

*Zut alors*

*Geoff Barton*

*Is there a control freak in the house?*

*No sooner is the Government boasting about the liberating potential of its flagship policy on independent trust schools, than their urge to micro-manage gets the better of them.*

*Take Modern Languages. Everyone now seems to agree that if we are really to create decent and inclusive pathways for all students from 14-19, then key stage 4 needs freeing up. We can't carry on trying to tailor GCSEs to the individual needs of every pupil.*

*Many schools therefore seized the opportunity offered a couple of years ago to make Modern Languages an entitlement rather than compulsory subject. We wanted our brightest students to see languages as part of a humane basic education, and those who struggled with English to be able to concentrate on other courses.*

*Then last week we received School Minister Jacqui Smith's letter confirming what we had read in the press:*

*From September 2006 ... we expect all schools to set a benchmark for the number of students studying languages leading to a recognised qualification at Key Stage 4. It will be for schools to decide an appropriate target to set themselves between 50% and 90%.*

*Here we go again. It's the management-by-targets approach that ensnared David Blunkett. Remember his zeal for reducing pupil exclusions? It led him to set exclusion targets which were promptly and consistently missed before being quietly buried.*

*The problem, as was all know, is that you don't fatten a pig by weighing it. Targets in themselves do little to help improve anything. Few of us, for example, really believe that a lower number of exclusions in one year necessarily means that behaviour is better than in the previous year. It might be that we have a different cohort, a different mix of staff, different strategies in place, or (I'm not joking here) different weather.*

*The more you work in education, the more you recognise – and indeed relish – the unpredictable nature of factors beyond our control, such as, er, children.*

*In those early New Labour days the urge to control manifested itself in ambitious ideals like the literacy strategy and workforce remodelling, with consequences that many of us have welcomed. But more recently the tampering has become more irritatingly intrusive. For example, many people agreed that the tangle of management allowances needed a radical shake-up. But because we couldn't quite be trusted to manage the process at a pace that suited our own institutions, an unrealistic deadline was imposed. The result is that even many of the most stable schools have been plunged into unnecessary turbulence by centralised regulations.*

*Sometimes the level of pronouncements is more farcical. Ruth Kelly announced last year that vending machines containing junk food would be banned in schools. Whilst it's difficult not to agree that we shouldn't be selling crisps, gonad-burgers, and fizzy drinks to young people, there is both deeper issue here.*

*Schools like ours generate £7000 a year from vending – money that will simply transfer itself into the cash register of local newsagents with no impact on young people's health. Simply banning such foodstuffs doesn't do what good schools aim constantly aim for – to educate youngsters to take responsibility for their own eating habits. Outlawing crisps or (as we used to quaintly call it) pop will simply give those foodstuffs the*

*tantalising allure of other prohibited substances. Stand by to catch a bunch of your naughty Year 11s, hapless lookout posted by the bike sheds, furtively wolfing down a pack of Nik Naks.*

*One of the best things the Government did was to create the National College for School Leadership which, since Steve Mumby took over as Chief Executive, is finally starting to feel as if it belongs to the profession. But as you sow, so shall you reap. There's now a crop of school leaders well versed in distributed leadership, vision and values, and committed to growing the next generation of leaders.*

*We're also itching to be left alone to show that we can ride our bikes without the impediment of stabilisers or an over-attentive nanny running alongside. We like the possibilities offered by specialist status, extended schools, more devolved direct funding, and being judged by broader measures than simplistic league tables. We want to be given the time and space to get on with the job.*

*And that's the central irony of the proposal for independent trust schools. It's the "trust" bit which seems to be lacking.*

*Nul points for delegation, I'm afraid, Minister.*

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*50 words*