



The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain
The Resource Centre
356 Holloway Road
London N7 6PA
Email: mairead@irishtraveller.org.uk

IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN

BRIEFING

Traveller Free schools: The way forward?



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INTRODUCTION

The desirability of specialist education provision for Travellers is a question that has always attracted both support and criticism in equal measures. In the autumn of 2010, Education Secretary Michael Gove announced that 16 proposals for free schools had been given a green light by the Government and were expected to open in September 2011. The second call for applications is expected to re-open again in the coming months for schools intending to open in the 2012-2013 academic year.

The free schools model provides an alternative for educators, families and communities who are dissatisfied with educational quality and local council bureaucracies which currently exist. The establishment of a free school offers a potential opportunity for a model of education which could be specialist, tailored and highly support orientated towards Travellers, should the community itself wish to decide on proceeding down this route.

This paper explores the appropriateness of this option and the suitability with regard to the needs of the Traveller community. It highlights the key arguments in favour of adopting the free schools model as well as the potential risks which could be associated with children withdrawing from mainstream education.

The first part of this paper will consider the background to the free schools model which will then be followed by an outline of the key features. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn on the matter which is broadly in favour of the adoption of free schools but which urges caution that inherent safeguards need to be built into the process and even more critically, there cannot be success without full commitment and ownership from the community in the establishment and management of a free school application.

BACKGROUND

In the current education system, mainstream state schools, are controlled and funded entirely or partially by the Local Education Authority (LEA). There are 24,000 maintained schools in the UK, with 7,000 of these secondary schools. All pupils in these schools follow the national curriculum and, with the exception of grammar schools, they do not operate a selective admissions policy. The majority of maintained schools are community schools where the LEA owns the land and buildings, but they also include voluntary schools, foundation and trust schools. The LEA also funds the school, employs the staff, provides support services and usually sets the admission procedures.

Free Schools are a policy of the Conservative-Liberal coalition whereby it is now possible for parents, teachers, charities and businesses to set up their own school in England. Such schools would be state school funded by the tax-payer, non-selective and free to attend but they would not be controlled by local authorities. A free school will be a new school that will have the same legal requirements as academy schools. They will be state funded but free from local authority control and therefore have the ability to control things like pay and conditions to staff. The concept of free schools is based upon a similar model found in Sweden as well as US charter schools.

As regards the question as to who can set up a free school, almost anyone who can provide evidence that there is demand for a new school can set up one. Charities, universities, independent schools, community and faith groups and businesses are among the most likely groups cited by the Government.

KEY POINTS

1. **Current system is failing**
2. **Evidence**
3. **Flexibility and school ethos**
4. **Community Hub**
5. **Risk of segregation and ghettoisation**
6. **Geographical issues and Community Buy- in**

1. **Current system is failing**

1.1 It is clear that the current system is failing Traveller children for a variety of complex reasons. The issue of improving educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils has been a focus of research and policy for some time and is particularly serious for secondary age pupils. Evidence suggests that where Gypsy and Traveller pupils do transfer successfully to secondary school, their attendance is unlikely to continue beyond the age of 14.¹ Ultimately, recent figures have found that only 38% of Irish Travellers reach statutory leaving age.²

1.2 In the most recent research to date carried out by the Department for Education, using an analysis of the National pupil database over a five year period, higher rates of Free School Meals eligibility were found with Irish Travellers, suggesting a connection between poverty and disrupted educational experience. Irish Traveller pupils are reported to have the highest level of Special Educational Needs of all ethnic minority groups, and this may be the result of families lacking information or experiencing problems accessing appropriate health care, or schools failing to respond appropriately to cultural difference. Overall, the fact such pupils tend to have low prior attainment, have Special Education Needs

¹ See Department for Education and Skills, *Ethnicity and Education: The Evidence on Minority Ethnic Pupils aged 5-16 (2006)*. See also, Derrington, C. and Kendall, S. (2004). *Gypsy Traveller Students in Secondary Schools: Culture, Identity and Achievement*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

² Department for Education, *Improving the outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils: final report (Oct 2010)*

and are entitled to Free School Meals was found likely to have been affected by cultural factors.³

1.3 All of this evidence therefore suggests that radical measures in order to redress the low education attainment of Irish Travellers is long overdue. Related to this, further commitment must be made to tackle the root causes of these problems. In this regard, it is argued that the provision of any alternative educational provision which will be tailored to the specific needs of the community must surely be a good thing since clearly the current mainstream system is not working for Travellers.

1.4 In addition to this, the extremely concerning withdrawal of funding to support Traveller Education Teachers which have been the only dedicated resources funding Traveller education working towards promoting higher attainment levels will leave a huge gap in the provision of specialist support to Travellers. Therefore by proceeding with the option of free schools it will allow for the alternative possibility to access government funding in order to obtain specialist support for Travellers. Linked to this,

2. Evidence suggests they work

RACHEL WOLF, NEW SCHOOLS NETWORK- The evidence from New York, from Boston, from Chicago, is that they can and will. There, new schools set up and run by teachers in the poorest areas have transformed education standards. Dedicated teachers are getting the poorest children - children who had been let down in other schools - into college.

2.1 The evidence suggests that in similar free schools worldwide in including in the US and Sweden, there is a high degree of success, in particular, in

³ Ibid.

relation to raising attainment in areas where there have been significant under-achievement and in the US model in particular evidence has shown that they have been particularly successful at substantially increasing attainment of ethnic minorities.

