



Cartoon by
Polly Donnison

Free schools should come with a health warning



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HOW can the Government be funding schools to open with alternative approaches to education, watching as parents opt for these institutions, but then essentially disallowing their divergent philosophies as soon as they run into difficulties?

I've asked myself this question repeatedly in relation to the free schools policy in recent months, as communities wonder how Department for Education support for these controversial new institutions can prove to be so shallow.

In the West Country, many parents and former staff at three free schools, which until recently were run as state-funded Steiner Waldorf institutions, are despairing after they were handed by the Government to an academy trust.

Most of what made the Steiner schools distinctive has now been removed. Their creative approach has been abandoned by the incoming Avanti Schools Trust, which took over the schools, in Bristol, Exeter and Frome, after all failed Ofsteds amid safeguarding concerns, in late 2018.

Meanwhile, in Devon, another alternative vision has bitten the dust. Plymouth School of Creative Arts was set up in 2013, placing the emphasis on "learning in all subjects through making". Much of the building was open plan.

By last year, however, the school had failed its own Ofsted, inspectors criticising the effects of the building itself, student progress and the curriculum. The Government handed it to another large academy trust, Reach South, which appears to be reshaping it in line with ministers' favoured traditionalist stance.

In south London, the International Academy of Greenwich, which had offered the International Baccalaureate (IB) from temporary buildings since opening in 2016, is closing after the site of its proposed permanent home was rejected by council planners.

Parents were distraught as the Government appeared to have given no

thought as to whether pupils who had begun IB courses could study them elsewhere.

I guess many readers will be sceptical about the free schools policy, as am I. But most striking in these cases is how, having funded the schools, ministers see no obligation to the parents who opted for them to respect the choices those families made.

So, while safeguarding concerns at the former Steiner schools are, of course, significant, the idea of addressing these weaknesses while respecting principles on which the schools had been set up seems not to have featured.

Repeatedly, the original from-the-ground-up idea of the free schools policy seems to have run up against the centralised decision-making of the Government's academies policy; pressure to improve results on a narrow range of indicators; and arguably against a top-down vision of education as enshrined by Ofsted.

Thus the diversity allegedly promoted by the policy is shown up as hollow. Parents need to be aware that Government support for the different approaches free schools may initially offer could well be withdrawn as soon as an institution runs into difficulties.