

A step backwards?

The Department for Education's new white paper sets out a sweeping vision to turn all schools into academies by 2022. But **James Croft** of the Centre for Market Reform of Education is not convinced

There's much to be welcomed in the government's new schools white paper. From the rationalisation and professionalisation of governance; to the development of proper performance measures for multi-academy trusts (MATs); to a significant shift in the accountability framework enabling parents to demand more from their schools, it's clear that the government is seeking to bring coherence to features of the reforming school system that have been in need of attention. But on perhaps the central tenet of the reform package – the requirement for all remaining local authority (LA) schools to take academy status, and its implications – concerns have been expressed from some unexpected quarters.

The nature of these objections, as my own, is not about the broad direction of travel, but rather the risks that forced conversion, and conversion on the scale and timescale proposed, pose to the efficacy of the reforms and to the reform agenda itself. On the evidence, the case for increasing school autonomy is generally convincing and gaining strength, but it's not a panacea, and if it's not done in the right way, and not properly supported by the right incentives, it may not be as

effective as it might be for generating the outcomes we want to see, if it achieves them at all.

It's worth reminding ourselves that though modelled on US charter schools and Swedish free schools, academies are a particular form of government-licensed and funded independent school, evidence of the effectiveness of which is only emerging. This is also true of the different types of academies, principally 'sponsored' or converter, the circumstances of the creation of which are very different. While sponsored academies are generally previously underperforming schools that became academies in order to improve their performance from a very low baseline, converter academies don't have sponsors and are schools previously assessed as 'performing well'. Although there's convincing evidence for a marked positive improvement in outcomes for the former type (pre-2010), it's too early to gauge what the impact has been of those established later and those of the latter type – the converter academies. Indeed, researchers are just now getting underway with this project.

It's also important to note that any 'academy effect' is an aggregate effect of a number of features of both the process of take-over/conversion and the new

governance, leadership, and management practices introduced as a result, the relative influence of which we don't yet fully understand. For a government supposedly committed to discovery of what works, acceleration of the programme is a missed opportunity to get clear on these issues.

Identifying system leaders

For example, central to the government's structural reform agenda is the conviction that the most important factor for the success of academy reforms is the way they release leadership capital. The majority of academy heads would probably concur with this view. Delivery of the white paper's ambition depends on identifying system leaders at the school-level, and then preparing them and incentivising them to tackle underperformance in the neediest of schools. But despite the confidence with which many leaders speak of the characteristics of effective leaders and of how to identify potential, a survey of the literature suggests that effective leadership practices have to be learned and are embedded in context, and may not be as transferable as is typically proposed. (Consider independent schools' efforts to turn around failing schools to date – it's a chequered track record at best, but it appears little has been learned



to temper optimism on this point.) This being the case, those at the coalface of school improvement estimate there's only a 'shallow pool' of schools with leadership capability and capacity that could be useful in providing support to others.

It's also not at all clear that we have achieved the right balance between autonomy and accountability, with many of those responsible for the system's architecture and leaders in the academy sector now openly questioning the reality of their supposed autonomy. Surveys of the extent to which they're using their freedoms have found mixed results, which many have put down to wider constraining influences. Academies receive conflicting messages from the various oversight bodies to which they are responsible on the circumstances in which it is appropriate to trial new interventions, the results to be expected from them, and to what timescale. Though the white paper, as Ofsted also, is full of good intentions in respect of supporting innovation, there is nonetheless a pressure to stick with what works and a lack of incentives (and research support) to adopt more radical strategies for improvement.

And the benchmarks against which performance is judged, focused as they have been on final attainment rather

than educational progression, are both unrealistic and unhelpful for many more challenging contexts, in which gains are likely to be incremental and take time to emerge. If we haven't got the balance right between accountability and autonomy (most concur that the scales are tipped too far in favour of the former), this will continue to discredit the autonomy reform agenda, and to deter development of the sustainable growth strategies that both the schools commissioners and the EFA want to see.

Basic viability

There are some welcome proposals for addressing these issues in the white paper: 'breathing space' from Ofsted inspection following takeover of struggling schools; a Multi-Academy Trust Growth Fund, which ought to deter chains from expanding mainly due to the need to achieve scale efficiencies; the promise of joined-up thinking in the development of proper performance measures for MATs. But little has been offered, excepting the promise of seed funding for providers to develop innovative approaches to addressing regional supply shortages, in the way of incentives to encourage excellence as such. These measures are addressed more to basic viability, which makes the plan

look half-baked.

A parting thought might offer a ray of promise for the future. The lifting of the requirement for academies to have parent governors in all schools and the addition of the skills test, together with plans to rationalise governance by having smaller schools join chains, addresses one of the most significant impediments to wholesale subcontracting of the business of running schools to education management organisations under the OJEU tendering framework. After an early unsuccessful experiment with this model, the DfE have discouraged other trusts from trying it, largely for this reason. This may be the government's answer to the challenges of attracting the new sponsors that will be required to achieve its ambition of full academisation by 2022.

It would diversify supply, increase competition, and be a good and workable compromise (one already favoured by the Charity Commission in the independent sector) on the issue of how schools can be run both profitably and in the public interest. It might also provide the pressure valve schools need to get on top of the many challenges they face in implementing the last round of reforms on what are by any estimation lean resources. If they haven't considered it, they should. ■