

## Making them happen

*Turning grand education plans into reality will take preparation, speed and ruthlessness.*



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Since Labour came to power in 1997 proclaiming education its priority, one grand policy after another has foundered. Schools were told to run themselves—but forbidden to do the things that matter most, such as paying good teachers more. Parents were encouraged to choose schools—but with too few attractive ones to choose from, many were rejected by the schools they selected. They were urged to lobby local government for new schools—but were largely ignored when they did so. A total of two “parent-promoted” schools actually opened.

The opposition Conservatives, who are on course to form the next government, will be making much of their own grand plans for schools at their party conference beginning on October 4th. Citing Sweden’s “free-school” reforms of the 1990s as their model, they say they will smash the state’s monopoly by funding new schools, to be run by charities or groups of parents, as generously as state ones. Michael Gove, their schools spokesman, reckons that 220,000 new places—as many as 500 schools—might be made available during their first term in office. The policy could see new suppliers responding to demand, innovating and competing to drive up standards. It could be a revolution.

Or it could be another almighty flop. Among the pessimists is Anders Hultin, an architect of Sweden’s reforms and co-founder of Kunskapsskolan, the country’s largest chain of free schools. He now works for GEMS, a Dubai-based chain of commercial schools operating in nine countries, including Britain. Of Sweden’s 1,000-odd free schools, three-quarters are run for profit, he points out—but the Tories, afraid of the charge that they plan to hand little children over to big business, would ban schools from making profits. “I think it is a tactical decision,” says Mr Hultin. “But it will surely mean fewer schools opening.”

Mr Gove says that once the new schools have shown their worth, voters will be reassured and the issue of profits could be revisited. Meanwhile, parents and charities will have to make the running. But how many parents are ready to hunt for premises, take on planning authorities and mug up the curriculum, particularly in inner cities where the need is greatest? Charities may go where parents fear to tread. But since the Tories plan to give free schools more money for teaching poor children, staying the invisible hand by excluding operators like GEMS seems particularly perverse.

If the Tories' plans are to amount to anything, lots of schools must open fast, says Rachel Wolf, founder of the New Schools Network, which is due to start in October. Like the centres that support similar charter schools in many American states, it will combine policy development, research and advocacy with help for would-be schools on everything from applying for permission to finding premises and hiring teachers. Lots of those schools must be outstanding, and none disastrous failures, she adds. Parents will be cautious until they can see some shining successes, and will be frightened off if badly run schools collapse.

Even before its launch, Miss Wolf's organisation is talking to charities and other groups that might want to set up new schools—as indeed are the Tories themselves. It is also hunting for interested parents, with a view to getting them ready to apply the moment they can. The idea is to insulate free schools from hostile politicians by moving quickly from policy to practice to broad popularity. American charter schools and Swedish free schools have plenty of enemies, Miss Wolf points out, but they survive because politicians do not dare to touch schools that have good results and broad support. In Sweden that support extends beyond those with children in free schools: most parents think the fact that they can apply to open schools forces the state to run its own institutions to their liking—or else.

Allowing those who set up new schools to make profits would certainly turbo-charge the Tories' plans, but other sorts of suppliers are likely to come forward. Mr Gove thinks he can nudge exclusive private schools, which are fighting to retain their charitable status, into opening free-school relatives as a way of looking socially responsible. KIPP, America's largest chain of charter schools, shows that non-profit organisations can grow and succeed in poor areas. And the operators of "academies"—independent state-funded schools that work rather like the planned free schools but are centrally managed rather than demand-driven—are likely to get into the game too. "Opening an academy means negotiating with local authorities to replace a failing school, rather than just going where parents want," explains Daniel Moynihan, chief executive of the Harris Federation, which runs nine academies in London. He says they will keep expanding under the current restrictive rules, but would move faster and further under the Tory plans.

The biggest skirmish may be with teachers, or, more precisely, with their unions. State funding would follow children into free schools, meaning that if lots of new ones open, some state schools will have to close. "The good teachers will find new jobs," says one Tory aide, blithely—but unions have never been concerned primarily with their more able members. The unions also oppose Tory plans to end central pay bargaining for teachers and to allow schools to pay according to merit.

Here, though, the lessons from Sweden are more optimistic. Swedish teaching unions initially hated the whole idea of free schools—but once they saw that their members liked working in them, says Mr Hultin, they changed their tune. Britain's teachers too might prefer better-run, less chaotic schools, more freedom over how to teach—and to be rewarded for success. If the Tories stand firm, free schools could be in Britain to stay.

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