The Success of Free Schools - *Legacy Report*

& The Launch of the NSN Innovation Fund

New Schools Network

About this research

This report was produced by Public First on behalf of New Schools Network.

We are grateful to all those who submitted written contributions to the report. We are also especially grateful to Joanne Hoareau, Phil Copple and Sophie Harrison-Byrne for their assistance in compiling it.

We would also like to thank the Innovation Unit, whose research into the characteristics of high-performing free schools forms the basis of a chapter of the report.

About New Schools Network

New Schools Network was a national education charity set up in 2009 to support the creation of free schools in England.

It directly helped thousands of free school proposers develop their plans for opening new schools and worked closely with Ministers and officials on how every aspect of the free school programme was delivered.

It also delivered the Department for Education's (DfE's) Academy Ambassadors programme, recruiting over 2,000 highly skilled non-executive directors, trustees, and members to academy trust boards.

Having achieved its original mission to cement the role of free schools in the English education system, the charity's trustees decided in 2022 to close the charity's direct support for free schools.

From 2023, NSN will move into a new phase, in which it delivers an Innovation Fund that supports free schools and academy trusts that share NSN's commitment to ending educational inequality.

About Public First

Public First is a global strategic consultancy that works to help organisations better understand public opinion, analyse economic trends and craft new policy proposals.

It has worked directly with some of the world's biggest companies, government departments, top universities and major charities to produce bespoke, original policy proposals and reports derived from an evidence base of economic analysis and public opinion research.

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1. Foreword

It has been a great privilege to have been involved in the free school programme over the last 13 years.

As the sponsor of a multi-academy trust which has opened two free schools, I have seen the impact these new schools have made on the communities they serve, as well as the way they have improved the work of our trust overall.

As the Chair of New Schools Network (NSN) since 2016, I have also been aware of the much wider impact that the policy has had on this country's education system. The new schools that NSN was able to help bring into being have been remarkably successful in their own right. But they have also an outsized role in creating a much more vibrant school system, which benefits all our children. One in which unacceptably low standards have been challenged, school leaders have been given greater autonomy and innovation is encouraged.

In 2022 we took the difficult decision to re-purpose New Schools Network.

Before doing so, we commissioned this report to capture what those involved with the charity and the free school programme believe we can learn from it. It demonstrates the remarkable work being done by free schools around the country. It contains important lessons for all those motivated to improve education provision, as well as for anyone interested in how to successfully carry out public service reform. Sadly, it also reveals the way that the free school policy has lost its way in recent years – becoming too slow, too bureaucratic and too closed to new ideas. This poses a threat not just to the quality and number of future free schools, but to the quality of the wider school system, which they help to challenge. Without a dynamic free school programme, we are at risk of going backwards.

NSN remains committed to supporting innovative thinking and activity in the education sector.

Our remaining reserves, and anything which we raise in the future, will be used to support future innovation for schools in the free school system and to those working to help every child – no matter their background, income or geography – access an excellent education. As policymakers and politicians from all parties consider the future of the free school programme, I hope they will look carefully at the conclusions and recommendations of this report. They contain a clear call to reinject the programme with the urgency, entrepreneurialism and innovation that have made free schools so successful.

The last 13 years have shown what is possible when we have the courage to trust school leaders and communities to create high quality new schools, and support them to do so. It is time to find that courage again.

David Ross
Chair of Trustees, New Schools Network

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"The last 13 years have shown what is possible when we have the courage to trust school leaders and communities to create high quality new schools, and support them to do so."

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2. Introduction

New Schools Network (NSN) played a critical role in advocating for, designing and delivering the free school programme.

Between 2009- 2023, New Schools Network worked closely with communities, school leaders, Ministers and officials on every aspect of the free school programme was delivered.

Collectively, this work created a unique set of insights about how free schools and wider school reform can deliver improvement in the education system. The way that NSN worked with both government and communities also provides valuable lessons about public service delivery in general.

As the charity moves into a new phase, NSN's trustees commissioned this report to capture this learning, as well as the achievements of the free school programme to date.

It records, in their own voice, what those involved in the programme believe we can learn from its successes, as well as its failures.

The first section of the report looks directly at what we can learn from the experience of free schools themselves, including a summary of qualitative research by NSN and the Innovation Unit on the common principles of high performing free schools.

The second section of the report explores the wider impact of the programme, with reflections from DfE Ministers, NSN Directors and other leading policy thinkers about what it can teach us about reform in the education system and successful policy implementation in general.

The final section of the report draws together these insights and makes a series of recommendations for how to ensure free schools can continue to make a positive contribution to improving education. It also provides details of how NSN will continue to support this work through its Innovation Fund.

3. Executive summary

The free school programme is one of the most radical and impactful education policy reforms of the last thirty years.

Since 2010, it has enabled hundreds of communities, teachers, academy trusts, social entrepreneurs and others to open new state schools across England- many of them in areas of significant deprivation and low educational standards.

These schools have made a direct difference to hundreds of thousands of families. Free schools are more likely to be rated as Outstanding by Ofsted and outperforming other types of school across each stage of education. Several are now consistently ranked amongst the highest performing state schools in the entire country.

But free schools have also had a much wider impact. By empowering teachers to innovate, enabling the best existing schools to expand their reach and allowing new providers to bring in fresh thinking, they have injected new energy into the school system- helping to improve education for all.

The role that New Schools Network (NSN) played in supporting free schools also provides a model for how public service reform can be delivered. By acting as an interface between those starting free schools and the government, it was able to help build the capacity for change in communities around the country and help Ministers and officials improve how the policy was delivered.

One of the strengths of free schools is their diversity. Representing a hugely varied range of educational philosophies, curriculum approaches, faiths and communities, they demonstrate the value of having a genuinely diverse, autonomous school system.

High impact free schools also have much in common. They have a clear vision and sense of moral purpose, which informs every aspect of how the school is run, focus relentlessly on how pupils learn and how staff improve, and share their practice to support the wider school system.

We now have more evidence than ever about what makes a free school successful, as well as why a small number of free schools have failed. As a broadly accepted part of the school system, free schools should therefore be in a better position than ever to make a positive contribution.

Instead, the free school programme is in danger of losing direction. Recent waves of the programme have been less open to innovation, less accessible to many parts of the country and have delivered improvements for pupils far less quickly.

This means free schools are now a much less effective mechanism for bringing in new ideas and new capacity into education than they used to be.

In August 2023 the DfE announced that another 15 free schools had been approved to open. This will create 12,000 additional school places, including in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country.

This wave of free schools reminds us that the programme can bring fresh thinking and new solutions to long-standing challenges. In particular, it includes a partnership between Star Academies and Eton College to open new, high performing sixth form colleges in Dudley, Teesside and Oldham, which will help significantly more young people from these areas access top universities.

However, as we head towards a general election, the future of the programme remains uncertain, with no timetable for future application waves.

Change is now needed so that more new free schools can help deliver a good school place for every child.

Summary of recommendations:

1. The DfE should confirm details of a new round of applications for free schools and that it plans to continue the programme beyond the current spending review period, as part of a long-term commitment to free schools' role in the school system.
2. Future waves of the free school programme should have an explicit emphasis on promoting innovative approaches.
3. Future waves of the free school programme should reserve space for projects outside of areas with a basic need for school places – allowing communities to make their own case for a new school.
4. The DfE should fund increased support to free school applicants in communities facing educational disadvantage, so that they can engage with the free school programme.
5. School system leaders should campaign to secure a commitment to continuing the free school programme in each of the main political parties' manifestos.

4. The impact of free schools in numbers

701 **free schools** are open, with a **further 142** approved to open in the future.

Over 373,000 new school places have now been created by free schools.

Free schools are more likely to be based in areas which are more deprived.

Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, free schools have a lower average rank than other types of schools.

25% **of free schools** are rated as **'Outstanding'** by Ofsted – the highest of any type of state school and significantly more than all other types of state school overall.

School Type	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
Free Schools	**25%**	62%	9%	4%
All Schools	16%	73%	9%	3%

2/3 of all open or approved free schools were supported by NSN, with free school applicants that worked with NSN significantly more likely to be successful in each wave of the programme.

Over 90% of those supported by NSN **rated its support as helpful or very helpful.**

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Free schools outperform other types of non-selective state schools across each key stages for which national data is collected*:

Key Stage 1 – a higher percentage of pupils at free schools meet the required standards and are working at greater depth across Reading, Writing, Maths and Science than in other types of schools. **87% of pupils at free schools** meet the required standard in the Phonics Screening Check compared to 82% of pupils at all state schools.

Key Stage 2 – 64% of pupils at free schools meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths compared to 60% of pupils at all state schools. Pupils in free schools made more progress in reading and maths than pupils with similar prior attainment in other types of schools.

Key Stage 4 – free schools have an average Progress 8 score of 0.21 compared to an average for all state schools of-0.03

Key Stage 5 – Around **35% of A levels** taken by pupils in free schools achieved **a grade A or A*** compared to 22% studied by pupils in local authority schools.

* Reflects the most recently published data as of October 2023.

