



## The State and School Choice: Reflections from England

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The development of more diverse education systems has been one response to promoting school choice. This has involved challenging the concept of centrally controlled education systems by increasing the range and types of school providers through independent state-funded schools (ISFS). This movement is an international phenomenon and comes under the guise of charter schools in the US, free schools in Sweden and academies in England. ISFS naturally lend themselves to the development of groups of schools working together as federations and chains under a single governance structures (Policy Exchange, 2009).

In England the Government white paper, The Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010) commitment to academies and chains:

*“Schools working together leads to better results. Some sponsors already oversee several Academies in a geographical group, or chains of Academies across the country, and already seven organisations sponsor six or more Academies. These chains can support schools to improve more rapidly. Along with our best schools, we will encourage strong and experienced sponsors to play a leadership role in driving the improvement of the whole school system, including through leading more formal federations and chains.”*

(DfE, 2010, p. 60)

For England the direction of travel is clear and the pace of change is fast. The emphasis is on breaking up established bureaucracies to free up schools and hand over control for improvement to our best schools and sponsors. Promoting collaboration across school boundaries to stimulate mutual improvement is a key feature of this approach. These reforms may play an important role in the emergence of what David Hargreaves has described the self-improving school system whereby:

*“more control and responsibility passes to the local level in a spirit of mutual aid between school leaders and their colleagues, who are morally committed to imaginative and sustainable ways of achieving more ambitious and better outcomes.”*

(Hargreaves, 2010, p. 23)



Given the pace of change, it is unsurprising the evidence about what works and why in developing a self-improving school system lags behind both policy and practice. However, early indications suggest this approach has led to some exciting innovations including public-private collaborations, the formation of multi-agency Trusts, the emergence of National Leaders of Education and Teaching School Alliances taking more responsibility for initial teacher education and professional development of teachers across groups of schools. However, this new landscape also appears very unstable. The agenda has marginalized school districts, removing local co-ordination of effort and local checks and balances that ensured the needs of the most vulnerable are catered for. The dismantling of the middle tier and subsequent colonization by a diverse range of providers is an interesting experiment but as yet the impact these changes have on educational standards, school choice and equity remains to be seen.

The purpose of this paper is to map the emerging terrain in England and tease out the lessons from developing a system based on a diverse range of ISFS. In conclusion, this paper will reflect on a number of emerging issues, tensions and dilemmas associated with developing an education system characterized by diversity and fragmentation.

## References

Hargreaves, D (2010) *Creating a self-improving school system*, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

Department for Education (2010) *The Importance of Teaching: the Schools White Paper 2010*, Cm 7980, Norwich, The Stationery Office

Policy Exchange (2009) *A Guide to School Choice Reforms*, London, Policy Exchange

