

Grant Maintained (GM) Schools

The terms of reference for the Scrutiny Board Inquiry include the consideration of any relevant experiences of working with GM schools from other LEAs.

Research by Halpin, Fitz and Power¹ undertaken in 1990-91 examined the early impact of opting out on a selection of 24 English LEAs:-

Initial response of LEAs to the GM policy proposals

During the consultation phase, prior to the introduction of the GM proposals, most local authorities did not welcome the idea of opted out schools, being either opposed in principle to the policy or concerned about its practical consequences. The concerns raised by LEAs were that it would affect the LEAs capacity to develop plans for the rationalization of surplus school places. That, if a school was threatened with closure, amalgamation or reorganisation, the school would try to become GM and this would undermine the LEA's capacity to plan strategically. Because the LEA was still under an obligation to remove surplus school places, this might lead to some LEAs closing schools that they would otherwise prefer to keep open and the "danger that surplus school capacity would simply be shuffled around rather than tackled strategically".

LEAs are still under an obligation to remove surplus school places, but unless the Secretary of State makes it clear that he would not view sympathetically applications for GM status which appear to arise largely from a school's desire to avoid the consequences of reorganisation, rationalization schemes will be inhibited. (The Association of Metropolitan Authorities, 1988).

Fears were expressed that the policy would be unfair and have unsettling effects and divisive consequences. That "LEAs could have little more than a residuary function providing education largely for those children who could not gain admission to, or who were excluded from, the other kinds of schools" (Brent LEA, 1988).

There were concerns about the financial implications for LEAs. That:

The more schools opt out, the more serious the problem will become. With each school that leaves the authority, unit costs will rise and eventually a critical point is reached where it no longer makes financial sense to have an authority (Barnet's Director of Education, 1989).

Impact on LEAs once GM schools were in place

Two thirds of LEAs reported that reorganisation plans had been abandoned or postponed in the wake of schools seeking or having achieved GM status. One said that it had "put a complete brake on reviews right across the county in all sorts of

¹ Sources: *The Early Impact and Long Term implications of the Grant Maintained Schools Policy* Halpin, Fitz and Power, 1993 and *Grant Maintained Schools: Education in the Market Place* Halpin, Fitz and Power, 1993.

respects". However, seven LEAs said their planning for school places had not been disrupted because of GM schools.

The researchers found "ample evidence to suggest that a single opted out school could have a major impact on its previous LEA, particularly if it formerly occupied a pivotal position within the local authority's existing or anticipated scheme of provision". They learned of several instances where a school faced by closure or a change of character had achieved GM status and thereby "sabotaged local plans to develop, in one case, a tertiary college, in another, non-selective co-education. For both the LEAs concerned, there appeared to be little further room for manoeuvre except, that is, for them to identify another school to close which it was then feared would also seek to opt out."

Although there was antipathy to the policy felt by many of the LEAs studied, most were keen to develop positive relations with the GM schools in their area.

We have always said, and it is one of the principles that we have tried to work on, that the children who attend the grant-maintained school are still our children. They are still part of the maintained sector; that hasn't changed because the school has become grant-maintained. We have a duty to those children. It has also been our policy stance from the start to continue to provide at cost any service the school wants. (LEA in an Authority with no overall political control).

Several LEAs were selling services to GM schools (cleaning, payroll, school meals and INSET). At least one had offered "associate membership" of the LEA to its 'opt-out' schools.

The researchers concluded that most LEAs were adopting a "pragmatic as opposed to political response to the GM schools policy. That is to say, while they mostly do not like or welcome the policy, they regard it as more expedient to work with, rather than against, its grain."