4,500 schools

The free schools supported by NSN are at the core of a community of over 4,500 schools, linked to them via Multi-Academy Trusts and other partnerships.

5. The 10 design principles of high impact free schools

Free schools are deliberately diverse. But whilst they take a wide range of educational approaches, the most successful schools to have emerged from the programme have much in common.

Working with the Innovation Unit, a social enterprise that grows and scales innovations that address persistent inequalities, NSN spoke to founders, school leaders, teachers, and students from nine high impact – but very different- free schools about what underpinned their success.

This revealed 10 shared principles – the components that guide how these schools were designed and how they function.

What is a 'high impact' free school?

This project explored the experiences of free schools with a track record of Outstanding Ofsted ratings and strong exam results, as well as high levels of participation, engagement, progression and achievement.

1 *A clear sense of mission and moral purpose*

An incredibly strong sense of mission, vision, and culture, informs everything these schools do. It is driven by moral purpose and forms the central part of the school's values, which are embedded into every aspect of school life. Staff and pupils are aware of these values and understand they are consistently applied. The mission is driven by assertive leaders who have worked with the school from its inception and who can ensure the school remains true to its original vision as it grows.

- At **Dixons Academy Trinity**, there is a clear mission statement: "To get pupils to and through university so that they thrive in a top job and have a great life". This mission is reinforced by the core values of hard work, trust, and fairness, complemented by three motivational drivers: Mastery, Autonomy, and Purpose. This is so deeply embedded that it has permeated all areas of the school: everything at Dixons Academy Trinity is thought about in detail, with a commitment to simplicity, ensuring that the daily routine of pupils is consistent.
- **School 21** was designed with a mission to 'develop the whole child- head, heart and hand'. The school strives to give pupils the most challenging and exciting curriculum possible, and everyone is treated with respect, kindness, and support. School 21 expects all pupils to leave at 18 with the following six attributes: professionalism, expertise, craftsmanship, eloquence, grit and spark.

"Our schools are in deprived communities. Educational excellence, for us, means not only a responsibility to achieve high academic standards but also to foster a love of learning. It is our belief that this passion will carry our pupils to success in whichever road they choose to travel."

Asiyah Ravat OBE - Founding Headteacher, Eden Girls' School, Coventry; Executive Principal, Eden Boys' Schools, Birmingham

2 *An explicit emphasis on culture and buy-in from staff, pupils and parents*

Culture is central to the ongoing narrative of these schools, including displaying physical artefacts which enshrine cultural features. Staff and pupils understand how their actions and requirements feed into the overarching culture at the school, and every member of the school community demonstrates their clear 'buy in' into the school culture.

- **Marine Academy** develops relationships with families before the children begin school. Parents are encouraged to sign the school's Home/Academy Agreement when their children join, which is their commitment to supporting behaviour and learning policies. Early Morning Learning at the start of each day offers parents a chance to come into the classroom and learn alongside their children, as well as providing an opportunity to liaise with their teacher if necessary.
- At **XP School**, the end of every learning 'Expedition' is marked by a 'Celebration of Learning' that parents are expected to attend, and experts and the wider community are invited to. Parents are actively involved in these sessions and are asked to complete 'exit tickets' where they speak to other young people and write down what they have learned. Student-crafted products are placed within the community to provide public meaning. The school also runs student-led conferences instead of parents evenings, where young people present their digital or physical portfolio of work and discuss the learning targets that they have met and mastered, as well as the targets they are still grappling with.

"Working with parents is cultural. Parents are invited in all of the time; they are absolutely key.

"There is a deeply rooted purpose behind everything that we do and it's habitual. We teach our kids to be kind to each other and to the environment, and to everybody else. We want our kids to be aware of inequities and injustices, and we want them to do something about it. That's powerful knowledge."

Andy Sprakes - Executive Principal, XP School

3 *Recruiting to the values*

These schools commit to employing people who specifically buy into its approach. This can mean that coherence to their values is more important than initial teaching competence or experience, due to an understanding that teaching quality can be improved through coaching and training, while mindset is invaluable.

- **Michaela Community School** often hires new teachers with little or no teaching experience, as preference is given to those who align with the school's ethos. Experience is not seen as a prerequisite, as teachers receive a thorough induction and training upon arrival.
- **Eden Girls' School** recruits staff based on their belief in the school's values and model above other factors, even where there are gaps in skills, experience or capabilities. During the recruitment process, progression is mapped out and development to address any gaps identified in the recruitment process starts on day one. A comprehensive induction programme is designed to inform new staff of policies and codified operational practices, in line with the school's culture, values and vision.

"You've got to find people who live and breathe the ethos of the school."

Katharine Birbalsingh CBE - Headmistress, Michaela Community School

4 *Developing leaders from within*

Internal succession planning is a key component in ensuring the original vision for these schools is maintained, and leaders play a pivotal role in promoting their ethos. These schools display a consistent commitment to developing and progressing their own leaders.

- At **King's Leadership Academy**, there are no set leadership responsibilities. Teachers are given a permanent teaching contract, but leadership responsibilities are seen as an 'allowance' and each year they are advertised, with staff are encouraged to re-tender for responsibilities. Leaders do not have traditional job descriptions nor undergo performance management; instead, they must demonstrate impact through writing and developing 'visions' for their department, which act as a dynamic job description.
- At **Michaela**, the school never externally recruits for middle management roles. Instead, there is internal recruitment for existing staff to move into these positions. This ensures consistency within the school and retains staff by providing them with opportunities for growth.

"By empowering people in this way, we get increased motivation and alignment from colleagues. The strategy is well researched with impact visible in the outcomes. Traditional job descriptions are limiting."

Shane Ierston - Founding Headteacher and CEO, Great Schools Trust

5 *Opportunities for all staff to learn*

These schools offer professional development opportunities to staff at all levels and encourage all staff to take advantage of these. Strong working practices ensure that all staff learn from one another, as well as other schools and the broader education sector.

- At **Dixons Trinity Academy**, the 'Dixons Way' is expected to be practiced by staff at all times. One-to-one coaching is delivered to all staff by a more experienced colleague three times a week to support these practices. Teachers are expected to identify and work towards an explicit improvement point, supported by a strong training culture.
- At **School 21**, two hours each Wednesday and five planning days at the start of each term allow teachers to review what they are working on and challenge and improve practice through staff learning modules, clinics, research opportunities and conversations with peers. All staff create a professional portfolio of their work, development, projects, interests and reading. Each member of staff is also on at least one team which collectively develops an aspect of the school, with areas including project-based learning, new technology, and school culture.

"We invest in our people and it is the same with senior leaders."

Linda Thompson - Former Headteacher, Eden Girls' School, Coventry; Executive Director of Star Institute

6 *Sweating the small stuff*

These schools show a preoccupation with getting the minutiae consistently aligned; ensure that pupils and staff know there is a clear 'grammar' of behaviour and learning. In addition, each child's journey through their school career is carefully mapped and tracked, meaning that pupils are well known by staff, and are supported to reflect on their own growth and development.

- At **Marine Academy Plymouth**, even pupil and staff interactions have been considered in the school's design, with staff expected to use the schools' scripted "MAP Manners" as a basis for these, saying: 'good morning', 'you're welcome' and 'may I?' to each other. As a reward for the consistent use of MAP Manners, children have 30 minutes of 'Positive Behaviour Time' on a Friday afternoon where they can enjoy constructive activities of their choice.
- At **The Heights** primary school, the mental health and wellbeing of all pupils, as well as additional support for the most vulnerable, is a core component of school life. Facilities that are provided to nurture the wellbeing of children include daily use of the Headspace mindfulness app, a qualified play therapist being based in the school each week, a nurture and sensory room, as well as weekly 'interaction with specially trained dogs to support emotional regulation.

"Without a strong culture, irrespective of how successful it appears in design, a curriculum will be squandered. When you have a really strong culture with extremely high expectations, pupils work hard in school and at home, they know how to achieve their high aspirations, they enjoy being challenged, they are intrinsically motivated.

"Sustaining culture is not an intellectually sophisticated endeavour; it is about being willing to do the mundane tasks every day, finding the energy to maintain expectations every day, and caring for adults and pupils unconditionally."

Luke Sparkes - CEO, Dixons Academies Trust

7 *A relentless focus on the fundamentals of learning*

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While the actual curricula differ hugely across these chosen schools, each school offers a clear and well-articulated model of learning. There is a common focus on mastering key content, concepts, and skills, and on pupils understanding their own learning and how to further progress this. The fundamentals of learning often draw upon international and well evidenced school models and practices, from Teach Like a Champion to Expeditionary Learning; KIPP to High Tech High. A number of schools have built and maintain international partnerships, as well as ones within the UK, to ensure they can build on the latest educational thinking.

