The Primary Review

... children, their world, their education

THE GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION OF ENGLISH PRIMARY EDUCATION

Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder
University of Bath

This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 10/2, *The Governance and Administration of English Primary Education*, by Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder. **The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.** The report covers:

- The changing nature of educational governance
- The new roles of central agencies, local authorities (LAs) and school governing bodies
- The operation of school governing bodies
- Alternative models of school administration
- Policy making in the new environment
- Key issues and findings from the research surveyed

The changing nature of governance: from government to governance

There has been a fundamental change in the governing of education from one based on local authority control to one where schools are nominally given much more autonomy but within very tight constraints imposed by central government. These changes were initiated by the Conservative government in the 1980s and have been developed since 1997 by Labour. In this context, the role of education in local authorities has also changed while new agencies have been introduced and parents have been given an important role.

The focus on these changes has been on fiscal efficiency and raising educational standards as defined and measured by the national tests administered during the primary phase at ages 7 and 11.

Changes at the central level

A series of new agencies and actors have come to define the education policy arena. The DfES (since June 2007 the Department for Children, Schools and Families) now assumes less responsibility for direct management and service delivery while other agencies have become involved: quasi-governmental organizations which include the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED, successor to Her Majesty's Inspectorate), the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA, successor to TTA and CATE), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, successor to SCAA, NCCA and SEAC), as well as private companies such as Capita which deliver key initiatives such as the Primary National Strategy.

At the same time, the government has strengthened its hand through what may be called, the 'state theory of learning'. The state theory of learning in England is based on the idea that a combination of the repeated high stakes testing of pupils, a national curriculum, and in primary schools mandated pedagogy in numeracy and literacy will raise 'standards'. Schools are judged by their performance in national tests of pupil attainment and their resulting standing in league tables.

The changing role of local authorities

By considerably devolving resources and decision making powers directly to schools the 1988 Education Reform Act radically altered the definition of local authority functions. Several policies were introduced as part of the move towards school self-management: a large proportion of local authority

budgets was handed directly to schools; policies of open enrolment meant that local authorities would have reduced decision-making powers over pupil selection; local authority representation on governing bodies was also reduced by removing the inbuilt majority of local politicians and increasing the representation of parents and local business interests. More recently, and in line with the government's commitment to 'joined-up' policy under the Children's Act (2004) education and social services have been merged into the wider brief of children's services.

The key change for local authorities, with respect to education, however, is that they have become part of the process of monitoring in relation to standards, generating data by which schools' performance can be judged and developing strategies for intervention in cases where schools are not considered to be performing well.

The operation of school governing bodies

In the shift towards the self-governance of schools, the role of governing bodies has become increasingly important. They have been given control over major aspects of school management including: strategic leadership, resourcing, the employment of professional staff and the development of key policies within areas such as the school curriculum and discipline. Modelled on the basis of the private sector board of directors, they are expected to have an especially positive effect on the development of more strategic forms of school management.

Alternative models of school administration

During the same period, central government has instigated and/or encouraged a number of alternative models of school administration. Currently Academies have a high and controversial profile. Academy status gives schools considerable autonomy with respect to admissions, the appointment of governors and the area(s) of specialism that schools adopt. To date this model has been confined to the secondary sector. Through Foundation Schools the role of charitable trusts has been strengthened, while the government has encouraged the expansion of the faith schools sector.

Policy making in the new environment

Today the balance of power lies between central government and local partners involved in the running of schools. While control is in the hands of the former, strategic decisions and the planning of school activities is largely in the hands of schools.

Government control is exercised mainly through strategies for setting and monitoring standards, with OfSTED playing a central role through the development of mandatory assessments and inspections. At the primary stage national strategies in literacy and numeracy, now consolidated within the Primary Strategy, have extended the control of content via the National Curriculum into the realm of day-to-day classroom practice and decision-making, thus greatly reducing the autonomy of teachers in this phase.

Key issues and findings from the research surveyed

Since the arrival of New Labour central control in key areas of educational action has been strengthened within a framework of administrative and fiscal devolution and a growing emphasis on 'partnerships' aimed at bridging traditional private/public, market/state divides.

Research suggests that the paradoxes involved in this model of 'decentralized-centralism' are at the core of the difficulties found in the application of government policies. The notion of partnership, too, is problematic and evidence suggests that private involvement in public education has not produced the changes claimed by its advocates.

Many of the key issues arising from the current model of governance concern 'standards' and the associated batteries of tests by which pupil and school performance are judged. The new system of governance therefore needs to be judged against two questions. The first concerns the way a new and highly complex system impacts on children's learning, while embracing economic efficiency. The problem here is in attempting to trace the causation involved. This is extremely difficult. One of the most significant attempts to do so suggests that there is likely to be a range of tensions and

contradictions between and across the different levels of management which may have a bearing on outcomes. One of these tensions concerns the way that head teachers have to deal with multiple external agency requirements and relationships, while also conforming to test performance demands. This is clearly difficult and may explain the significant number of vacancies for headships.

The other question relates to the larger concerns of the Primary Review: the learning outcomes desired by the government and imposed upon schools through the National Curriculum, national tests, national strategies and other initiatives. There is little doubt that the machinery of surveillance and accountability makes it difficult for schools to deviate from focusing on test performance. Whether these outcomes represent the sum of children's education or merely their ability in taking tests is another matter, and it is addressed by other studies in this series.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Balarin, M. and Lauder, H. (2008) *The Governance and Administration of English Primary Education* (Primary Review Research Survey 10/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-20-9.

The report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Funding and Governance**.

Enquiries: The Administrator, The Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523.

Email: enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk   Website: www.primaryreview.org.uk

Press enquiries: richard@margrave.co.uk   (Richard Margrave, Communications Director).

Note: the views expressed in the Primary Review Research Reports are those of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Primary Review, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation or the University of Cambridge.