

## Cutting the knot

*Plans to give excellent schools the freedoms already enjoyed by dire ones.*

A SILVER thread of accountability runs through the fabric of education in England. Schools are held to account through a regime of inspections introduced almost two decades ago. The previous Labour government used the system to take over schools that fell short, reorganising and reopening them as “academies” that have greater control over what they spend their money on and how doggedly they pursue the national curriculum. On May 27th the new education secretary, Michael Gove, was due to introduce legislation to let schools deemed outstanding by inspectors join the ranks of these favoured few.

Academies were a pet scheme of Tony Blair’s, introduced in 2000 to redeem failing state secondary schools in poor inner-city areas by handing over their management to sponsors who could appoint excellent head teachers and give them the freedom to do much as they pleased. Once a school had repeatedly failed to impress inspectors, a sponsor—usually a charity or philanthropist—was allowed to take it over. The sponsor controls the governing body of an academy, which holds some power over admissions, decides how to deal with bad behaviour and what, outside the core curriculum, is taught.

The powerful teaching unions dislike academies because they need not hire staff registered with the General Teaching Council, as other state schools do, and they can opt out of national pay agreements. There are now more than 200 of them, and exam pass-rates are far better than at the schools they replaced.

The thread of accountability that informs parental choice has now been picked up by Mr Gove. In the expectation that his bill will be passed, he has written to the governing bodies of the 2,200 state primary and secondary schools that have won inspectors’ top rating, asking them whether they would like to become academies. Hundreds are expected to accept the offer at once. Separate legislation in the autumn will allow parents, teachers, charities, other schools and religious groups to set up new state-funded schools, the most radical reforming policy espoused by the Conservatives before the election. But the move to let schools turn themselves into semi-autonomous academies is likely to prove far more popular.

The creation of academies has already tempted new providers into establishing schools. Kunskapsskolan, a Swedish for-profit company, is due to open two academies in London in September. University College London is in the process of setting up an academy intended to boost the numbers of teenagers who study science and modern languages in the capital.

Other universities might be advised to follow suit, for the government is ring-fencing spending in this financial year on schools. Universities are not so lucky. English institutions had already had their budgets chopped by £1.3 billion over three years by the previous government; they learned on May 24th that they are losing a further £200m this year. Plans for an extra 20,000 places for students anxious to avoid the dole queues have been slashed to 10,000, and these will be limited to budding scientists and mathematicians.

The creation of more academies will increase parents’ choice of where their children are educated. Mr Gove intends to provide more information on how schools compare with one another. Any school that starts to slide down the league tables will be inspected promptly. So will those where a suspicious proportion of the teachers quit. Inspections will be directed away from fluffily measuring how much a school contributes to community cohesion and the like and focused sharply on the actual teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom.

Whether having more academies will close the growing gap in academic performance between rich and poor children is moot; the new academies are more likely than existing ones to end up teaching well-off ones. Patricia Sowter, head of Cuckoo Hall primary school in north London, reckons that if her school becomes an academy, as she intends, she could ditch prescriptions on providing one-to-one tuition to certain children in favour of supplying more of it to the neediest, for example. It would be a start.

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