- Staff at **Dixons Trinity Academy** are trained in the domain of cognitive load theory, so they understand how learning takes place and which methods are most effective to support knowledge retrieval. The curriculum is built upon the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and all lessons feature intelligent sequencing, tailored learning activities and effective formative assessment. Literacy is a core focus of the school and pupils must always have a reading book in their possession, speak in full sentences, and 'track the speaker' when they are talking.
- At **School 21** the curriculum is project oriented, with the curriculum and pedagogical practices allowing pupils to choose personalised opportunities for growth which are relevant to their passions and interests. Pupils can choose the contributions they make to each collaborative project based on areas of strength and development, for example taking on the role of 'researcher' or 'public speaker'. Each teacher has a spreadsheet for every pupil containing passions, barriers they are trying to overcome, and strengths.
- **Marine Academy Plymouth** has developed its own curriculum around marine themes relating to Plymouth's history by the sea. The curriculum encourages children to learn through exploration and is grounded in the strongest available evidence about how pupils learn and retain knowledge in the long term. Learning is put in context with rich learning opportunities which link to and build upon previous learning- enabling pupils to develop transferable knowledge and skills.

"Project based learning really turbo-charges pupils supporting one another. Projects create a community of learners who work together to test, create and critique multiple drafts of work in line with the project brief. Their relationships are, in the end, what matter."

Oli de Botton - Founder and former Executive Headteacher, School 21

8 *An approach that ensures consistency in the classroom*

These schools have also carefully considered how they will ensure lessons continue as initially planned even as the school grows. This might include co-planning, team teaching, drop-in observations, or close monitoring. Feedback between teachers is encouraged as a tool for improvement.

- **Michaela Community School** goes to great lengths to ensure staff have strong, open relationships with each other. These allow for an environment of continued reflection and improvement; teachers hold each other to account by knowing what the 'Michaela teacher' and 'Michaela teaching' looks like. Rather than formal policies in place to monitor teachers, Michaela standards are embedded in school life – two spare chairs are placed at the back of each classroom for observation by others, and regular, immediate feedback is encouraged.
- **XP School's** curriculum follows the National Curriculum and is delivered through Expeditions, which are cross-subject, standards-based, and academically rigorous Expeditions are reviewed yearly based on any updates to the standards, level of engagement, and gaps in knowledge and skills. Annual planning allows for flexibility to respond to real-life events that are experienced by pupils, such as elections.

"Each of them (the staff) are in and out of each other's classrooms. That's a huge part of our school: constant observation. When my teachers come I tell them to leave their ego at the door. To be a good teacher, you need to get feedback."

Katharine Birbalsingh CBE - Headmistress, Michaela Community School

9 *Thriving on being publicly visible*

Schools have a clear desire to act as exemplars of innovation for the wider education system. Being mission driven, they are energised by influencing others and value being seen as trailblazers. As a community, they practice, develop, and evaluate their own approach and share their findings publicly.

- **Michaela's** Headmistress and teaching staff speak regularly at national and international events and conferences, and are prominent in policy and media debate. The school hosts over 600 visitors each year (mostly teachers looking to learn from their approach) and has published two books to encourage other schools to think differently about education.
- Rather than pursuing academy trust growth, **School 21** has made its approaches public by using an open-door policy to engage other schools. The school's focus on oracy has seen the launch of 'Voice 21', a national charity which works with thousands of teachers and hundreds of schools across the UK annually. The school is also part of Big Education, a movement-building initiative which works with other like-minded schools and educators.

"We have a mission to make a difference beyond our own school."

Linda Thompson - Former Headteacher, Eden Girls' School, Coventry; Executive Director of Star Institute

10 *A commitment to wider impact*

Scaling the model is a feature for some schools, but the majority have codified key practices and are open to visits and to sharing materials. Some have been the founding schools of larger multi-academy trusts, while others were set up by existing trusts as a means of spreading best practice to a new community.

- **XP School** is growing as an academy trust; since opening XP School in 2014, a second secondary free school has opened on the same site and proposals for a third have been submitted. The trust has also sponsored three Doncaster primary schools, which share their philosophy and approach.
- As part of the Star Academies Trust, **Eden Girls Academy** plays an active role in supporting the wider system. Through its Star Institute, it offers a range of school improvement support that includes assisting schools in developing school improvement plans and policies, addressing weaknesses identified by Ofsted and even providing acting headteachers in particularly challenging schools.

"Partnerships need you to think differently about the sorts of things you want to teach and be able to teach in different ways.

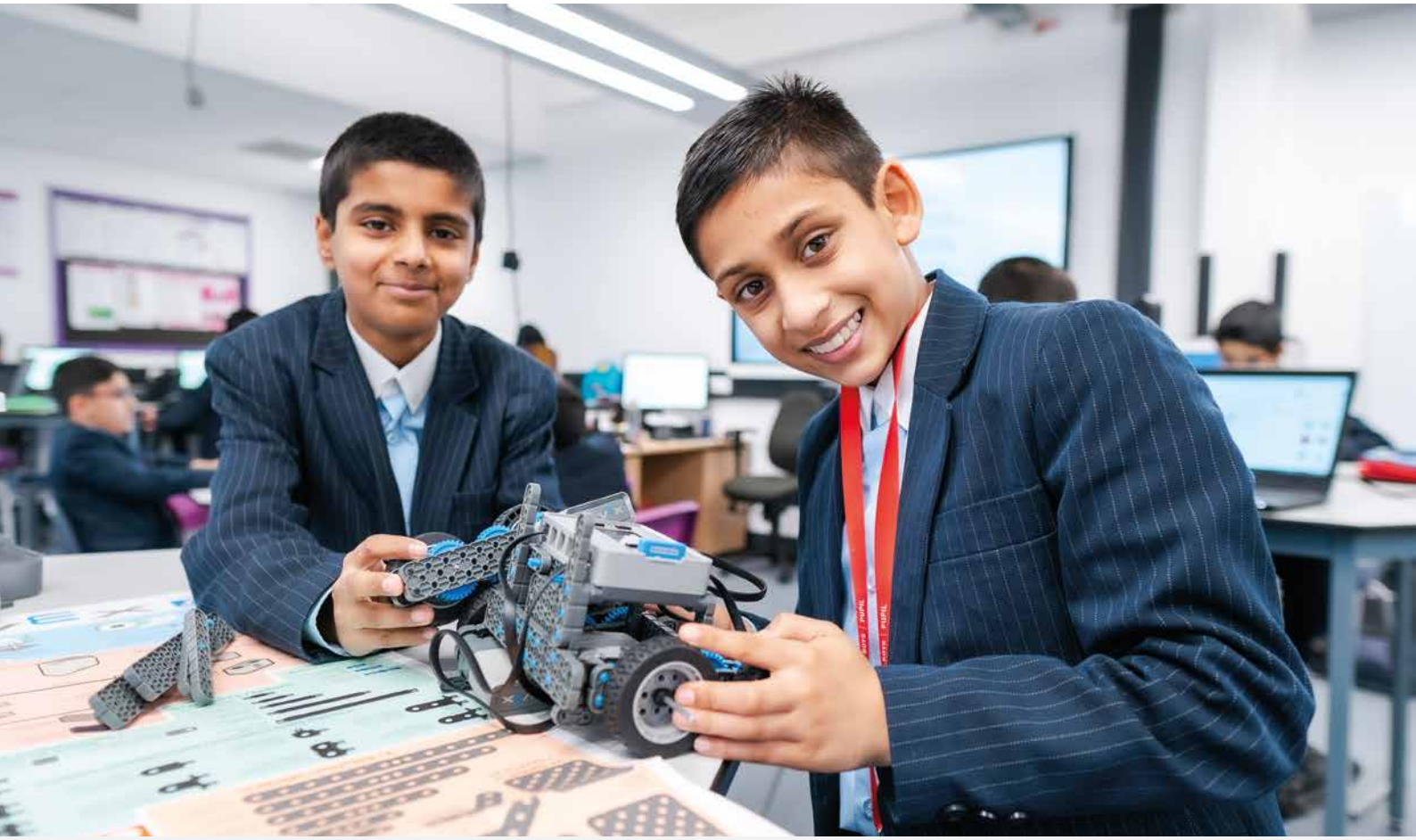
"School 21's role is to come up with new programmes and share them. Voice 21 and Real World Learning are examples of this. While we don't have a huge desire to scale, we want as many teachers as possible to buy into our programmes and practice."

Oli de Botton - Founder and former Executive Headteacher, School 21

6. Free school stories

Behind each free school is a remarkable group of individuals, who had the vision to create a new institution for their community and the ability and tenacity to bring it to life.

To capture their insights, we asked a range of free school founders to describe their schools' story and to give their views on where the free school programme should go next.



Star Academies: *Sir Mufti Hamid Patel CBE*

It is no exaggeration to say that, over a decade, the free school initiative has allowed us to raise aspiration out of all recognition in the disadvantaged communities we serve.

Our first free school – Tauheedul Boys (TIBHS) – opened in 2012 in a disused primary school building in Blackburn, a town beset with poor educational outcomes. It now occupies state-of-the-art premises, is a leader in digital innovation and has transformed the life chances of many young people.

TIBHS and Star's subsequent free schools – secondary and primary – there are 18 in total – are characterised by academic excellence, exemplary behaviour and a strong reputation for community service. They are over-subscribed and hold enviable positions in national league tables for both achievement and attendance.

