

Speech: Nick Gibb: The power of greater freedom and autonomy for schools

Year on year, the voice of Freedom and Autonomy for Schools National Association (FASNA) grows ever more prominent in the nation's great education debates. FASNA – under the stewardship of Tom Clark – continues to be an independent voice, arguing for the empowerment of teachers and the pursuit of evidence-based policies that enable schools to raise standards for all pupils.

FASNA promotes autonomy for schools, believing that autonomous schools are the best vehicle to innovate and raise standards for their pupils, in the best interest of local communities. This is a belief that we share. Thanks to the reforms of this government, support from organisations like FASNA and the hard work of teachers and headteachers around the country, there is now a burgeoning empirical evidence base for this belief.

Herein lies the power of greater freedom and autonomy for schools. By empowering teachers and headteachers and promoting an atmosphere of innovation and evidence, power is wrestled from the old authorities. Ideas are weighed and, if they are found wanting, they can be discarded.

By unleashing the proliferation of ideas, it is no longer the exclusive prerogative of LA advisers or education faculties of universities to dictate pedagogy or curriculum to teachers. Teachers – empowered by our reforms – have seized back their profession.

And thanks to powers granted by the government and the expansion of the academies and free schools programmes, teachers and headteachers now enjoy far greater control over the destiny of their school. Decision making has truly been localised and professionalised.

Alongside the greater freedoms made available to teachers in free schools and academies, the government also scrapped 20,000 pages of unnecessary regulation and guidance, freeing teachers to focus on teaching.

Greater powers now exist to deal with disruptive behaviour, which for too long blighted English education. Importantly, the government granted teachers anonymity if they faced allegations from parents or pupils.

But freedom has not only been granted, it has been seized. For example, Tom Bennett's report, '[Creating a Culture](#)' – drawing on evidence and examples from high performing schools – documents how all schools in all circumstances can achieve high standards of behaviour.

It is the determination of teachers to prove that all children thrive when given a classical liberal education – after decades of being told that

Shakespeare and good behaviour isn't for children from certain backgrounds – that has been the most important consequence of greater teacher autonomy.

The flourishing online community of teacher-bloggers – who share their experiences, challenge received wisdom and critique evidence – are raising the status of the profession and improving the lives of pupils. Few examples from teaching better sum up the perennially underestimated effects of freedom than the effect that this heterodox collection of teachers have had on the profession.

And this new education commentariat – distinguished from those they are replacing because of their current classroom experience – are taking their influence offline. Through teacher-organised, grassroots conferences such as ResearchED, evidence of what really works in the classroom is spreading quickly throughout the system.

From Andrew Old's long-standing campaign against the so-called 'Ofsted teaching style', to Greg Ashman's tireless commitment to evidence-based practice and Jo Facer's thoughtful and personal reflections, these classroom teachers provide insight, commentary and challenge from the classroom – making redundant those who seek to speak for teachers.

And teachers have seized control of schools too. This year's GCSE results go to show the effect of greater autonomy: 8 of the top 10 schools for progress made by pupils were academies or free schools.

These extraordinary schools are changing what is thought to be possible and raising expectations across the country. They are an example to any school seeking to improve.

And whether you look at Reach Academy Feltham, Dixons Trinity Academy or the Harris Academy Chain – which had three schools register Progress 8 scores above 1 – there are some obvious similarities.

All of these schools teach a stretching knowledge-rich curriculum. Each has a strong approach to behaviour management, so teachers can teach uninterrupted. And all of these schools serve disadvantaged communities, demonstrating that high academic and behavioural standards are not – and must not – be the preserve of wealthy pupils in independent schools.

In the areas of the country where the government's reforms have matured most rapidly, school-level autonomy twinned with a sensible accountability system has created a range of different schools from which parents can choose.

All around the country, the government has built the foundations of an education system through which teachers and headteachers control the levers over school improvement and parents exercise choice, wrestling power away from local education authorities and handing it back to local communities.

