

Voluntary partnerships ~ or enforced liaisons?

The Labour party's idea of forcing independent schools to share their facilities and expertise with the state sector has been kicked into the long grass - for the time being at least. Their amendments to the Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill did not get through a Parliamentary committee earlier this month (January). Commentators believe the idea, which might oblige independent schools to open art, music and drama departments to state schools and offer careers advice and help with university applications to pupils from state schools, may resurface later. Many independent and state schools already cooperate via voluntary partnership 'ISSP' schemes which benefit both, although some state schools are known to be hesitant about such arrangements. Here, Julie Robinson (pictured), General Secretary of the Independent Schools Council (ISC) reflects on the issue...



through their annual reports to the Charity Commission and most schools run collaborative projects as a matter of course, simply as part of their engagement with the local community and supporting high educational standards generally.

It was heartening to see amendments to the Charities Bill withdrawn at the committee stage in the Commons. These amendments would have sought to introduce legislation requiring independent schools to work with state schools on a range of specific, determined projects and could have gone a great way to undermine and undo a lot of hard work, over many years, already put into fostering these strong ties.

It is not the case that all independent schools are large - the typical ISC school is one of around 350 pupils - and many schools operate within tight financial restraints.

Successful partnership work is created by pairs or groups of schools seeking to develop projects according to local need. It grows from good working relationships between the schools and thrives on flexibility and local opportunity. It is because of this that we, as well as independent schools of all sizes across England, do not believe a 'one size fits all' approach is appropriate. Several schools have written to their MPs pointing this out.

ISC and the Associations remain fully committed to protecting independent schools which are

charities from these proposed amendments. Schools are now able to highlight their valuable partnership work on the new www.schoolstogether.org website - a public platform created with the Independent/State Schools Partnership forum at the DfE - to show good work being done to a wide audience of opinion formers and decision makers. This provides a showcase beyond individual schools' websites where everyone can see good practice across the country which might inspire further collaborative projects. We encourage all schools to take a look at the site and to upload their projects.

Productive partnership work is based on independent and state schools finding the best way to work with each other, by themselves.

Quotable quotes...

"[Labour's plans] would undermine the thousands of existing partnerships because schools would have to obey the new charity rules."

Barnaby Lenon
Chairman of the Independent Schools Council

"This betrays the Labour Party's prejudiced and outdated assumption that state schools lag behind private schools."

Nicky Morgan
Education Secretary

"Instead of telling independent schools off, it would be far better if both major political parties worked with independent schools to make this world-class education available to more bright pupils. Forty years ago, that is what the direct grant system did. It's a shame that education is now engaged in such a sterile dispute."

John Cloughton
Chief Master
King Edward's School Birmingham

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