Since its inception, the free school programme, of which the New School Network was such a central pillar, correctly placed exacting demands on multi-academy trusts like ours – and rightly so. It has required trustees to formulate a shared, uncompromising vision that will sustain them through the difficult years of managing temporary sites and establishing a strong, positive presence in their localities. It forced us to develop free school models, frameworks and policies that are subject to rigorous scrutiny and are devised with the utmost care.

We quickly learnt that attention to detail is crucial. Achieving the best depends on sweating the small stuff: demanding the absolute optimum of every teacher and child, every lesson, every day. High expectations can only be realised in a culture where support is effective and where learning from mistakes is non-negotiable.

Early suspicion that free schools would injure neighbouring institutions has not materialised; indeed, our free schools work collaboratively with a wide range of partners, and Star operates three teaching school hubs in North West England. Our schools are outward-facing organisations whose flourishing partnerships build bridges across cultural divides within communities in which neighbours formerly lived parallel lives.

The free school programme does drive competition between institutions – and in-so-doing improves standards – but we prefer to emphasise the role they play as community leaders.

Our schools' civic leadership- including relationships with local charities, voluntary groups and care homes- strengthened during the pandemic. Staff and pupils have worked together to operate sustainable food banks and provide time and friendship to support lonely and hard-pressed people. There is a strong sense of Star schools giving back to the communities in which they are located and fostering a spirit of social inclusivity.

Star's free schools began their lives in constrained temporary accommodation. Our permanent buildings are beacons, conveying a sense of hope and aspiration on sites that were previously derelict, barren or contaminated. Spaces that were once magnets for crime and anti-social behaviour have been transformed into powerful symbols of regeneration and belief in our young people.

At the core of our work is the belief that education is the only genuine catalyst of change in the communities we serve. The free school movement – so ably assisted by the New School Network – has enabled us to intervene directly to spur social mobility.

"We quickly learnt that attention to detail is crucial. Achieving the best depends on sweating the small stuff: demanding the absolute optimum of every teacher and child, every lesson, every day. "

The Laurus Trust: *Linda McGrath, CEO, Laurus Trust and Andrew Law, Chair, Law Family Education Trust*

For the Laurus Trust, the free school programme has offered a fantastic opportunity to help improve educational opportunities across Greater Manchester by giving more young people access to high quality, academically focused provision.

As the leaders of Cheadle Hulme High School, one of the top 25 secondary schools in the country, we had a strong track record of pupils achieving excellent GCSE results, but too many of them were struggling to translate this into success after they left us at 16.

Research published by the Sutton Trust in 2011, which showed that Stockport ranked 150th out of 151 for the proportion of state school pupils going into Higher Education, convinced us that we needed to act. Our response was to bid through the free school programme to open Cheadle Hulme Sixth Form, an academic 16-19 provision; designed to dramatically improve these outcomes.

Our success in doing so depended heavily on NSN, who supported us through every stage of the process – from reviewing our bid, to providing mock interviews, and media training.

NSN also provided invaluable advice as we made the transition from being a Local Authority school to founding the Laurus Trust with the support of our sponsor, The Law Family Educational Trust. As our multi academy trust has grown, NSN has continued to help us – including by connecting us to other free school leaders with whom we can share ideas.

We have since been able to add a further five free schools that are now open or approved to open. These include another school in Stockport, set up in response to demand from local parents, one in a deprived area of Tameside, and another which serves one of the most disadvantaged areas of Manchester.

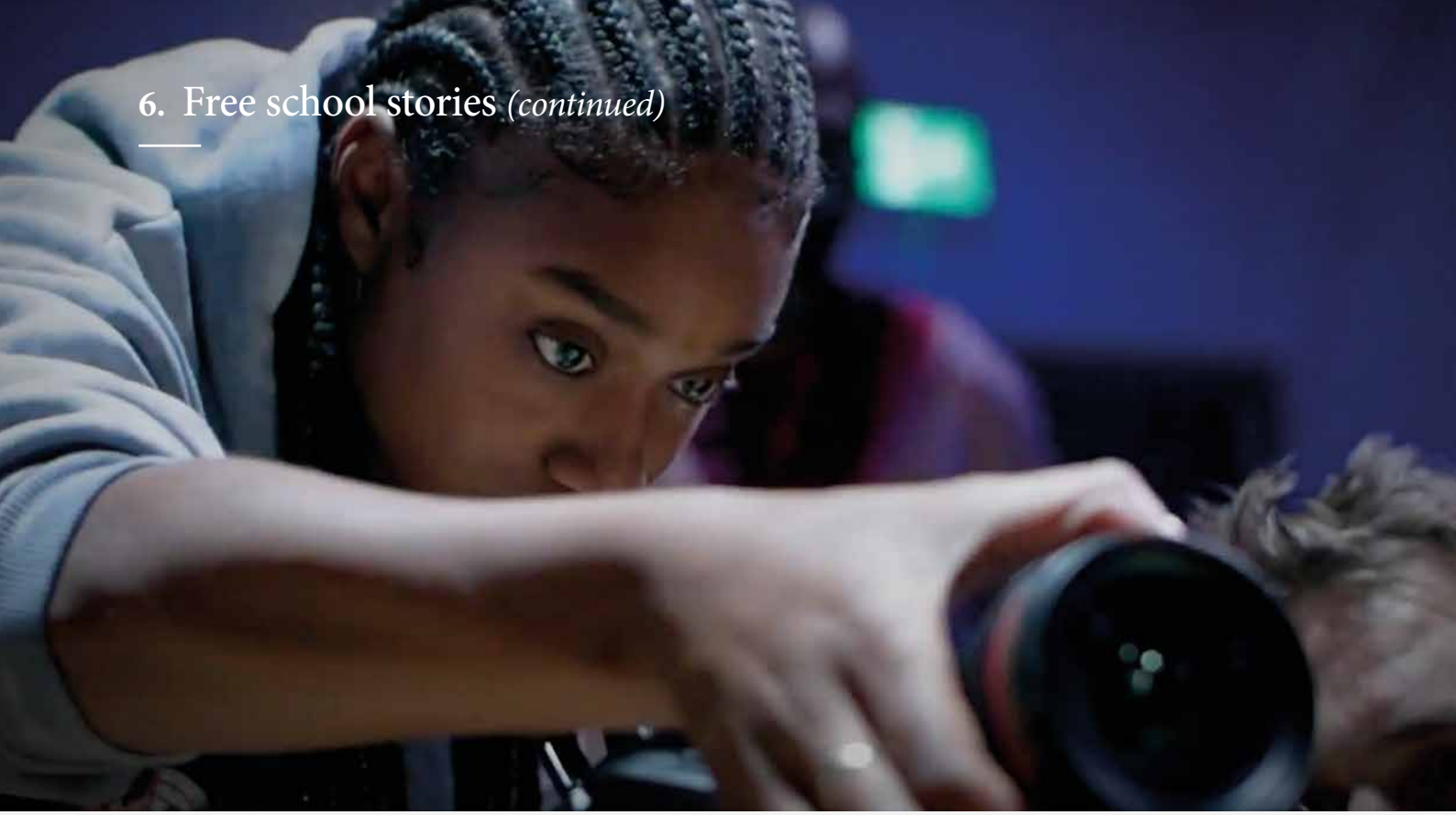
"Most importantly, free schools have allowed us to both fulfil a local need for school places and tackle the educational disadvantage. As the programme develops, the government needs to be brave enough to continue this focus on using free schools to raise standards, rather than just creating new school places "

These schools mean we are now fulfilling our promise to improve the life chances of young people across Greater Manchester. The Sutton Trust research that spurred us into action found that only 45% of children in Stockport went onto university, with just 12% going to the most selective universities. At Cheadle Hulme Sixth Form, those rates are now over 90% and over 72% respectively.

Getting to this point has been challenging- particularly engaging some local stakeholders. But free schools have also provided us with an opportunity to work in partnership with them, most notably through plans for an Alternative Provision free school, which will work with mainstream schools across Stockport to support children with complex social, emotional and mental health needs.

Most importantly, free schools have allowed us to both fulfil a local need for school places and tackle the educational disadvantage. As the programme develops, the government needs to be brave enough to continue this focus on using free schools to raise standards, rather than just creating new school places. That means backing school leaders and others who know what their community needs. This is especially important if we are ever to level the playing field between state schools and the independent sector.

Our experience has shown that challenging the status quo can be uncomfortable. But it is absolutely necessary if we are to build a better education system for all.



Day One Trust: *Ed Butcher - Founder and Vice Chair of Governors, East London Arts and Music*

Our first free school, East London Arts and Music – a full-time industry academy for 16-19 years olds interested in pursuing a career in Music, Film and Television Production and Games Design – was born out of two beliefs:

Firstly, that for too long the creative industries – one of the UK's leading exports- had been the domain of the privileged. Despite London being one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, its Film and TV companies boasted a 96% white workforce, whilst the wider creative economy was only marginally better.

Secondly, that current efforts to change this situation weren't by themselves going to be enough. Tweaks to recruitment and assessment practices, diversity targets and mentoring initiatives are all important, but we needed to get upstream of the problem to drive genuine change and ensure that the creative industries tell stories that speak to modern Britain.

