

## **Fringe Report**

### **England's schools: A free for all? (ATL, NASUWT and NUT)**

Speakers: Michael Gove, secretary of state for education, Department for Education; Andy Brown, president, Association of Teachers and Lecturers; Fiona Millar, writer and journalist specialising in education and parenting issues; Professor Becky Francis, director of education, RSA

Education secretary, Michael Gove began by saying that teachers across the country felt that their freedoms had been 'chipped away' when it came to class discipline, shaping the curriculum and designing lesson plans.

Gove said that talented and highly qualified graduates who went into teaching were bursting with creativity and they 'should be given more freedom to harness that creativity'.

The education secretary said that the Academies Act would allow professionals to decide for themselves if they wanted to set up free schools. He said that people went into teaching to help young people, not to face overly-bureaucratic systems.

Gove said that the inequalities in education were the 'single greatest source of shame for Britain'.

Gove emphasised the need to improve standards in line with other countries in a globally competitive world, saying that, in the future universities could be 'colonised' by state schools pupils from other European countries if the government did not act now.

He concluded that it was essential to introduce a competitive drive in education. He said that teachers and head teachers taught with a guiding moral purpose and they should be allowed to do this by setting up free schools.

Chris Lines, the president of the NASUWT, opened the debate by giving a brief background to the government's free schools policy. He said the government was planning to revise planning legislation to make it easier to establish schools in shops and residential properties.

Lines quoted Paul Carter, the leader of Kent County Council, who had said that free schools would threaten the budgets of normal schools. The NASUWT president argued that schools would be better improved by local authority intervention.

He referred to the 1944 Education Act which made education a national service managed locally. Lines said that it appeared that Michael Gove did not trust local authorities to run schools.

Professor Becky Francis, the RSA's director of education, said that academy status gave schools autonomy over their finances and curriculum. She said that she had genuine concerns about the social justice of free schools, arguing that the policy focused those on outstanding schools where middle class children were concentrated.

Prof Francis emphasised that the RSA supported innovation and creativity and recognised the value of autonomy and creativity in the curriculum. She spoke of the importance of

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schools working together with their communities.

Writer and journalist, Fiona Millar spoke of her experience as a school governor and her belief in the big society's ability to turn around the fortunes and results of schools.

However, Millar said that she fundamentally believed that it was wrong for some schools to have freedoms that others did not have. She said the policy would be 'divisive and dangerous and would reduce choice, defeating its stated aim'.

Millar concluded by emphasising that teaching and leadership should be at the heart of the education debate instead of free schools, which would give some parents privileges above the rest.

### **The future of teaching; Responsibility or regulation? (ResPublica/Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education)**

Speakers; Nick Gibb, minister for schools, Department for Education; Professor John Bangs, visiting professor, Institute of Education; Philippa Cordingley, chief executive, Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE); Phillip Blond, director, ResPublica

Schools minister, Nick Gibb, set out the government's position and intentions. Policy under the coalition, said Gibb, would be driven by "freedom, fairness and responsibility."

Giving schools greater autonomy, Gibb said, would help raise standards. This, he argued, was itself based upon evidence both from the UK and elsewhere. As an example in the UK, Gibb mentioned city academies.

"Giving autonomy and freedom to head teachers is key" said Gibb, "and this government trusts teachers and parents, the academies act will allow for this freedom."

Gibb said that between 20 and 30 schools were applying for academy status each month.

The minister also indicated that there would be reform to league tables and said that qualifications previously reserved for independent schools would be taught in state schools.

Addressing the contentious issue of discipline in schools, Gibb said that teachers would in future have greater powers to deal with disruptive pupils and there would be greater protection for teacher from false accusations.

The coalition, said Gibb is; "determined to tackle bad behaviour, until we do we cannot raise standards."

As a means of achieving this, the minister said that teachers' powers of search would be increased and the requirement to give 24 hours notice before imposing a detention would be scrapped.

It would also be a priority of the coalition, said Gibb, to restore prestige to the teaching

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profession in order to attract the best and brightest graduates, especially those who have studied maths and the sciences.

All these measures would help close the attainment gap between rich and poor, Gibb said.

