant parties, and avoid any schools falling into autarky. They suggest a research-based National Education Council working with ‘rejuvenated’ local authorities. Such local authorities:

are democratically accountable to their citizens, big enough to employ specialists, close enough to schools to understand local issues and to ensure that sufficient school places are available. They are able to support and challenge a process of accountability in which school self-evaluation is scrutinised by school governing bodies as the starting point for a reporting process that goes via local authorities to an independent National Education Council.

This Council:

would guide schools in their development of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and self-evaluation; monitor children’s attainments by sampling; monitor local authorities’ support for schools; sponsor research into good practice; and generally aim to tell the general public and Parliament of the successes, failures and future directions of the education system - without fear or favour of party politics.

Recognising the problems discussed earlier in this article of local authority government of schools, the letter said, without explanation, that they must be ‘rejuvenated’.

LOCAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATIONS: POLITICALLY INDEPENDENT BODIES LINKING SCHOOLS TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

As a development of this notion these are present thoughts on ‘rejuvenation of local authorities’.

1. Education must be separated from child services. In effect this means that the Education Act of 2004, which merged child well-being and welfare services with educational services, must be repealed. Both are vital services, but they make unsatisfactory bed-fellows. The ‘rejuvenation’ entails new bodies which have local education as their focus, covering nursery, primary and secondary schools, student grants to further and higher education, and adult education.

2. It may be appropriate to call them ‘local education *administrations*’ rather than ‘authorities’ since power over curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation is to be vested in schools and colleges. Probably it will be best for their area of responsibility to be identical with that of the local authority - ie county, borough, etc. boundaries.

3. The elected members of these administrations should *not* be local authority councillors. Instead they should be elected by the governors of the schools in their areas, perhaps say four from primary/nursery education and four from secondary education institutions. Specifically they should *not* be representatives of political parties, or of any pressure group, but should maintain an independent stance.

4. The main functions of these administrations would be:

- to appoint a chief education administrative officer;
- to carry out regular censuses of numbers of pupils and the number of these with particular special needs in order to inform national government of the local requirements for revenue funding;
- to carry out regular censuses of school buildings and sites in order to assess aspects of these which require revenue funding from national government above the norm;
- to ensure that sufficient school places are available for the local population by advising national government when extensions and repairs to existing schools or building of new ones are needed;
- to transfer revenue funds from national government to schools following national formulae (ie for salaries, equipment, materials, maintenance etc);
- to ensure that national government makes such additional revenue payments as may be needed for special needs pupils, specialised resources, and specific site issues for particular schools, following national guidelines;
- to support the financial administration of smaller schools and to arrange for the audit of the accounts of all schools and colleges to ensure financial accountability;
- to support the governing functions of schools through employing a limited number of inspectors/advisors who, in particular, will scrutinise (giving both challenge and support) reports of governing bodies;
- to collate reports from school and college governing bodies and to forward these to the National Education Council with a brief commentary by the administration;
- to have at least one member participating with governing bodies in the appointment of new headteachers.

These measures would ensure that: the local administration was peopled by those who, being elected by an electoral college of school governors, should be

knowledgeable and care deeply about schools; tribal political allegiances would no longer affect decisions about schools; funding would no longer have a 'postal code' character; and the link between schools and the National Education Council would be clearly delineated.

This is the kind of structural change that national government should make to support local education - not fiddling about with curriculum, pedagogy and other matters that should be the proper business of the schools themselves.

WHO KNOWS BEST?

Everybody - teachers, their unions, politicians, professors - wants to raise the standards of educational attainment and ensure that young people receive a balanced all-round education which enables them to develop their individual talents and achieve whatever is their potential. But who knows best? National politicians - here today and gone tomorrow? Or teachers who by training, experience and professional commitment are trying to get to grips with the educational needs of the young people in their classrooms, but are frustrated by incessant demands made by central government and its agencies? It's a no-brainer: it is teachers who know best. But they need a framework which frees them to act effectively. Local education administrations are needed to give them this freedom.

But who will listen?

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