When we started meeting with record label, TV & film executives in 2012 to discuss the idea of a new school, they agreed that bigger interventions were needed. And we were delighted that the companies they ran wanted to join us in investing earlier in young people- using full-time education to build the knowledge, skills and behaviours they would need to thrive in today's industry.

But our enthusiasm, research and network building couldn't compensate for an underlying lack of confidence. If we hadn't been accepted onto NSN's Development Programme I don't think that the project would have made it off the ground.

The enigmatic NSN team- who presented somewhere between Government officials and

New Schools Network

"But our enthusiasm, research and network building couldn't compensate for an underlying lack of confidence. If we hadn't been accepted onto NSN's Development Programme I don't think that the project would have made it off the ground."

secret agents- laid out a series of milestones and experiences that we emerged from starting to believe. Their grant of £20k allowed us to build a website, produce marketing collateral and run events that lent the idea credibility.

With NSN's help, our application to open ELAM was approved, and through the hard work of our team and the support of our industry partners, the school has gone on to be hugely successful. Our trainees are three times more likely to achieve the highest possible grade in their courses than the national average and our alumni are making waves across the industry as artists, producers and executives.

Five years later, we opened our second free school - London Screen Academy – through the Day One Trust, a new multi academy trust dedicated to accelerating further change.

Without the free school programme, this wouldn't have been possible. It provided the opportunity to bring new thinking, and in this case the contribution of industry, into the design of these schools from the very start.

This means we now have a nucleus of flagship creative schools dedicated to bringing a knowledge-rich, evidence-led and rigorous creative education to a new generation of young people.

At a time when other parts of the creative sector find themselves in the firing line, it has also given us a platform to demonstrate the value they add – both to the UK's economy and society.

Efforts to tackle low quality courses by consolidating post-16 creative qualifications, for example, may raise the floor of provision a little, but they also risk lowering the ceiling for what's possible at the country's best providers.

Retreating from this flavour of creative education can't be an option if we want the UK to grow a more dynamic, and diverse, creative economy.

The route forward is to follow the lessons learned at our best creative schools, our own included, and ensure they quickly become the standard that children can expect nationally.

Reach Academy Feltham: *Ed Vainker OBE and Rebecca Cramer, Founding Headteachers*

Reach Academy Feltham opened in 2012. The founding team was largely built from the network of Teach First Ambassadors who at that time were working both inside and beyond schools.

We came together with the aim of creating a school that enables every child to enjoy a life of choice and opportunity. We took advantage of the freedoms that the Free School policy offered to set up a small, all-through school with only 60 pupils in each year.

Many of the founding team are still involved – ourselves and co-founder Jon McGoh remain in leading executive and governance roles, while three other governors, our Secondary Headteacher, and several other teaching and support staff are still with us from that small founding team. Continuity of staffing is important to us because we believe that at the heart of a great school are strong, trusting relationships between pupils, families and staff. We are proud of our achievements, outstanding Ofsted, excellent results and strong destinations for our pupils – the vast majority going on to University in a community where the average was 20% before we opened.

The start of the school was a whirlwind – 10 months from approval to opening – and we benefited hugely from the support of the New Schools Network to navigate the system and make sure we had bases covered. Four years later, the announcement of a big development in Feltham led to a second Free School application, which was approved in July 2016. Perhaps in line with the slowing momentum of the policy, six years later the school is not open and are we are yet to break ground, though are hopeful for progress soon.

In the interim we have developed a Cradle to Career model around the school. We had been inspired by the Charter School movement when designing the school and went back to the US for inspiration as we developed the Reach Children's Hub and Feltham Convening Partnership, a collective impact approach inspired by Strive Together in the US. We are now working in 17 communities in the South West and Yorkshire, helping schools and Trusts to develop their own Cradle to Career models that help every child flourish. Many of these partners are Free Schools and we think it is important that a network of Free Schools is retained to help the system hold on to the opportunity for innovation and creativity in our system.

We are hugely grateful for the opportunity the policy gave us to start our school in West London. We have worked hard, alongside others, to build a school and a wider model that can serve our community. We have often reflected that we were lucky to apply when we did – that we were a risk as a new group with limited experience and no resources – but did have a track record, a strong team and a deep commitment, as well as a clear vision and plan for the school. Over recent years there have been fewer and fewer new organisations being established, which feels like a missed opportunity. We hope that might change and would welcome the opportunity to support such groups to bring their vision to life.

"We came together with the aim of creating a school that enables every child to enjoy a life of choice and opportunity. We took advantage of the freedoms that the Free School policy offered to set up a small, all-through school with only 60 pupils in each year."

Lighthouse School: *Katie Parlett MBE, Chair of Trustees*

Lighthouse School in Leeds was the first special free school to open its doors in September 2012.

IIt was founded by five families who all felt their autistic children had so much to offer but the lack of autism specific education, as well as pathways into adulthood and employment, would not lead them to the happy fulfilling lives that they deserved. Driven by a desire to make a difference not just for our own children but for the wider community, we set out to create a pioneering new school which could change lives for the better.

Education at Lighthouse is destination led and underpinned by four cornerstones: well-being, communication, broad and balanced curriculum and skills and experience. Since opening we have created an environment that is calm, purposeful and happy, with leavers moving into supported internships, employment and vocational courses at colleges all around Yorkshire.

We now have our own employability programmes, as well as a café, clothing shop and gift shop run by the students. More recently, we have also been able to set up a specialist post 16 Employability College and Charity that sees 92% of its students move successfully into paid employment.

The journey has not been without its challenges; being the first is not always easy. But we were grateful to NSN for holding our hand throughout the process- arranging surgeries to discuss specific matters of governance and supporting with day-to-day queries.

One of our main challenges initially was recruiting staff, especially where there was uncertainty about moving away from local authority contracts. But we have been able to grow from strength to strength and now have a passionate and skilled team of 75 in the school.

Asking parents to take an initial leap of faith and join a brand-new school was also difficult. But we now have 84 students on roll- well beyond the 54 we originally planned for – and over 100 applications a year for 7 places.

Since Lighthouse opened, we have been pleased to be able to help the growing network of special free schools. This includes supporting two autism focused special free schools, which are now open and running successfully, and showcasing our unique curriculum to over 50 free school leaders, who attended a 'Spotlight' event arranged by NSN.

Our Lighthouse brand is now known nationally, and we are ready to expand our offer both in our own locality and in neighbouring local authorities.

Most importantly, 10 years on from opening, we are proud to see our past and present students living fulfilled, happy and purposeful lives. That's all any parent could wish for!

Reflecting on our experiences there are three issues we feel the free school programme needs to keep a focus on as it evolves:

Firstly, the importance of pace. Opening quickly allowed us to maintain the confidence of parents, staff and the community. With some free schools now taking up to five years to open, these projects risk losing momentum.

Secondly, providing support for growing multi-academy trusts. This needs the sort of dedicated support NSN provided to free schools if we are to see more providers scale up their impact.

Finally, maintaining a role for parents, especially in the special free school programme. Parents have been the driving force behind many of the autism focused schools that have come through the programme. We cannot afford to lose their dynamism and passion, especially as the need for this kind of provision grows.

"The journey has not been without its challenges; being the first is not always easy. But we were grateful to NSN for holding our hand throughout the process - arranging surgeries to discuss specific matters of governance and supporting with day-to-day queries.

7. Ministers reflect

Free schools were introduced in 2010 as a key part of the government's plans for reform.

From the outset, Ministers were closely engaged with the programme, with a clear focus on delivery.

We asked Ministers who oversaw the programme to offer their perspectives on how it developed, the role NSN played in this and the lessons this offers future governments.

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP,
Secretary of State for Education, 2010 - 2014

When I became Education Secretary in 2010, I was told countless times that free schools would not succeed.

That no-one would want to open them, that parents would be wary of them and that their performance would be no different to other schools.

More than a decade on, the opposite has happened. Free schools have achieved spectacular results, are hugely popular with parents and have redefined the conversation about what state schools can achieve, especially those serving the most disadvantaged children.

Free schools work because they bring together what our education reforms were designed to achieve. They give teachers the freedom to design and implement a high-quality curriculum, bring new partners and expertise into the school system, and respond directly to the needs of local parents.

The pace at which free schools have been opened and their outstanding results are a reminder of what Government can achieve when it is brave enough to back reformers working on the ground, rather than simply listen to vested interests.

But Government could not have delivered this success alone. New Schools Network played a pivotal role in championing free school founders, shaping how the policy was implemented and challenging Ministers and officials to stay true to the free school programme's original intentions.

The free school programme showed me the importance of Government not compromising its ambitions, giving greater autonomy to those running public services and working with others to deliver.

These are lessons I have tried to carry into my other Ministerial roles. They provide a template for how Whitehall can operate at its best. We must not lose sight of them as the free school programme evolves.

New Schools Network

The Rt Hon. the Lord Hill of Oareford CBE,

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, 2010-2013

New Schools Network was the beating heart of the free schools policy. Inspiring, cajoling, campaigning - NSN always led from the front.

