**Report on APPG for Education meeting**

***The changing schools landscape: what can maintained schools, free schools and academies learn from one another?***

**5pm on 29th November 2011 in the Thatcher Room, Portcullis House**

**Chaired by Nic Dakin MP**

**Panellists:**

*Fiona Millar*, education journalist and co-founder of the Local Schools Network

*Adam Dawson*, Chair of Governors and co-founder of the Etz Chaim Jewish Primary School

*Bill Watkin*, Operational Director of The Schools Network

*Ray Barker*, Director of the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA)

**Attendees:**

Around 50 stakeholders attended, including parliamentarians, teachers, union representatives, educational resources suppliers, education associations, local authorities, free school and academy organisations, and law firms.

Following the opening description by *Nic Dakin MP* of a tapestry of schools now being in existence, a number of interrelated themes flowed from the debate question of what those schools can learn from one another:

**Redeveloping a middle tier:** With a growing number of schools outside local authority control, there were recurrent questions about the changing role of local authorities, the support they could now give, and what alternative arrangements might develop. *Fiona Millar* described local authorities as the glue in the system, often enabling collaboration and school improvement, and she believes that parents will demand a middle tier to deliver their community’s education needs. *Ray Barker* talked about the need to respond to the system as it now exists: accountability will develop, whether through local authorities or a self-governing body, and it is important that this emergent middle tier should not be politicised. He also described how many schools are positioning themselves as academies even where they do not intend to convert immediately because they believe the diminished role of local authorities will lead to increased costs for maintained schools.

**Legal and practical ambiguities:** There are a number of practical issues that free schools will face where the answer is not yet clear – as *Adam Dawson* described, the Government has paid for free schools, but if there is an urgent problem with a building, who should they call and who will fund major repairs? *Ray Barker* then looked at the legal issues around procurement by free schools and academies, where it is unclear whether they are a credit risk or whether they can go bankrupt, and where many schools are unaware that they are subject to European procurement rules.

**Increasing transparency:** Some argued that GCSE results distorted the impact made by academies, and that if they are removed there is no overall difference in performance from other types of schools. *Fiona Millar* raised concerns about the funding arrangements for free schools, which are not yet publicly available. In response, *Adam Dawson* said that his school had received a significant number of information requests and that changes to funding agreements were difficult to achieve.

**Opportunities for collaboration:** A number of free schools and academies at the meeting gave examples of groupings which pool resources and staff, and openly share their experiences about converting. *Adam Dawson* highlighted the close relationship that his free school is developing with the community (for example, through sharing teachers, knowledge, purchasing power, resources and facilities). He also emphasised that in establishing the school, the co-founders – living in Barnet with a shortage of school places – looked at what structural needs they could assist with and how to respond to local demand. He described the Government as having given small groups the opportunity to do something different – a form of educational entrepreneurship. *Ray Barker* looked at the ability of clusters to share their knowledge and buying power, and how reductions in funding would push schools to look for new ways of collaborating to support pupil needs.

**Getting collaboration right:** Some schools said that they wanted to collaborate, but felt there was suspicion from other schools, perhaps believing that they would have to prioritise other schools’ needs above their own or that they might share too many resources and ideas, leaving the question of how to begin collaborating. *Bill Watkin*emphasised that care was needed when developing partnerships – pairing strong and weak schools together only works where their particular characteristics, capabilities and needs are matched. A number of schools saw partnership with the local authority as a key aspect, particularly in relation to admissions – schools should not be their own admissions authority, and the role of the local authority in reflecting local characteristics and long-term strategic needs through admissions is vital.

**The schools tapestry:** In looking at the landscape overall, the changes were described as a move from a planned economy to a market economy, with many opportunities for mistakes and so a concurrent need for a broker role to enable that transition – although there was some confidence that a functioning middle tier would emerge. There was also concern that different types of school should not be viewed as homogenous – different arrangements suited different schools, and even within chains there were different approaches in certain areas. Others added that structure does not imply improvement, rather it is about the quality of teachers. There was agreement that the emphasis should be on common aspiration and common need, with children’s education at the centre rather than a politicised debate - there is no monopoly on success. *Baroness Howe of Idlicote* concluded the meeting by describing parents’ wishes: they want a balanced intake, quality teachers and leadership, good buildings and resources, and a community approach.