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Two steps forward, one step back [1]

Written by **Tom Clougherty** [2] | Thursday 22 November 2007

In his most recent announcement on education, Conservative leader David Cameron pledged [3] to provide of 220,000 new school places by allowing independent organisations to set up schools that would receive state funding on a per pupil basis. Under the Tory plans, a legal presumption that any "fit and proper persons" should be able to set up their own state-financed schools would be created, and planning rules would be shaken up to release more land for educational purposes.

All of which is excellent, and could make a real difference to our ailing education system. Supply side reform like this, which harnesses market forces to create good new school places, is vital if demand side reform (i.e. school choice) is going to be effective. Indeed, the proposals are very similar to those in our recent education report *Open Access for UK Schools* [4] (which popped up again in the *Guardian* [5] this week).

Unfortunately though, I worry the Tories still haven't quite 'got it'.

The whole point of establishing independent schools within the state-funded sector is that in return for greater accountability (the school sinks or swims on how many pupils it is able to attract) the schools are given operational independence. This is the surest way to raise standards. Yet the Conservatives seem unable to move beyond the idea that when public money is being spent, the government has to regulate. Thus these new 'independent' schools would have to stream pupils by ability and teach synthetic phonics, and so on. Of course, these requirements may be sensible ones, but surely such decisions are better left to parents and to teachers? As soon as you allow government to regulate, the rules start piling up and you're back where you started ? city academies are a shining example of this.

All in all: good, but could do better.

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