But they were much more than cheerleaders: without their practical and moral support, many of those early free school projects would never have got over the line.

The lessons from NSN for the Government today? Go back to the roots of the free schools movement. Stop trying to impose a single blueprint on education. Instead empower local people- teachers, charities and community groups- to set up the local schools their neighbourhoods need. NSN was doing levelling up long before the term was coined. Back in 2010, they helped a new Government introduce true localism and diversity into the education system. This Government needs to rediscover that spirit today.

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP,

Minister of State for School Standards and previously Minister of State for Schools 2010-2012 and 2014–2021

At the heart of all the school reforms introduced since 2010 is a belief that teachers and schools are at their most effective when given the freedom to innovate.

Free schools empowered teachers to use this freedom by developing new approaches to the curriculum and bringing proven ideas from overseas to children in this country, particularly in areas where educational standards had been low for too long.

The most successful free schools – such as Michaela Community School and Reach Academy Feltham – have transformed the life chances of the children who attend them. But they have also improved outcomes for countless thousands more, by providing models for the system to follow and leading a much richer debate within the teaching profession about how education can be improved.

NSN played a critical role in this, by challenging and supporting free school founders to ensure they developed the best possible proposals, and the most successful schools in the long run.

As this Government continues to reform our school system, it is vital that we maintain a focus on school autonomy and give proper backing to the role that free schools can play in unleashing new thinking.

However, this must be underpinned by a rigorous focus on high standards and evidence. In the first stages of the free school programme, we were probably too loose in approving applications that were teaching a curriculum that wasn't evidence based. These are free schools that subsequently went on to fail. And there were too many applications with too little focus on the importance of the curriculum. We should have rejected those proposals even if it meant fewer free schools opening.

New Schools Network

The Lord Nash of Ewelme,

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System), 2013-2017

To me, the benefit of the free school programme, which I had the privilege to oversee for nearly five years, is that it injects competition and new thinking into an otherwise monopolistic system.

Free schools have proved that a rising tide lifts all boats. For example, the London Academy of Excellence had a substantial impact on the performance of competing sixth forms – to the benefit of young people across the capital – but also inspired others around the country to open more academically demanding 16-19 provision.

That dynamic is why it is vital that, in future, free schools should be encouraged not just in areas of a shortage of places but also where the performance of the existing schools is not good enough.

Future governments also need to ensure that new schools follow the evidence. Whilst I am proud of the way the free school programme encouraged new providers into the system, we could have done more to ensure their schools focused on the knowledge-rich curriculum and teacher led-instruction models that we know are most effective.

The support NSN gave to free schools in their planning and development stages was invaluable. As a Minister, I also found their input on the development of policy a valuable addition to advice from officials. NSN's ability to focus on delivery and speak directly on behalf of the free school founders implementing the programme is a model other parts of government should learn from.

The Lord Agnew of Oulton DL

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System, 2017 - 2020 and NSN Trustee, 2009 – 2013

As both a Minister and an academy sponsor, I have seen first-hand the impact that free schools have made in improving education standard across England.

They have achieved outstanding results, allowed our best academy sponsors to expand and brought greater innovation into the school system, all whilst being delivered at lower cost to the taxpayer.

Most importantly, free schools put control back in the hands of school leaders themselves.

This is the principle that future governments must preserve: that our teachers and Headteachers – not Whitehall officials – should take charge of solving the challenges facing children in their area.

That means ensuring the free school programme is genuinely open to new ideas and new providers, and available to all communities, including those where there are enough school places but standards too low.

8. Former NSN Directors reflect

As an independent charity sat between Whitehall and those creating free schools around the country, NSN had an almost unique perspective on how new policy gets put into practice.

We asked NSN's former Directors to reflect on their time running the organisation and what others can learn from its experience – both for the future of the free school programme and for policymaking generally.

Rachel Wolf,

Founding Director, 2009 – 2013 and Chair of Trustees, 2013 – 2015

I am in no doubt that the New School Network, which I founded, achieved its central mission: to make the free school programme happen, and successfully. Neither of these, as anyone who has worked in government will know, were guaranteed.

Through NSN, we (my own team, and my successors) delivered an immensely controversial policy, rapidly and against expectations, with successful outcomes: free schools are more likely to be rated Outstanding by Ofsted and are more popular with parents. Many of the top schools in the country exist because of its help; countless thousands of pupils are getting a better education because of those schools; and free schools like Kings Leadership Academy, Harris Westminster and School 21 have changed the debate about what is possible in state education and the staggering results that can be achieved with the right vision and the right level of determination.

It is a cliché, but we genuinely opened people's eyes to what was possible.

Why was NSN so successful? Because it was an obsessively focused, mission-driven, non-governmental organisation. It applied some basic principles that should be used in Whitehall more generally (and, in my experience, almost never are). Others have written generously about NSN's legacy. I want to focus on what I think policymakers, both in education and beyond, should learn.

1. Speed.

Before Free Schools, new schools took years and years to get off the ground. One former cabinet minister confidently predicted we'd get, at most, half a dozen open in a parliament. We knew that wasn't an option: unless we got a decent number of schools open, the policy would be too easy to reverse, and each individual school would be the focus of huge national attacks by unions and other opponents. Critical mass was essential.

For the first year of NSN's existence (before the 2010 election, and entirely funded by charitable donations) I spent most of my time identifying and cajoling groups who might want to found schools. They were inevitably nervous, and many of the teachers who were involved came under immense pressure and opposition. We tried to ensure they were ready to put in an application for a school, with demonstrable support from their community. It meant that by 18 months into the new parliament, over 80 schools were open; almost 300 by the 2015 election.

2. Failure.

The programme recognised the risk of the status quo – arguing that there was danger in not doing anything – rather than just the risk of change. Did all the schools work? No. But the ones that failed were closed much more quickly than is normally the case for schools, and the programme adapted fast.

3. Communication.

We talked, endlessly, to the point of screaming boredom, about what was happening and why it was working – over local radio and broadcast. Our parent and teacher groups were featured in the national press. Why? Because we knew that was how you attracted more people to set up schools. New programmes need a sense of momentum.

4. Motivation.

There were excellent civil servants who worked on the early free school programme – as is often the case, the exciting ideas attracted many of the best people. But NSN itself was staffed by people who were determined that free schools should happen, not just dutifully implementing a policy set out. For that, you need a non-governmental organisation, in the way that NSN was a charity.

5. Networks.

We held training sessions and conferences several times a year for those who wanted to found new schools – not just to give them practical support but also so they could find like-minded allies. This also meant we were constantly in touch with people on the ground. A support network was born.

6. Implementation.

NSN was not a think tank. It was a charity solely interested in the practical design and delivery of the programme. We created the application system for new schools, down to writing the questions on the forms, and asked people who had run similar programmes in other countries to check them.

The fact of the matter is that NSN was only possible because free schools were a priority for the Government. The zeal for school reform has unquestionably disappeared – which is surely one of the reasons why NSN has been allowed to wind down its free school services.

Being frank, I don't mind who picks up the mantle – be it the new Conservative administration or a Labour government – but the job of changing education for the better is not yet complete. We cannot let the spirit of NSN die altogether.

Nick Timothy CBE,

Director, 2015 - 2016

New Schools Network

Political debate is usually reduced to a familiar and depressing argument about the size of government: state versus market and intervention versus freedom. But successful policies enjoy a partnership of three – state, market and community – in which one supports the other two. And community is the magic ingredient we often find ourselves missing.

This insight explains the brilliance of the free school programme, launched by Michael Gove in 2010, and the New Schools Network (NSN), set up by Rachel Wolf the year before in 2009. Free schools – new schools ran outside the control of local councils – are innovative and, where low standards were tolerated for too long, disruptive. The secret to their success lies in the way they harness the power of community.

Those setting up free schools included parents, teachers, sports clubs, churches, and charities. Each brought a clear ethos to the school they founded, boundless energy and passion for their work, and excellence. For all the diversity of the free schools family – in character, curriculum and pedagogy – it is their excellence that marks them out.

This success did not come from nowhere. Indeed, free schools might have failed had it not been for NSN. Understanding that the opportunity to set up a school was not alone enough, Rachel set up NSN to identify the groups that wanted to found a free school and train and support them through the planning, application and pre-opening stages of the process. In policy wonk terms, she understood that the social capital and civic confidence required to set up a school – especially in some of the communities that needed free schools most – was not always there. NSN was the catalyst and capacity-builder that made sure it was.

NSN therefore answered some fundamental questions that had been asked by policymakers for years. Community, that often-elusive concept, is undoubtedly a precious public good. Where it is strong, it provides the foundation for positive social norms, good government and a thriving market economy. It steps in where state and market fail. It builds social trust and encourages reciprocity between citizens. But what is its role where state and market can provide more efficiently and at greater scale? And what can we do to revive community in places where social capital and civic confidence have declined?

It would be absurd to expect community to take back the roles it lost to state and market for good reasons. But where state and market cannot provide, community can step in: addressing loneliness among the elderly, for example; or running local assets, from pubs to parks, that would otherwise close or fall into disrepair. And where state and market do provide, but fail to innovate or respond to particular needs, communities can supplement their work: through the sponsorship of refugees, for example, or directing services or local spending through governance or other forms of decision-making.

