

School autonomy and accountability

A joint statement by ADECS¹, Confed², NAHT³, NASG⁴, NGC⁵, SHA⁶, and ACE⁷

This statement is issued by the six national associations which together represent headteachers, school governors, and directors of education/children's services within the English school system. It is also supported by the Advisory Centre for Education. Our purpose is to support the development of the system by providing an informed professional view, shared by all of us, on the policy of 'independent specialist schools' as set out in the Government's Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners.

We all fully support schools having autonomy in terms of their management and governance. We do not, however, believe that this autonomy should be regarded as independence from the local education system of which the schools are a part. Headteachers and governors fully support the need to provide for the education of all children in a locality, and for their schools to work to this end in co-operation both with other schools and with their local Children's Services Authority/LEA, as part of the wider provision of services to children and young people in their area. We recognise that the Five Year Strategy supports this position. The comments which follow relate to concerns about aspects of the strategy which could work against local collaboration.

1. We believe that school autonomy should be in a framework of collaboration and we are concerned that the emphasis on 'independence' in the Five Year Strategy is not balanced by sufficiently strong measures to encourage schools to work together. In our experience, few schools want actively to compete at the expense of neighbouring schools and very few, if any, schools will refuse to co-operate. Excellence in Cities partnerships are a good example of active collaboration, even between schools that had hitherto been in strong competition. We expect the guidance to schools under the Children Act 2004 to emphasise the importance of such collaboration, and we look to the Government to provide appropriate incentives for them to do so.
2. The Five Year Strategy enables schools to move more easily to foundation status and we are concerned that this may make it more difficult to establish local partnerships on important areas such as admissions and exclusions. New regulations on gaining foundation status need to be balanced by strong regulations or guidance on foundation partnerships, thus providing incentives for schools to collaborate at a local level as part of the wider service for children. We do, however, welcome the strategic role which the Government expects LEAs to fulfil in promoting and supporting such partnerships.
3. We consider it important that the proposed express route into foundation status should include a proper consideration of the implications at local level and we are concerned that a simple vote of the governing body, without consultation with other local stakeholders will not do this. In particular, the transfer of assets from community ownership to the ownership of a school governing body should be considered in relation to efforts to link schools more effectively with their community through the extended schools programme. No other procedure in Government can so quickly and easily

remove a major institution from democratic control. We have a further concern that the proposal for foundations to appoint a majority of governors could lead to some schools serving the interests of a narrow constituency, rather than the community as a whole.

4. We are concerned at the weaknesses in the current school admissions system, highlighted in the recent Select Committee report. We are disappointed that the Government's response to the Select Committee's recommendations has not been more positive. We share the view of the Select Committee that the Admissions Code of Practice needs strengthening, to counteract the socially divisive effects of the current system. .
5. We are concerned at the proposal for popular schools to expand, without reference to strategic place planning needs identified by the local Children's Services Authority and without any apparent connection to the Building Schools for the Future programme. In our experience, it is rarely the case that successful schools want expansion for its own sake. In many instances they recognise that their expansion could cause problems for other schools and could lead to closure of less popular schools, many of which are in areas of deprivation. We believe that expansion of popular schools should only be agreed within a clear framework of local place planning, and with the interests of their current pupils in mind.

To respond to these concerns, we believe the Government should re-emphasise the importance of schools, whether community, aided or foundation, working within a collaborative framework. As organisations representing leaders and managers in the education service, we share the Government's commitment to securing the best possible education for all our children. We believe that addressing the concerns outlined in this statement will help to achieve that goal.

¹ Association of Directors of Education and Children's Services

² Confederation of Education Service Managers

³ National Association of Headteachers

⁴ National Association of School Governors

⁵ National Governors Council

⁶ Secondary Heads Association

⁷ Advisory Centre for Education