

Raising a class

The first "free schools" open their doors

WIELDING trowels and small forks, pupils plant crocus and daffodil bulbs in the gardens of the Aldborough E-ACT Free School, - which opened in Redbridge, east London, on September 1st. The yellow and purple hues that should emerge in the spring will match their school colours. At the reception desk, a mother pleads with staff to admit her son. Alas, no suitable place is available.

The creation of new, independently run but non-selective and state-funded "free schools" is one of the government's central policies. Michael Gove, the Conservative education secretary, spent long years in opposition devising ways in which parental choice and competition could be used to improve England's lacklustre schools. He borrowed from America and Sweden the idea of allowing parents, teachers and others dissatisfied with what the state offered to establish new schools beyond the reach of local authorities. Such schools would be free to vary the hours of the school day and year, what was taught in the classrooms and teachers' pay. In contrast to his beleaguered cabinet colleague Andrew Lansley, whose long-pondered health reforms have run into the mud, Mr Gove's policies have taken wing.

Admittedly, the scale is small. Just 24 free schools have been established so far, including seven that have converted from the private sector. And the modest success of the free-school programme is dwarfed by the growth of academies (which have the same privileges as free schools but consist mostly of revamped state schools). Almost a third of all the secondary schools that began the school year this week have shed the shackles of their local authorities to become academies.

Mr Gove wants to liberate successful schools as well as poor ones from the overview of local authorities, arguing that the best education systems in the world are those in which schools enjoy autonomy. But the competition he aims to promote specifically through free schools is so far in short supply: the new schools tend to be in areas where there is a shortage of places. In Redbridge, for example, the free school has opened bang opposite an existing primary, but youngsters abound and both are full. Redbridge primaries are so oversubscribed that the proportion of parents unhappy with the place offered to their child is among the highest in England; some young children who want to be in school

languish at home.

The involvement of charitable chains of schools such as E-ACT, which runs the new school in Redbridge, may well boost the number of free schools. Established chains find it easier than parents to rustle up funding-from philanthropists, from banks-to construct new schools and refurbish existing ones: a distinct asset when public spending is squeezed. Yet even if

free schools fail to compete head on with existing ones, Mr Gove thinks they can still raise standards through what he calls the "beacon effect". Schools which offer options that are popular with parents-such as innovative ways of teaching and extended school days-will inspire existing schools to emulate them, he argues. Thankfully for Mr Gove, there is more than one way to improve English education. ■

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