(continued on page 38)

Nick Timothy CBE *(continued)*

This is what free schools have done up and down the country. And the role played by NSN in helping communities to help themselves is already a model to inspire others. The Government founded Reset, a charity that helps people to welcome and support refugees in their neighbourhoods, on exactly the same lines as NSN. Ministers should do the same again in response to any number of policies, from elementary social care to the maintenance of local green spaces.

We are living in tumultuous times, but the big missions the Government has set for itself – to revive community, level-up the country and restore economic growth – are more vital than ever. There is a strong case for a rejuvenated free schools programme, but so much to learn both from free schools and NSN. Neither state nor market has all the answers, and neither ministers nor officials know what is best for where you live. As free schools have shown, we need to give power to the people, give them with the support they need – and watch them fly.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Evans of Bowes Park,

Director, 2013 - 2015

By pioneering new and diverse provision, free schools have been able to help shine a light on the fact that giving parents more choice and schools greater freedom does indeed drive-up standards.

But achieving lasting change isn't easy and it was only by demonstrating positive impact at scale that we were able to make the policy irreversible.

To do this, NSN had to be absolutely focused on identifying, encouraging, challenging, and supporting free school proposer groups to innovate.

This was particularly important in harder to reach areas where young people were being systematically failed and were not getting the opportunities they deserved.

As an outside, independent body, totally committed to delivering the policy, we were able to move much quicker than government normally can and cut through the bureaucracy that can hold it back.

We also relied on unwavering political support from the top. We couldn't have made such progress without knowing we had the personal support of David Cameron, Michael Gove and all the other Ministers involved in the programme and for the civil servants working on the policy to know that too.

The lessons for government? That radical change is possible – but it will only happen if you are willing to give people the freedom to act and put the right support in place for them.

New Schools Network

Toby Young,

Director, 2017 - 2018

I am in the unusual position of having reached out to the New Schools Network for assistance when helping to set up a series of free schools from 2009-2014, and then serving as the Director from 2017-18.

The enduring lesson is that if innovative public sector reforms that rely on mobilising voluntary groups and charities are going to succeed – and I believe the free school programme was a great success – it is essential that those groups are given a great deal of support, not just by civil servants, who may not be wholly supportive of the reforms, but also by non-governmental organisations dedicated to making the reforms a success. The reason the New Schools Network was so effective is that it provided that support.

There is a risk when setting up these non-governmental organisations that are part-funded by the government that they end up at loggerheads with civil service departments, pulling in different directions. But such rivalry was never something that affected the relationship between NSN and the Department for Education, which, in my experience, complemented each other well. To prevent such territorial conflicts, clear political direction from the top is important, so the civil servants know the organisations have political support, but also a good deal of diplomacy on the part of senior civil servants and the organisations' executives.

Another reason organisations like NSN are important if public sector reforms that depend on the collaboration of community groups are going to succeed is that they're able to create support networks between the leaders of those groups, enabling them to provide assistance to each other. Not only is that essential if the reform is going to succeed, but it also mitigates against the risk of the reform losing momentum after it has lost political support and other sources of assistance begin to dry up. NSN proved itself very effective at creating support networks among free school founders.

Luke Tryl,
Director, 2019

NSN's stewardship of the free school programme showed that when it comes to education, we don't just have to settle for the same unfair, unequal outcomes, but instead by thinking outside the box and championing new and different approaches you can offer more for children, particularly those from communities that have been let down for too long.

For me, there are four key takeaways from the programme.

Firstly, that genuine reform requires bravery. The easy thing for Government's to do is to patch and mend around the mediocre status-quo; genuinely innovative policy is about Westminster giving up control and having the courage to accept there will be teething problems, as well as to take on vested interests.

Secondly, that a one size fits all approach from Whitehall isn't always, or even often, the best one. The range of successful schools that NSN supported with their different structures, pedagogies and curricula shows that the best route to unlocking real social justice and driving up standards in public services comes from empowering the public and professionals to challenge the status quo.

Thirdly, that innovation in policy only comes from making this a sustained, conscious choice. The temptation for any programme is to squeeze out the innovation and risk over time and revert back to the safe and known. This is a trap that the academy model and to some extent the free school programme has fallen into. Innovation needs to be recognised as an ongoing process that needs to be nurtured, not something that will just happen.

Finally, that capacity building is crucial if you want to see all places benefit from a policy. Citizen led schemes have huge potential but without support, they can be dominated by those with sharp elbows. NSN played an important role in ensuring free schools benefited the poorest communities. The particular focus on them shouldn't be lost as the programme evolves.

Unity Jones,
Director, 2019 – 2021

To build over 500 new schools in a decade is an incredible legacy for any organisation or Government policy. This was only made possible by the dedication of a small group of passionate and intelligent people, solely focussed on the mission of creating a good school for every child.

The ideas behind free schools will last just as long as the institutions themselves. From the governance arrangements to design framework, free schools created the conditions to encourage innovation and achieve continuous improvement in diverse settings and at scale.

As the free school programme evolves, that focus on finding new ways to tackle educational disadvantage

needs to remain its central focus. Yes, free schools can help meet a basic need for school places and fill gaps in provision but their ability to inject new energy and innovation into the system and raise aspiration in local areas has always been the programme's biggest contribution to the school system.

This is something that in the future government needs to value more. The results show that individual free schools have made a significant difference to the pupils that attend them, but they have also had an impact far beyond this – helping to regenerate deprived areas by making them more attractive to families and offering powerful models for other schools to follow.

It is also what should make free schools something all political parties can get behind. Despite our best efforts, it was always difficult for NSN to secure genuine cross-party support for the programme. But all politicians agree on the need to improve the education on offer to children in our most disadvantaged communities – and free schools remain a brilliant means for doing this.

Sophie Harrison Byrne,

Director, 2021-2022

The free schools programme was never about having a cookie-cutter model. It was about innovation and working in different ways to provide the best education to children.

It also provided a unique chance for school leaders- united around a shared sense of moral purpose- to test new thinking and models for education in ways that were simply not possible before.

But in the seven years that I worked on this policy, we have seen a marked slowing of the programme, diminished appetite for innovation and a situation where it is now almost impossible for new entrants to open schools.

To revive the programme, future policy makers should do three things:

Firstly, be humble enough to accept that there are new and better ways to add to and enrich our existing school system. This willingness to allow new ideas to flourish gave us some of the most successful free schools. Without it, we will miss out on the disrupters and innovators with the potential to push our system to the next level.

Secondly, embrace risks. Ten years into the programme, we know far more about how to identify, open and support a successful free school and are in a better position to nurture innovation successfully. This should include using the support of the almost 700 other free schools, as well a much stronger system of academy trusts. Backing innovators and allowing them to challenge the status quo is now less risky than it was ten years ago but it requires political leadership.

Finally, recapture a sense of urgency. It now takes three to four years for a school to go from the point of approval to actually opening, whereas in the early days of the programme this was closer to two years. This is a long time for free school founders to keep a dream alive, and to carry the local community with them. Again, we now know much more about how to

9. Perspectives from policy thinkers

Despite being relatively small in number, free schools have had an outsize influence on debates about educational policy, with the programme providing a new model for how policy can be made and implemented more generally.

We asked leading voices from education and beyond to offer their reflections on what we can learn from the programme so far and its legacy for policymakers.

The Baroness Morgan of Huyton,

Former Chair of Ofsted and current Master of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

Tackling educational disadvantage is at the heart of what I believe in. I was proud to work in a Labour government that made significant strides in extending educational opportunity, including through recruiting record numbers of teachers; increasing school funding - including most of all for the more disadvantaged - and providing services around schools that supported young people.

I'm also proud that the Labour Party introduced the Academy programme. We took on entrenched views across the country- where standards were too low and where aspirations were very limited – and worked to bring in great school leaders to improve results dramatically.

Free schools, where they have worked, were and are simply an extension of the Academy programme. The best ones responded to a clear need in their local community. In some areas, this was not just a need for new school places but also a need for a new approach that could disrupt the status quo, provide new opportunities for families, and encourage other schools to respond in kind. As the programme has matured, we have also seen good academy chains broadening their impact by opening their own free schools and making a difference in even more young people's lives.

But the work of reform is nowhere near complete. There is still so much to do to ensure all children get the education they deserve. Indeed, the gap has been exacerbated by Covid and other pressures.

Future governments – whatever their colour – will need to use all the tools at their disposal to tackle these ongoing challenges. This should include supporting free schools, alongside academies and maintained schools. We need to do what it takes to raise standards and life chances and this includes continuing reform where it translates to improvement.

Where that means a new free school being opened to improve young people's life chances, we should welcome it.

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Dame Rachel de Souza DBE,

Children's Commissioner and former CEO of Inspiration Trust

For me, the free school movement has provided a golden opportunity to support every child to dream big, receive an excellent education and achieve their goals.

