

in brief...

A Swedish model for UK schools?

Educational reforms in Sweden have been held up as a potential model for improving the performance of UK schools. **Helena Holmlund** and **Sandra McNally** examine the evidence.

In Sweden, reforms enacted in the early 1990s allowed new schools to be set up that are independent of government control. A variety of educational providers stepped in, ranging from non-profit co-operatives and faith groups to for-profit corporations. These organisations are now running schools funded with public money through a voucher system.

The Swedish system has been strongly praised by Conservative politicians, whose 'Advancing Opportunity' agenda proposes 'freeing up the system whereby new schools are established, to allow charities, livery companies, existing school federations, not-for-profit trusts, co-operatives and groups of parents to set up new schools in the state sector'. It has been suggested that an extended and reformed academies programme (initially introduced by the Blair government) would be the way to implement this approach in the UK.

For some years, school choice and competition have been advocated as a mechanism for improving educational standards. It is argued that schools in the public sector might lack the right incentives to provide the best possible education, and the idea is that competition should put pressure on these schools to improve. But the evidence on this is mixed, and the most detailed study for England, carried out at CEP, finds no effect of choice and competition on primary school performance (Gibbons et al, 2008).

There have been a number of studies of the effects of the Swedish reform. The most recent and careful study is by Anders Bohlmark and Mikael Lindahl (2008), who find evidence of only small positive effects. They speculate that one reason for this could be the fact that the entry of new private schools has not been followed by the closing down of state schools. It may be that increasing shares of school budgets have been devoted to the maintenance of poor quality state schools.

This points to a general weakness in the application of market economics to the public sector. There is no natural mechanism for closing down poor schools (they do not

literally go bust). Closing down schools can be slow, political and unpopular. The reality that governments will have to support simultaneously the new schools and the older 'bad' ones, and that the latter will not exit at an efficient rate, needs to be factored into the expected cost-effectiveness of a 'school creation' policy.

Creating new schools can also be an expensive policy if large capital outlays are required. This is the case with academies in the UK, although not for the new independent schools in Sweden. The latter are usually small and often use empty office buildings or former schools. This raises several big questions for all political parties.

Importing the Swedish model may not make very much difference to the UK's educational status quo



In a climate of tight public expenditure, is capital spending really the most efficient use of funds? What about all the evidence on other things that work to improve educational performance, such as teacher quality, reducing class size, etc? And what about recent research that evaluates the academies programme? Stephen Machin and Joan Wilson (2009) find evidence that new academies have not performed very much better than other similar schools.

Of course, not everything is about money. The main reason why the Swedish model is praised is because the schools are free from political control. But this is only true up to a point. For example, the new Swedish schools have to follow the national curriculum. This is not the case for academy schools in the UK, where it is only a requirement for English, maths, science and information and communications technology. The sponsor also chooses the subject specialism (since all academy schools are 'specialist').

Although, as in Sweden, state schools are not allowed to select pupils by ability, specialist schools are allowed to select 10% of pupils by 'aptitude' in their specialist subject. In practical terms, how does a school select by aptitude and not by ability? Is it right that sponsors should have so much power in deciding how pupils are taught? How can other aspects of policy be imposed (synthetic phonics, for example) while allowing independence from political control?

It is not at all clear in principle or practice how far the provision of education can or should be independent from the political process. This is partly a question of empirical research. If 'autonomy' is shown to be a good feature of aspects of school governance, then why not extend this privilege to all schools? This is not an argument for brand new schools.

Furthermore, importing the Swedish model may not make very much difference to the UK's educational status quo. In the early 1990s, Sweden started from a position of no school choice: all pupils had to attend the state school in their neighbourhood. In the UK, however, there is already much school choice and a diversity of provision.

The problem – as research at CEP has shown - is that not all people in the UK are empowered to exercise choice because they do not have the money to move to an area with popular schools or the personal resources to access and understand information about school quality. Therein lies another challenge.

Creating new schools will be expensive if large capital outlays are required and 'bad' existing schools remain open

Further reading

Anders Bohlmark and Mikael Lindahl (2008) 'Does School Privatisation Improve Educational Achievement? Evidence from Sweden's Voucher Reform', IZA Discussion Paper No. 3691.

Stephen Gibbons, Stephen Machin and Olmo Silva (2008) 'Choice, Competition and Pupil Achievement', *Journal of the European Economic Association* 6(4): 912-47.

Stephen Machin and Joan Wilson (2009) 'Academy Schools and Pupil Performance', *CentrePiece*, Spring 2009 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp280.pdf>).



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