



School building

Who wants a new classroom?

BRISTOL

Rebuilding schools turns out to be a good way of forcing through changes to how they are run

ASK pupils what they would like to see changed about their schools and they will come up with a surprisingly modest list. They want roofs that don't leak, chairs with four legs apiece, graffiti-free lavatories and no hidden spaces where bullies can lurk. The more daring will then start talking about the snooker rooms, cinemas and coffee bars you might have thought would be top of their wish lists.

Over the next 15 years visions both modest and ambitious will be realised as the government indulges in an orgy of wrecking and rebuilding. Under a programme known as "building schools for the future", half of England's 3,500 state secondary schools are to be knocked down and replaced, and the rest remodelled and refurbished. Private companies will stump up half the cash with the other half coming from the public purse.

Builders and architects, together with companies specialising in building security, software and other services will bid for contracts to design, build and run small clusters of schools. If successful, they will have the exclusive rights to future contracts in the district. They will make money by charging for their services over the next 25 years, and will be paid according to complex formulae that specify everything from how often toilets must be cleaned to

how many of a school's laptops may be out of service at any point.

This is just part of government spending on schools, but it is an influential part that is designed to speed other reforms. Last year Parliament approved plans to replace "bog-standard comprehensives" with "independent state schools". At the time the bill was described as enabling rather than prescriptive. By linking cash to administrative changes, the building programme gives it concrete form.

Education's Trojan horse

The bidding process favours schemes in which outsiders, linked to schools via trusts, pledge to provide an "ethos" and fresh thinking (code for shaking up the educational establishment). Academies-state schools run by a private sponsor will also be encouraged. Successful schools will be prodded to take over and run failing ones. Schools are expected to be open long hours, with breakfast clubs and after-school care.

Local authorities know that if they want new buildings, they must play along-and some schools are desperately in need of renovation. First to face the bulldozer are some built after the second world war to serve housing estates that sprang up where bombs had fallen thick-

est. Bristol is about to demolish and rebuild four schools, among them Whitefield Fishponds Community School. The head teacher, Theresa Thorne, is excited by the designs for her new school. Recent expansion has left her managing ten scattered temporary buildings; the first thing that greets pupils in the morning is the back of the gym hall.

This jumble is to be replaced by a gracious pavilion ushering visitors onto a centrally-heated street, with clusters of classrooms on one hand and larger spaces on the other. The "strawberries", as the architects, Wilkinson Eyre, have nicknamed the classroom clusters, have a workplace at one end, positioned so that a member of staff can keep pupils "safe but not guarded". Blind spots will be eliminated to cut down on naughtiness. Desks will be arranged in a horseshoe to stop students from slacking in the back row.

The desire for surveillance crops up again in Bristol's IT plans. The technology is to be provided by Normgate Information Solutions, which currently issues most of Britain's traffic-infringement notices. Its "managed learning environment" will integrate many different educational programs. It will also allow parents to see what children are doing (by tracking attendance, homework and canteen purchases), teachers to see what students are doing, and bureaucrats to see what teachers and students are doing (by recording the cost of staff phone calls and truancy, for example).

By using private cash, the government hopes to get better schools built on time and within budget, ensure maintenance is carried out and offload risk. But according to a report by the Audit Commission,

which monitors government spending, the few privately financed schools that have been built are shoddier than similar ones paid for by public-sector borrowing. Before they can get the go-ahead for rebuilding, local authorities must use methodology developed by the Treasury to show that private finance will prove better value than public borrowing. Yet an investigation by Andrew Coulson, a local government expert at Birmingham University, concluded that the methodology has a built-in bias towards the former.

Teachers' unions fear that mergers encouraged by the reforms will be used as a cover for redundancies. Long-term contracts may tie local authorities into paying for services that are no longer used, or, alternatively, paying too much for facilities that end up being used more than forecast. And there is always the risk that a consortium that finds its profits lower than expected will just pay the necessary penalties and walk away, leaving the taxpayer to pick up the bill.

Those who cannot remember the past

Architects have always nursed visions of what can be achieved in the right building. But it is unlikely that fancy accommodation will transform learning as dramatically as they (and the government) imagine. Rebuilding a crumbling edifice improves results, says Elaine Hall, an education researcher at Newcastle University who has studied past building programmes. But as long as classrooms are decent—not too dark, damp, noisy, airless, hot or cold—further frills seem to make little difference.

The post-war structures that now seem so flimsy were, in their day, cutting-edge architecture. Their big windows were meant to let in light rather than draughts. Flat roofs were designed to allow builders to stack modules on top of one another, rather than let in rain. That they were cheap and quick to build was seen as a virtue in more frugal days, and it meant they could be altered easily. But they were not used in the way their designers intended. Rank-and-file teachers were not keen on the avant-garde methods—open classrooms, pupil-directed learning—favoured by the leading pedagogues consulted by architects, and so just kept doing what they had always done. No money was set aside to carry out the adaptations that had been designed in so carefully.

Once again, a large-scale building spree risks duplicating mistakes all over the country. Mike Skilton, an architect who designs schools, believes partition walls will be the flat roofs of the future. "No one will take them down, and they are acoustically useless," he says. Ms Hall nominates atriums: "I look at them and wonder how much square footage you could have got in classrooms instead." •