2.2 Sweden

In 1992 the government introduced a system of school vouchers where schools without the municipality as principal, could receive government funding for each student. The schools cannot charge the students extra fees, nor can they discriminate or require admission examinations. These "free schools" most often have an alternate pedagogy (for example Montessori), foreign/international, religious (for example Catholic or Muslim) or special needs (for example hearing-impaired) profile. There are about 900 free schools in Sweden. Per Unckel, Governor of Stockholm and former Minister of Education, summarized the advantages of Swedish system "Education is so important that you can't just leave it to one producer. Because we know from monopoly systems that they do not fulfill all wishes".

2.3 United States

Charter schools in the United States are primary or secondary schools that receive public money (and like other schools, may also receive private donations) but are not subject to some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results, which are set forth in each school's charter. Charter schools are opened and attended by choice. Some charter schools are founded by teachers, parents, or activists who feel restricted by traditional public schools. State-authorized charters (schools not chartered by local school districts) are often established by non-profit groups, universities, and some government entities. There are two principles that guide charter schools. First is that they will operate as autonomous public schools, through waivers from many of the procedural requirements of district public schools. These waivers do not mean a school is exempt from the same educational standards set by the State or district. Autonomy can be critically important for creating a school culture that maximizes student motivation by emphasizing

high expectations, academic rigor, discipline, and relationships with caring adults. Affirming students, particularly minority students in urban school districts, whose school performance is affected by social phenomena including stereotype threat, "acting white", non-dominant cultural capital, and a "code of the street" requires the autonomy to create a carefully balanced school culture to meet students' needs in each unique context.

3. Flexibility in curriculum and strong school ethos

3.1 One of the key characteristics of free schools is the fact that they will not be subject to local authority control and will instead fall under central control through the Department for Education, which will also provide funding. This would be a particular advantage in relation to setting up a Traveller free school as prejudices at the local level will not affect the decision to approve the school nor affect subsequent funding.

3.2 Additionally, one of the primary characteristics of free schools is the greater degree of flexibility that is possible in designing the curriculum. This freedom would potentially allow such a school to cater for the specific needs of the Traveller communities by allowing a specialist curriculum to be designed which could be tailored towards vocational and "skills for life" needs of Travellers. For example, emphasis on business skills for self-employment or languages which are useful in cross-border trading.

3.3 Many supporters see this as the key advantage of free schools as it will allow parents to have more choice in the type of education their child receives, much like parents who send their children to independent schools do. Many of the first 16 free schools which have been approved to date have a curriculum or ethos which is currently exclusively (or almost exclusively) available in independent schools at present. Supporters also argue that insisting that all schools are the same implies there is only one 'correct' way

to educate children. Rather, they believe that there are many effective methods of education, from which parents should be able to choose using their knowledge of their child.

3.4 Linked to this, by having ownership of the curriculum development, this could have a major effect on the number of children completing secondary education, since if the parents are heavily involved, this will ensure that they are encouraging their children to complete their education.

3.5 Additionally, in designing the curriculum there could be a strong focus on citizenship and a strong moral ethos designed to promote strong self-esteem in pupils. This would be of particular benefit in a Traveller free school in light of the everyday discrimination faced by the community by equipping the children with confidence and resilience.

4. Community Hub

4.1 In establishing a school to cater for the needs of Travellers, it would also provide an ample opportunity to gather a range of services in one location, which could facilitate a one stop shop of tailored support for the community. For example, such a school could also have police liaison teams, outreach workers providing training to parents, health outreach services etc. This provision of an array of services on one site would help promote a strong community focus which would also be positive for the school.

5. Risk of segregation and ghettoisation

5.1 The main risk associated with setting up a school specifically for Travellers is the potential for segregation and associated isolation of the students from wider society. Undoubtedly, there is the potential for negative consequences linked to this, such as a worsening of community relations with the settled community caused by less frequent contact.

5.2 In ensuring that this risk does not materialize, it would be important to build in safeguards in the governance of the school to overcome the risk of ghettoisation. This could involve taking such measures to ensure the pupils are not isolated from the local community, such as through establishing regular inter-school events with other local schools to ensure that the pupils can mix freely with other local children. This could involve for example, working together on citizenship projects, joint drama or sports events and cultural awareness events. This it is hoped would minimize the risk for segregation and further exclusion from society.

6. Geographical issues and Community Buy- in

6.1 Aside from the concerns about segregation, another factor which would pose a potential obstacle in the establishment of a free school, is the logistical barriers. Due to the wide dispersal of Travellers, it may prove difficult to get a large group living in the same area in order to establish the school. In order to overcome this, ITMB may be able to help to identify an appropriate group of a sufficient size.

6.2 Furthermore, aside from identifying an appropriate group, the establishment of a free school would only be a success if the community were themselves committed to establishing such a school as the school would be managed and governed by them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered the benefits and drawbacks of the free schools initiative, which offers both opportunities and risks. On the one hand there is the opportunity to overcome the present problems associated with high dropouts at the secondary school level through the development of a school which satisfies the skills needs of the community and which is fully owned by parents. This is particularly pertinent in light of the implications of cuts to Traveller education services. Whilst this policy is not explicitly aimed at benefiting the communities it could potentially offer a positive option offering specialist support to the community to counteract the loss of Traveller education services. As this paper has highlighted with careful consideration and planning such a school could offer a tailor made skills for life curriculum meeting the specific needs of Travellers.

However, in order that the establishment of such a school does not further isolate the community, there needs to be safeguards considered in the governance of the school to ensure pupils mix with other communities.

However, before such a course of action can be considered, there must be full and unequivocal ownership by Travellers themselves. Without their support and commitment at all stages in the process, the benefits of the free schools model will not be able to be realised.