Open public services: how do the White Paper's five principles apply to schools?

Rebecca Allen of the Institute of Education and CMPO's director Simon Burgess explore the implications of the White Paper for schools – and whether in education it can achieve the goal 'to make opportunity more equal'.

The White Paper promises a revolution in how public services are delivered. The principles and policies it describes 'signal a decisive end to the old-fashioned, top-down, take-what-you-are-given model of public services'. In the foreword, the reforms are not advocated for their potential efficiency gains, but in terms of fairness, equality of opportunity and equal access to quality. Education is at the heart of the discussion, with inequality of access to good schools highlighted in the foreword and opening chapter.

So what are the implications for schools? A focus on unequal access to high quality education is welcome given the well-documented differences in attainment by social background (Goodman et al, 2009). Part of this inequality is due to differences in school access: children from poor families are about half as likely to go to a high-performing schools; and most of this gap arises from where people live rather than from 'the middle class working the system' (Burgess and Briggs, 2010).

We consider each of the five principles set out in the White Paper and how they relate to schools policies. The first principle gives the client – here, children and their families – control of the process, which, in this case, means supporting and strengthening school choice. Is this a good idea?

Choice and competition might affect standards overall through a 'competitive threat' effect; they may affect sorting or segregation in schools; and they may affect inequalities in school access. The UK and international evidence is mixed (see Allen and Burgess, 2010, for a review). In England, the national implementation of legislation arising from the 1988 Education Reform Act, combined with a lack of historical pupil-level datasets, makes it difficult to evaluate the effect of the introduction of choice.

The quasi-experimental evidence suggests at best only a small and statistically weak impact of increased choice on overall standards. There is evidence showing a correlation between higher levels of pupil sorting (by socio-economic background and by ability) and the degree of choice, but there is no evidence establishing a causal link. The evidence on school access shows that the main factor is residence. Stronger school choice should weaken that constraint, but it is undermined by other aspects of the school market, which we discuss below under the fourth principle of 'equal access'.

The second principle is to devolve power to the lowest appropriate level. In some ways, the acceleration of the academy programme fulfils this aim. Schools are given freedom from local authority control, greater freedom over the curriculum and freedom to change the pay and conditions of teachers. Some head teachers have welcomed the opportunity to take their schools in new directions.

The introduction of free schools and a pupil premium are unlikely to do much to raise equality of access

But there are countervailing factors. Freedom from local authority control means a lot less than it did before the implementation of local management of schools. *De jure* freedom over the curriculum is all very well, but the decisions of schools are strongly driven by the incentive framework in which they are placed. This means that the national exam system and the central importance to schools of the performance tables will often over-ride any desire to try something new.

An example is the introduction of the new E-Bacc – a centrally imposed measure of extra kudos for the school, given to pupils passing a particular (centrally-determined) set of subjects. It seems that this is already having an effect on subject choices. One of the main centralising features arises from the fact that the governance structures of academies are not clear. Currently the person immediately responsible for failing academies is the Secretary of State, a level of almost Napoleonic centralisation.

The third principle in the White Paper is that provision should be open to a range of new providers. This has an obvious counterpart in education: the coalition government's flagship policy of free schools. It is clearly too early to tell how this policy will play out. But the focus cannot just be on the 5,000 or so pupils who have just started, less than a twentieth of 1% of their cohort. If so, this would be a very expensive and high profile way to change the education chances of such a small number.

Rather, the focus has to be on the systemic effects of the reform, notably any impact that the new option of opening a free school might have on the local schools. We have argued that free schools are likely to be disappointing in working as a spur to higher standards (Allen and Burgess, 2011). But they are potentially an important part of 'open public services', and are highlighted in the White Paper as a key route to achieving fairer access. Free schools do offer this in principle: parents very dissatisfied with their state school can opt out and set up their own school.

But there are two reasons why free schools are unlikely to be the best answer to this. First, there are very significant set-up costs, both in time and energy from the founders, but also in the straightforward sense of acquiring premises. While currently these are being generously funded by the government, this cannot continue if the policy matures and spreads.

But second, it seems inconceivable that any local area with one free school and plenty of spare school capacity would be offered the resources for many others. So as a performance discipline device, this is a one-shot game, not a process of continuing pressure on low performing schools, which is what is needed.

The schools policy most likely 'to make opportunity more equal' is to reduce the use of proximity as the main criterion for allocating places

The White Paper's fourth principle is the one presented as the over-riding aim of the policy: ensuring fair access to public services. With a strict and now well-policed school admissions code in place, private schools educating only 7% of the population and grammar schools only a few more, we have to ask what it is about the school system that prevents fair access.

The answer is that there is one ubiquitous admissions criterion that militates against this. That criterion is where you live. Most over-subscribed schools use distance from the family home as the tiebreaker in deciding whom to admit. Our research shows that this proximity rule strongly favours children from more affluent family backgrounds. The gap in accessible school quality between rich and poor families widens by over 50% once a proximity criterion is imposed.

Clearly something has to be used as a tiebreaker if a school is over-subscribed. While using proximity makes sense in rural areas, one possibility in cities is a lottery. The United States has a great deal of experience of using lotteries for school admissions: put all the applicants' names into a hat and draw out as many as the school has places.

Such systems do not work perfectly and, as shown in our study of the Brighton and Hove lottery (Allen et al, 2010), there are complex design issues that can thwart the best of intentions. But by its very nature, a lottery ensures that places are allocated in a way that ignores social background. To achieve the goal of ensuring fair access, something needs to be done about the proximity criterion.

The proximity rule for allocating school places strongly favours children from more affluent family backgrounds

The final principle in the White Paper is that public services should be responsive and accountable. The accountability system for schools in England is well developed. Its potential evolution under an open public services agenda is discussed in the next article, which explores the use of performance indicators, including in schools.

So how does the coalition's education policy match up to the opening paragraph of the White Paper's foreword by the prime minister and the deputy prime minister? They write: 'There is an overwhelming imperative – an urgent moral purpose – which drives our desire to reform public services. We want to make opportunity more equal.'

England has had two decades of parental choice and school competition – and a thorough national accountability system. These are important parts of the system, and they can no doubt be tweaked and improved. But this alone will not make opportunity more equal. The introduction of free schools and a pupil premium are also unlikely to do much to raise equality of access.

The single policy most likely to achieve the goal described in the White Paper's foreword is a reduction in the prevalence of proximity as the main criterion for allocating school places.

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Further reading

Rebecca Allen and Simon Burgess (2010) *'The future of competition and accountability in education, report for the 2020 Public Services Trust'* (http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/2020/documents/ESRC_Allan%20and%20Burgess_FINAL.pdf)

Rebecca Allen and Simon Burgess (2011) *'What are free schools for?'* (http://cmpo.wordpress.com/2011/09/05/what-are-free-schools-for)

Rebecca Allen et al (2010) *'The early impact of Brighton and Hove's school admission reforms'*, CMPO Working Paper No. 10/244 (http://www.bris.ac.uk/cmpo/publications/papers/2010/wp244.pdf)

Simon Burgess and Adam Briggs (2010) *'School assignment, school choice and social mobility'*, Economics of Education Review 29(4): 639-49

Alissa Goodman et al (2009) *'Inequalities in educational outcomes amongst children 3-16'*, report for the National Equality Panel (http://www.equalities.gov.uk/national_equality_panel/publications/research_reports.aspx)