The problems in the UK educational system, argued the minister:

"Are not the result of a lack of aspiration, but rather a failure of the state."

Phillipa Cordingley, of CUREE, set out a vision of teaching based upon an ongoing commitment to professional development. The reforms currently on the table mean that teachers will have to take more responsibility and make more decisions, she said. The looming spending review would also mean that there is a need for greater efficiency.

"Knowledge is power", said Cordingley, referring to her own work at CUREE, and best practice in education should be evidence based, as is the case in the health sector.

There is evidence out there, Cordingley said, but it is "locked away in academic journals".

Cordingley argued that this was holding the profession back, despite the fact that many of teachers would like to draw on the experience and evidence available from across the world.

Phillip Blond of ResPublica indicated general agreement with the sentiments expressed so far and focused particularly on the issue of restoring prestige to the teaching profession. Blond said we must:

"Re-intellectualise schools, restore a sense that schools are places where intellectuals can go and be intellectual."

Blond said that autonomy and independence have been 'policed out' of teacher training by too many targets and a rigid curriculum.

The key, for Blond, is restoring the link between universities and schools.

Reflecting his own interests, Blond argued that philosophy should be reintroduced in schools, something that works well on the continent and would reflect what education is really for, not just the transmission of a curriculum but an exploration of ideas.

John Bangs, of the Institute of Education, also signalled agreement saying he hoped what was being said might influence the impending white paper on education.

Regarding more technical issues, Bangs questioned the value of performance-related pay and the school workforce agreement, calling them "a bit iffy".

On the subject of pupils' behaviour Bangs said that the proposals had been sensible and he welcomed the international approach being taken by the government, saying that, when it comes to education policy the UK "cannot descend into the bunker."

## **Who should pay for skills?**

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### Speakers

John Hayes MP, minister for further education and lifelong learning Lord Digby Jones John Stone, chief executive, Learning Skills Network Chris Bank, chairman, Independent Review of Further Education

Further education and lifelong learning minister, John Hayes began by setting out the bad news:

"We are facing difficult economic circumstances and these discussions are taking place within the context of a tight spending round."

The good news, the minister said, was that the government and the minister personally, are deeply committed to further education and believe firmly that unless this issue is given greater impetus the UK would suffer. Britain had no future as any other than a high tech, high skilled economy, he asserted.

In terms of government actions so far Hayes pointed to the draft skills strategy paper which was closely linked to the growth White Paper.

Hayes said that the age of; "Bureaucratic micro-management" that Digby Jones had presided over, was finished.

There must also be a better learning market, driven to a greater extent by the learners themselves. Hayes also reiterated an earlier point that, if someone is told something is free, they will place no value upon it and it is ultimately detrimental.

Providers must be trained, Hayes argued, in providing more freedom and flexibility and there must be a more credible overall vocational system, the vocational pathway at the moment, he said, is too complex.

Hayes also argued that the system must be sufficiently responsive to the changing needs of the economy and employers.

In his opening remarks, Lord Digby Jones made a stark case for training to maintain the UK's economic competitiveness.

"This summer half of the kids who took GCSE's didn't get grade C or above. One in five adults in the UK cannot read to GCSE level." Lord Jones said.

The UK can only survive the coming 'Asian century' if it changes the way that skills are funded and managed, he said. This is not just a private sector issue - as Lord Jones pointed out, the biggest employer of unskilled people in the UK is the NHS.

Small businesses also, Lord Jones said, need to have a skilled workforce and, importantly, need a government who will fund apprenticeships to close the skills gap. The government had to take away the financial obstructions to businesses who wanted to train and go further by "Bribing them", he argued.

If we don't take action, Lord Jones warned that "China and India will win" in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Chris Banks, chairman of the independent review into higher education, was next to take the stage. Banks called for co-investment in training funding, explaining that it was an

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investment because there will be clear returns and co-investment because employers, individuals and government should all be investing together. The system currently, Banks argued, is too complex and uncontrolled.

Employers, Banks said, will invest in training individuals if;

"They feel it is genuinely worth investing" and individuals will take training but; "need help to get there."

Banks said that the system could be more responsive if employers and individuals were in the driving seat, if this were the case market principles would ensure that the courses that were most relevant and desirable would receive the most attention.