With an intelligent accountability system to maintain high standards, innovative schools collaborate and compete with one another to improve teaching, the quality of their curricula or retention of their staff.

The guiding principles behind the reforms to the curriculum, assessment and accountability structure were simple: raise standards, increase rigour and ensure that every child – whatever their background – receives a high-quality, knowledge-rich academic education up until the age of 16.

Schools are now judged based on the outcomes and progress they achieve for their pupils, giving a truer picture of the achievements of schools. The government wants to do even more to attract teachers to schools in challenging areas, but the change in emphasis in the accountability system should go a long way towards breaking down the barriers to attracting teachers to where they are most needed.

Of even greater significance has been the refinement and improvement of the national assessment system. In order to encourage schools to enter more pupils into rigorous academic GCSEs, the government introduced the EBacc performance measure, a key combination of academic subjects: maths; English; two sciences; a humanity; and a language. This combination of subjects provides pupils with a broad academic core of knowledge and provides pupils with the best opportunity of being admitted to the UK's most prestigious universities.

A recent report from the Sutton Trust found that pupils at schools that had enthusiastically adapted its curriculum to enter more pupils into the EBacc combination of subjects were more likely to achieve good English and maths GCSEs and go on to take A level or equivalent Level 3 qualifications, as compared to a set of schools with similar characteristics.

Additionally, the pupil premium gap closed slightly more in these schools compared with schools with similar pupil intakes, but which had not adapted its curriculum choices to promote greater take up of the EBacc.

This policy has resulted in some significant improvements. Since 2010, the proportion of pupils studying the science component of the EBacc has risen from 63% to 91%. Similarly, the proportion of pupils studying either history or geography has risen from 48% to 77%. These figures show the scale of what has been achieved in education over the past seven years.

However, there is much more to do if we are to achieve our manifesto target of 75% of pupils studying for the EBacc by 2022 and 90% studying the EBacc suite of qualifications by 2025. This year, for the first time the proportion of pupils entering subjects in all five pillars fell slightly, whilst the proportion of pupils entering four pillars or more rose 6%. More pupils took more EBacc subjects, but fewer pupils took all five EBacc subjects needed.

The proportion of pupils taking GCSE languages has risen from 40% to just 47% this year, falling from 49% last year. Too few pupils are being taught a foreign language. In an ever more globalised world, having an economy with a voracious appetite for people with knowledge of a foreign language and being a great trading nation and host to the world's financial capital, we must do more to ensure more pupils study languages at GCSE.

We cannot always rely on businesses' demand for multi-lingual senior staff to

be met by foreign born or non-UK employees or those educated in the independent sector. We need those opportunities to be equally available to young people educated in our state schools.

Our accountability system – including the EBacc entry and attainment measures – rewards schools for their achievements and incentivises behaviour that improves outcomes for pupils, maintaining standards and allowing for innovation. But, too many schools have been competing on an unequal footing because of the unfair and anachronistic funding system.

The unfair, opaque and outdated school and high needs funding system meant the same pupils would attract significantly different levels of funding depending on where in the country they went to school. The government is grasping the nettle and addressing this unfairness.

As FASNA knows, the need for reform has been widely recognised, because of the manifest unfairness in the current system. For example, Nottingham receives £555 more per pupil than Halton despite having similar proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals.

For the first time, school funding will be distributed according to a formula based on the individual needs and characteristics of every pupil and school in the country. This will direct resources where they are needed most, and provide transparency and predictability for schools.

Time and time again since 2010, the government has demonstrated the desire to take on the big questions that confront our country.

Following extensive consideration, involving two public consultations – generating over 26,000 responses – and a large number of meetings with teachers, headteachers, councillors, governors, academy trusts and MPs, the government announced the final national funding formula for schools and high needs in September.

The introduction of the national funding formula is supported by significant extra funding of £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the budget announced at the 2015 spending review, ensuring that no school will lose out as a result of these reforms.

