

Policy watch

Education debate shapes up



Six weeks into the New Year and half term looming, so how are things shaping up on the education front? Clearly most eyes have been on the election and the economy but it's a busy time for education as well.

Big picture wise, three speeches stand out.

First, Lord Mandelson's [speech](#) to the Work Foundation at the start of the year. This set out the context for the next stage of development in the government's industrial strategy, building on last autumn's '[New Industry, New Jobs](#)' Paper and confirming the importance of the lead being shown by Lord Mandelson in this area. His Dept has come out with some important thinking on economic strategy over the last year notably in trying to define the right conditions for growth, seeking different forms of investment and identifying key sectors going forward. His speech was bullish about the potential for growth and focused on the infrastructure, investment and skills needed to exploit this, all themes developed in the subsequent '[Going for Growth](#)' Paper. Coming months will see more key sectors for growth identified, including potentially construction, business services and homeland security and completion of the Hauser Review on creating '[an innovation landscape](#)' based on models in Germany and Holland but for anyone wishing to understand the skills agenda going forward, this was an important speech.

Second, for those with an interest in schools, David Cameron's speech a couple of weeks later launching the Conservative's draft school [manifesto](#) was equally important. This centred on the importance of the teaching profession in raising standards in schools, "*if we want to give our children the best, it's time we made our teaching the best.*" Proposals for doing this have been fairly well rehearsed including: raising the bar on entry, encouraging career switching into teaching, improving the lot of the teacher by giving them greater powers in the classroom and, noticeably, introducing greater flexibility in pay structures. In a further development, the DCSF Select Committee this week released a Report into the '[Training of Teachers](#)' which endorsed a number of the proposals particularly on raising quality, "*we are clear that the bar must be raised across the board.*" The Committee also threw its weight behind the government's own proposal to raise performance through a renewable licence system. The number of 'failing' teachers is small, just 46 teachers in England have been judged incompetent over the last eight years by the General Teaching Council but all Parties want to be seen as doing their bit to raise standards and there are continuing concerns about the use of non-specialists in certain subjects. Many will be attracted by the Select Committee's recommendation for "*a single, overarching 'Chartered Teacher Status' framework, linking professional development, qualifications, pay and the licence to practice.*" Raising standards, and in particular the role of teachers in this, is likely to feature strongly in Party manifestos.

Ensuring an even balance between the Parties, the third notable speech over the last few weeks has probably been Nick Clegg's [speech](#) at Barnardo's on 1 February; the theme was targeting public spending at the poorest children. In an article in

The Times early in the New Year, Nick Clegg made it clear that the Lib-Dems would not be *'for sale'* if a hung Parliament emerged after polling day but with the current polls uncertain about a clear majority, Lib-Dem policies are inevitably being looked at with particular interest. In January, Nick Clegg made his pitch for young people, interestingly through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube rather than the news media, with a 90-day promise that would see 16-24 year olds helped into a job, training, or internship after 3 months of unemployment rather than the six months promised by Labour and the Conservatives. In his Barnardo's speech, he returned to the theme of the pupil premium, *"the biggest spending commitment we will make at this general election."* This commitment, amounting to £2.5n, would be paid for out of efficiencies and a reduction in some 'middle class' benefits, would see additional support put in to support disadvantaged pupils and would help redistribute resources to where they are most needed.

Away from the speech making, education debate has centred on structural reform.

For schools, this has tended to focus on Conservative proposals for a new 'free' state school system. The Party has been developing its ideas in this area for some time now and they have featured most recently in their recent draft schools manifesto, *"we will break down the barriers to entry so that any good education provider can set up a new Academy school, free, non-selective, high-quality state school open to all."* The blueprint for such schools can be seen in the charter school system in America, known as charter because such schools are set up by different groups such as parents and charities and work to an agreement or charter rather than a set of state rules, and also in the Swedish 'free' school system, free in the sense that they are state funded but not state controlled. Another variant, the Swedish Kunskapskolan or 'Knowledge School' is gearing up to sponsor two Academies in England later this year. Here, learners will follow the National Curriculum but work more in ability groups than set classes and to a personalised learning plan. The New Schools Network, set up last year to provide support and assistance to those wanting to set up 'free' schools, has already picked up a lot of interest from groups wanting to set up such schools in England but as this week's Newsnight programme identified, there's still discussion to be had about how far the Swedish model would fit here.

For FE, where discussions about structure are a way of life, the issue is how best to deliver the skills needs of the future; a business-planned demand-led model as envisaged by Labour or a more open market of competitive provision, funded through a dedicated agency as envisaged by the Conservatives. An interesting take on possible future structures can be seen in a recent [Paper](#) commissioned by the 157 Group of Colleges. Operating in federated structures, offering broader campus models that encompass all through education and training from age 14 to HE, diversifying into international offerings, accrediting their own qualifications, even joint-venturing with the private sector all get an airing in this Paper. A lot will depend on how the fee system for further education develops in the future but as the Times Ed noted last week, the balancing act for colleges is how *'to operate in a commercial environment without losing local accountability.'*

As for HE, it now finds itself, perhaps surprisingly, playing host to the debate about how the public sector can deliver as the financial constraints tighten. As Lord Mandelson said in his [Dearing speech](#) this week, *"the three year, campus-based, straight after school, honours degree has served us well but it's not where we should focus future growth."* Little seems certain at present.

Edexcel Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.