Banks also made a point that drew much agreement when he said that;

"The one word most damaging to learning and training is 'free'."

There is no such thing as free training, Banks said, and the question is who should fund. By calling courses free we undermine their value in people's perceptions, he stated.

John Stone, chief executive of the Learning Skills Network, said that the skills system was heading for "a perfect storm."

A situation where the demand for skills is up and the demands of the new economy for new sets of skills are also rising. The coalition government's controversial migration cap has, Stone said, exposed the massive skill gap in the UK.

Stone also criticised the train to gain initiative of the previous government saying that, for the money spent on it, it did not deliver. Stone said that employers wanted holistic solutions not just the ability to choose products from a shelf. Train to gain, Stone said, was;

"About as demand-led as a Russian supermarket."

There are many possible solutions, Stone argued, including upgrading skills accounts or flat rate charging for training. Stone also said that the principle of 'who benefits pays' should underpin thinking and the government should seek to subsidise the disadvantaged rather than simply by skills level.

A manufacturing led economic recovery; what is the government's role?

Dods/Food and Drink Federation

Chairperson: Jonathan Walker, political editor, Birmingham Post

Speakers: Andrew McCall, director, global government affairs, Jaguar Land Rover; John Hayes MP, minister of state for further education, skills and lifelong learning; Danielle Chapman, head of government relations, General Motors; Melanie Leech, director general, Food and Drink Federation

There was a "violent consensus" across the parties that we needed to rebalance the economy in favour of manufacturing.

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Specifically, the UK must continue to grow its advanced manufacturing base, Andrew McCall told attendees, stating that the government must work to create the right environment in which the sector can flourish.

The director of Jaguar Land Rover's global government affairs division, McCall said that priority must be given to recalibrating research and development tax credits, noting that "R&D is the lifeblood of manufacturing in the UK", but that we were falling below our European competitors in this area.

Asked about other areas where the government should focus its attention to support manufacturing, McCall said that ramping up skills, and particularly increasing the number of engineers in the UK, would help attract further investment.

Speaking for the government, John Hayes said that we had to be a highly skilled, high technology economy in order to compete in the future and that the government was fully committed to ensuring that our skills agenda was taken care of.

"We will fail unless we realise this", he said, noting that investment in further education and up-skilling our workforce must be more focussed towards the demands of employers and that a vocational pathway as "clear, seductive and navigable" as academic routes must be promoted to demonstrate the appeal of more practical careers.

The premise that the only career path which should be pursued is the traditional academic route, he said, was a premise which should be "challenged at every turn" before discussing the issue of funding and whether government or industry should pay to ramp up the country's skills agenda.

"We have ducked the issue of training levies in this country", he said, before suggesting that the UK looked at systems such as licence to practice which are conducted in countries like the US.

The skills minister also criticised the former government's Train to Gain programme, which he said was a "blunt instrument" which the Audit Commission had reported on as carrying "an immense dead weight" in terms of investment.

Hayes sought to reassure the audience that the skills agenda was being taken very seriously by this government, that it was at the heart of its policy-thinking and that the Draft Skills Strategy had been published in June specifically in order to "set the direction of travel" for this area of policy before the cost implications and constraints of the comprehensive spending review were published.

In other comment, Danielle Chapman, government relations manager at General Motors, said that, as much as R&D tax credits and the right tax environment were important levers for the government to be pulling, the coalition also needed to be looking at how UK plc was perceived overseas and what UK Trade and Investment needed to do to increase inward investment.

The panel also discussed the problems for the manufacturing sector, as a careers route, in having to compete with more lucrative jobs in finance.

Melanie Leech, director general of the Food and Drink Federation, accepted that manufacturing could not financially compete with finance jobs but reminded the audience

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that the sector still payed above the national average and that there were a plethora of career routes to pursue within it.

She also said that, once people had "come through the door" of the sector, it also proved a stable career option - boasting good retention rates.

The panel also discussed synchronizing the skills agenda with the immigration agenda, Chapman expressing her concern that the cap on immigration needed to take into consideration the transfer of employees, from within an organisation, across countries - in order to keep talent mobile.