Thanks to our careful management of the public finances, we are able to increase core funding for schools and high needs from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion in 2018-19 and £43.5 billion in 2019-20. That's £2.5 billion more in 2019-20 than in 2017-18. This will allow us to maintain school and high needs funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years.

To provide stability, the Government has announced that local authorities will continue to decide final, individual school budgets for the next two years. However, the funding local authorities receive will – for the first time – be allocated according to a clear and transparent formula based on the characteristics of pupils and schools in their areas.

This historic reform, backed by increased investment, will ensure:

- An increase in the basic amount of funding every child attracts to their school, compared to our proposals in December
- A minimum per pupil funding level of £4,800 for secondary schools and £3,500 for primary schools in 2019-20
- A minimum cash increase for every school through the formula of one per cent per pupil by 2019-20, with underfunded schools seeing rises of up to three per cent per pupil in 2018-19 and a further three per cent per pupil in 2019-20
- A £110,000 lump sum for every school to help with fixed costs, and an additional £26 million to rural and isolated schools to help them manage their unique challenges

The final national funding formula will benefit schools right across the country. Rural schools will gain on average 3.9% through the formula, with those schools in the most remote locations gaining 5.0% and schools with the highest numbers of pupils starting with low attainment will gain on average 3.8%.

In order to provide transparency to the public, we have published the full detail online, so that everyone can see notional figures illustrating what these reforms mean for their local schools.

We have also recognised the need for additional investment in high needs to support the most vulnerable pupils. Every local authority will see a minimum increase in high needs funding of 0.5% in 2018-19, and 1% in 2019-20. Overall, local authorities will gain 4.6% on average in their high needs budgets.

These much-needed reforms to school funding provide teachers and headteachers with the resources they need to continue to drive up standards in schools, and they allow parents to choose the best school for their child safe in the knowledge that they will receive the fair funding their child deserves.

By combining greater autonomy, raised expectations and a level playing field for all, the school system has gone from strength to strength. Where appropriate, the government has stepped back, with teachers, schools and MATs having control over their destiny. No longer does the scourge of the 'Ofsted teaching style' dictate pedagogy in English classrooms. Now teachers are free to pursue and debate the most effective teaching methods.

But government has played, and will continue to play, an important role. As well as levelling the playing field and liberating teachers from unnecessary constraints, the government has played a crucial role in raising standards for all.

Thanks to the phonics reforms, 154,000 more pupils are on track to be fluent readers this year than in 2012. The review of the national curriculum has seen knowledge restored to the heart of schooling, better preparing pupils for working life and introducing them to the great conversations of humankind.

Government will continue to raise standards for all children, whatever their

background. We are determined to close the 'word gap' that exists when pupils first arrive at school. We know that disadvantaged pupils arrive in reception with less developed language and vocabulary than their more affluent peers.

In the interests of having a socially just and socially mobile society, it is important that we do more to address this inequality. Children who struggle with language in reception are six times less likely to reach the expected standard in English at age 11 and ten times less likely to achieve the expected level in maths, demonstrating that early language development is key to unlocking potential.

And we are determined to make progress in preparing pupils for the rigours of secondary school. The new primary maths curriculum and the introduction of the multiplication tables check will help ensure that every pupil leaves primary school knowing their times tables, granting secondary maths teachers the freedom to cover complex mathematical concepts secure in the knowledge that their pupils have the requisite domain knowledge.

Alongside a dynamic and self-improving school system, government has an important role to play in spreading excellence to all parts of the school system. That is what we will continue to do.

Over the past seven years, the school system has been transformed:

- Teachers and headteachers have been empowered, being given additional responsibilities, more autonomy and a greater voice
- Rigour has been returned to our education system, with more pupils studying core academic subjects and innovative free schools and academies leading the way in raising standards
- Schools will be funded fairly and transparently for the first time

FASNA has played a key role in the national education debates, arguing for greater freedom and autonomy for schools. Your contribution has been invaluable in shaping, developing and fine-tuning national policy, and I look forward to working with you in the future.