

Anti Academies Alliance



www.antiacademies.org.uk

“A good
local school
for every
child”

‘Free’ Schools The lessons from Sweden

Michael Gove has introduced ‘free’ schools into the English education system. These are schools which are independent of the Local Authority and can be set up by parents, charities or businesses. 24 opened in September 2011 and 55 are due to open in 2012.

‘Free’ schools originated in Sweden. Unfortunately for Gove, Swedish ‘free’ schools have had a stream of bad press recently.

Here we summarise the experiences and problems that Swedish ‘free’ schools have had and their impact on the Swedish education system.

What are ‘Free’ schools

‘Free’ schools are often opened in empty office blocks, industrial estates or other cheap accommodation. They often have very few facilities. They rarely have libraries, sending pupils to local municipal libraries instead. They rarely have art, design & technology, cookery or sports facilities, as these take up space and are expensive. Instead they send pupils away on courses to study these areas of the curriculum.

75% of Sweden's ‘free’ schools are run for profit.

This is achieved by the economies described above, and by the use of untrained teachers.

The number of qualified teachers in independent schools is a little over 60% compared to 84% in public schools.

Falling Standards

Per Thulberg, director general of the Swedish National Agency for Education, said the schools had “*not led to better results*” in Sweden.

“Swedish pupils slide in new global ranking”

Sweden came in 19th overall out of 65 OECD countries and partners, far behind OECD partner Shanghai, China and OECD leaders Korea and Finland, the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2009 survey revealed.

Compared with PISA 2000, Sweden has lost 19 points and now has 497, compared with 556 for Shanghai, 539 for Korea and 536 for Finland. The OECD average is 493.

Literacy: the Swedish results have worsened, with the reading comprehension of 15-year-olds at the PISA average.

Mathematics: Since the 2003 survey, Swedish students have lost 15 points and currently perform at an average level.

Science: for the first time, Swedish students have fallen below the OECD average in science. Sweden is now six points below the OECD average and the survey projects a downward trend in this area.

PISA revealed a growing disparity between high- and low-performing students and a strengthened role in the students' socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, the differences between high- and low-performing schools has increased.

<http://www.thelocal.se/30668/20101207/>

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He said: *"This competition between schools that was one of the reasons for introducing the new schools has not led to better results. The lesson is that it's not easy to find a way to continue school improvement. The students in the new schools have, in general, better standards, but it has to do with their parents and backgrounds. They come from well-educated families."*

and *"We have had increasing segregation and decreasing results, so we can't say that increasing competition between schools has led to better results".*

Increasing Segregation

One of the concerns that campaigners in Britain have about academies and 'free' schools is the possibility of them leading to segregation. The Skolverket report says *"Several previous studies, and statistics, show that choice in the school system has led to a tendency to segregate in terms of pupils' sociocultural background, performance and ethnic background."*

Skolverket report 2004. www.skolverket.se.

Ann-Christin Larsson, a senior officer at teaching union Lärarförbundet, spoke at a seminar organised by the Anti Academies Alliance and the TUC in March 2010. She said

"Independent schools have also created more segregation. Pupils attending these schools are from better off, more educated families. It's because they are more informed and they know how to work the system better."

“Doubts grow over the success of Sweden's free schools experiment”

SNS, a prominent business-funded thinktank, issued a report in September that sharply reversed its normal pro-market stance. The entry of private operators into state-funded education, it argued, had increased segregation and may not have improved educational standards at all.

"The empirical evidence showing that competition is good is not really credible, because they can't distinguish between grade inflation and real gains" Dr Jonas Vlachos, who wrote the report on education, told the *Observer*.

Vlachos, an associate professor of economics at Stockholm University, is standing his ground. His argument is based on his finding that students who entered gymnasium [sixth form] from free secondary schools on average went on to get lower grades over the next three years than those who had entered with the same grade from municipal secondary schools.

Vlachos suspects that, because schools rather than external examining boards mark students, free schools are more generous than municipal schools in the grades they give. *"There's been tremendous grade inflation in Swedish schools"* he said.

Jan Björklund, the minister of education, moved to tighten central control over schools and is soon to launch a parliamentary inquiry into competition and free schools.

"Loopholes in the legislation have meant that free schools can elect not to have a library, student counselling and school nurses" he complained. *"And as they get just as much money as the municipal schools, the owners have been able to withdraw the surplus."*

Vlachos believes that the economic thinking underlying free schools is simply wrong. *"It's very difficult for people to make an informed choice of what's a good school and that's not conducive to a well-functioning market"*

In his study, Vlachos argued that such systems were brought in as much to save costs as to improve education.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/10/sweden-free-schools-experiment>

The SNS report, only in Swedish, is here <http://www.sns.se/forlag/20-ar-med-forandringar-i-skolan-vad-har-hant-med-likvardigheten>

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