As the Headteacher and then CEO of Inspiration Trust, I had the privilege of setting up three free schools- Sir Isaac Newton Sixth Form, Jane Austen College and Charles Darwin Primary School- each with its own special ethos and culture.

They demonstrate, in different ways, what is so powerful about the programme – whether by offering young people specialist STEM provision that wasn't available in the area, an extended day to support working parents or dedicated SEND provision.

The magic ingredients of these schools have been the freedom and independence to innovate, their ability to meet the needs of local children and families and the way they have empowered the teachers working in them. By creating something completely new, they have been able to open up unique opportunities for the children that attend them.

We now need to ensure these ingredients are preserved in the future, so that free schools can help improve standards and transform opportunities for children in every area of the country.

My role as Children's Commissioner has given me a birds-eye view of the wider children's landscape which free schools fit into.

Children have told me that they love school and their teachers; that they are ambitious and see education and getting a good job as vital to their future happiness. But I have also heard, too often, about the lack of aspiration the school system has for some children.

Free schools have an important role to play here. They have the opportunity to innovate again and change more children's lives, particularly those who need more support than they can get from a mainstream classroom.

They can lead the innovation that's needed to change children's lives – whether that's through better mental health support, wider family engagement or partnership work to improve safeguarding.

That's why I want to help breathe life back into the free school movement and embolden trust leaders and teachers to dream big for their children. They must be dynamic, they must be innovative, they must be transformative. And, through collaborative support, they must seek to make improvements for children in all their local areas and beyond.

Robert Colville,

Director, Centre for Policy Studies

The success of the New Schools Network is first and foremost a lesson in the importance of delivery. The NSN team didn't just write policy reports. They built coalitions, prepared ground, worked by hook or by crook to ensure that these new schools existed, and that they existed in sufficient number to become self-sustaining.

The other big lesson here, though, is about innovation. One of the by-products of scale has been increasing standardisation: schools were born free, but are everywhere in chains. We need free schools to retain their status as the laboratories and test beds for education innovation – to enable new and very different approaches to education to either fail or flourish. That is a principle with applications far beyond just education.

Sir David Carter,

Former National Schools Commissioner and CEO of Cabot Learning Federation

Across my roles as CEO of the Cabot Learning Federation and later as Regional and then National Schools Commissioner, I was able to see the value that free schools have added to the school system first hand. For me, they are one of the boldest education policy reforms of the last thirty years.

That challenge could be uncomfortable for existing school leaders, but ultimately, it is something the whole school system has benefited from. I can personally remember taking deeply sceptical Heads into free schools and seeing them come out enthused by what they had learnt.

That focus on innovation is what marked free schools out and where I feel the real benefits of the programme lie. As the programme has evolved, the DfE has got better at approving projects that are likely to succeed but this should not come at the expense of being able to test exciting new ideas.

The key is to make sure that founders can deliver their vision. As the programme moves forward, free schools should remain a mechanism for parents, teachers and others to open new schools, provided they have the right support around them, for example by requiring that they work with a school improvement partner.

The application process also needs to remain flexible, and demand led. Free schools are an excellent way of filling gaps in provision which aren't always obvious in Whitehall or in Local Authorities, and we should back school leaders and others to decide what their area needs. We need to make sure we are opening schools for communities, not schools for trusts.

Finally, we also need to learn lessons from NSN. The educational landscape is littered with government projects that were rich in support whilst they were being created and a bit more "hands off" once they were deemed to be complete. What made free schools different is that they had the support of NSN right the way through, including after they opened. That clear focus on delivery has been critical for the success of the programme and is something we must not lose in future.

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has allowed those involved in the free school programme and with New Schools Network to explain, in their own words, what they feel can be learnt from it.

Their contributions reflect what has been achieved through the programme but also concerns that its long-term impact is at risk if the programme continues to slow down and produce fewer innovative new schools.

This final section summarises the themes of their contributions and sets out recommendations for how policy makers and others can reinvigorate the programme.

1 *A strong pipeline of free schools requires a long term commitment from Government*

The free school programme has achieved extraordinary success by inspiring school leaders and communities to seize the opportunities that come from the chance to open a new school.

When Ministers have made it a consistent focus, they have been able to encourage many more strong new schools and cut through the barriers that can hold back their creation.

In recent years, concerns over future funding commitments and the slower pace of schools opening has led to a loss of momentum.

At the time of writing, there is no timetable for future application waves, and it is unclear whether the DfE will fund the creation of new free schools beyond the current spending review period. As we head towards a general election, this creates crippling uncertainty for the programme and a real risk that it will cease all together.

It is vital that the programme is now established as a long-term feature of our school system, so that free school proposers have confidence that it is worth coming forward with their ideas.

Recommendation:

The DfE should confirm details of a new round of applications for free schools and that it plans to continue the programme beyond the current spending review period, as part of a long-term commitment to free schools' role in the school system.

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2 *The free school programme is most impactful when it is focused on innovation*

Free schools have delivered impressive results for the pupils that attend them, but their main impact has been to bring new ideas and approaches into the school system.

The most successful schools have now given us a much clearer evidence base for which school models and pedagogies – of all kinds- are most effective, and allowed others to learn from this.

The free school programme should be a mechanism for creating more new schools that are based on this good practice, as well as encouraging the emergence of new ideas. However, it is now much less innovative than it was, with fewer genuinely different schools coming through it.

The Government should renew its focus on using free schools to introduce innovative new approaches. This means accepting that some schools may fail. But provided processes are in place to enable swift intervention, the benefits of successful innovation will be much greater for the wider school system.

Recommendation:

Future waves of the free school programme should have an explicit emphasis on promoting innovative approaches.

3 *Free schools have made the biggest difference to communities that need better schools, not just new school places*

The original free school programme had a clear focus on improving education in areas where standards were weak, as well as providing a basic need for new school places.

Many of those profiled in this report were originally criticized as unnecessary or attacked out of a fear they would undermine the existing offer of local schools, when they have ended up significantly improving it.

But as the policy has developed over time, there has been less emphasis on allowing school leaders and communities to challenge existing provision and much more on simply creating new places.

Now that the acute need for new school places across the country eases, free schools should be used once again to empower communities that want better quality school provision.

In line with the Government's commitments on 'Levelling Up', this means making the programme available to all parts of the country, not just those with a shortage of places.

Recommendation:

Future waves of the free school programme should reserve space for projects outside of areas with a basic need for school places – allowing communities to make their own case for a new school.

4 *Delivering free schools across the country requires investment in community capacity*

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Free schools have had a significant impact in areas of high deprivation, where low education standards had become entrenched.

But starting a new school in these places is a particular challenge. Local people may want change but lack the skills, time and social infrastructure that helps bring it about.

Over time, it has become harder for those outside existing schools and multi-academy trusts to successfully open a free school – even where they have the potential to make this successful.

For the free school programme to be genuinely accessible to all parts of the country, it needs to become more welcoming to entrepreneurial school founders and ambitious communities. This includes providing direct support to applicants so that they can develop strong proposals and see them through to opening.

Recommendation:

The DfE should fund increased support to free school applicants in communities facing educational disadvantage, so that they can engage with the free school programme.

5 *Free schools should not belong to any one political party*

Free schools have been controversial but there is now clear evidence that the policy works.

Judged by their results, there is clearly a role for them as part of an autonomous, diverse school system – which all parties are committed to.

Over a decade into the programme, there is also now much greater appreciation at a local level of what free schools can offer – with many more councils and school leaders using the policy to improve school standards and augment existing provision.

Ahead of the next general election, there is a need to build cross party support for free schools – based not on ideology but on the evidence which shows how effective they can be.

Recommendation:

School leaders should campaign to secure a commitment to continuing the free school programme in each of the main political parties' manifestos.

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INNOVATION FUND

11. The Future – NSN Innovation Fund

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Since its inception, NSN has passionately advocated for a future in which every child has an equal chance to succeed in life, irrespective of their background.

In the future, it will continue to champion this vision by moving into a new phase, in which it provides grants that support innovative projects in education.

Through the **NSN Innovation Fund**, it will work with grant recipients to end educational inequality and change a situation where an unacceptable number of children continue to fail to reach their potential because they lack access to an excellent education.

Free schools and academy trusts with a free school will be eligible to apply for funding towards any new project which enhances children's learning and seeks to break the barriers of disadvantage.

All requests will be considered by the Board of Trustees at quarterly meetings throughout the year.

Grants will be awarded from £5,000- £50,000 for schools that can demonstrate how their idea will contribute to improving educational opportunities.

In awarding grants, Trustees will assess how the proposed project will be delivered and how the success of the project will be measured in delivering improvements in education and advocating for young people. Recognising that schools are an important part of the communities in which they are located, projects which foster a spirit of social inclusivity and impact on the wider communities which they serve will also be considered.

Looking ahead, NSN will also look at future fundraising so that it can continue to support the free school programme and advocate for reform which changes education for the better.

Now more than ever, we need to ensure that innovative thinking is encouraged in education, so that every child in every community genuinely has the best possible start in life.

Applications for the NSN Innovation Fund are now open. Further details and an application form is available to download from **www.newschoolsnetwork.org**.

New Schools Network

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