

# Vouchers, Inclusion and the Limits of Freedom

*Vouchers offer the beginnings of healing for a divided society.*

By Neil de Reybekill

**“The dominance of the [private] school system is a long-standing offence to any notion of democracy or meritocracy in our society ... The wider processes of exclusion and their dependence on privatization are laid bare by these schools.”**  
*W. Hutton, The State We’re In, writing about the United Kingdom)*

Such is the negative image of state schooling and the actual, as well as mythic, success of the private sector, that 46% of parents nationally say that they would send their children to a private school if they could.

Perhaps the first thing to acknowledge in approaching this problem is that we can’t put the genie back into the bottle. It is unlikely that the diverse range of public, private, charitable, church and other schools that now exist could all be nationalized and run successfully, even if there was the political will to do so. Yet the United Kingdom desperately needs a proven way of empowering the parent, motivating the child and healing society.

It is my suggestion that Britain look to Denmark where an arrangement called Funding Transfer Entitlement (FTE) has been in use as a central plank of national policy for decades. The Danes have an exemplary system of public education working hand-in-hand with a thriving alternative, private and free school sector.

What is special about this set-up is that all these component parts provide the glue in a highly cohesive society. Children’s experience of school, though clearly never perfect, is one of choice. Along with their parents, they have chosen the school they want to go to from a variety of options — public and private — and they can do so without concern for cost because the money follows the child.

The Government, which means the taxpayer, pays 85% of the schools’ costs. In the *folkeskole* (state schools) the remainder comes from a support grant which is locally administered. In

private, free and other alternative schools, the remaining 15% is paid by parents.

Danish society is characterized by a solidarity borne of democratic institutions, a sense of social conscience and trust which comes from small town roots and a commitment to progress through education. It is also a society which understands the necessity of inclusion and the limits of freedom. FTE works in Denmark because, like so many other Danish institutions, it gives freedom to the individual, trusts the citizen to make informed choices and then regulates to prevent abuse of the system by the unscrupulous.

Those who criticize FTE often do so on the grounds that it invites selection and social manipulation leading to segregation. While the United Kingdom’s system is hardly free of such behaviour — with middle-class parents ‘buying addresses’ near to sought-after schools — implications such as these must be considered.

The main factor that has prevented the Danish *frieskoler* from becoming the sort of elite private schools with which we are familiar in Britain is the legislation that ensures that private and free schools operate almost on equal terms with the state sector. The only difference — that 15% of running costs not covered by public subsidy — is paid for by the parents. Fees, however, are usually set on a sliding scale: so that those with lower incomes pay less. Legal restrictions limit the sums raised from parents.

Where a school is much in demand, places are allocated on a ‘first come, first served’ basis, with waiting lists much in evidence for successful *frieskoler*. One beauty of this system is that if you are unable to get a place in the private or free school of your choice and you don’t like the look of the local state school, then, as long as you can find 10-12 other parents who are in a similar position, you can start your own school. The government will help you find premises, employ staff

and run it. Which is only natural: are they not, after all, charged with spending your taxes wisely and providing the education of your choice for your children?

Where a school is failing, local people know and won’t use it: rolls fall and the school adapts or closes. Class sizes in all schools are low (19 per class), so that it takes only a few parents who are dissatisfied to make a rapid and drastic difference to teachers’ jobs. Ultimately, though, from the teachers’ point of view, the number of jobs in an area doesn’t fall with the establishment of a new free school. As the money follows the child, there is always the need for new teachers.

Because this funding arrangement covers *all* schools, it works as a unifying element — a common thread linking state schools to Islamic free schools and those of the socialist seventies to those of the Christian Right established in recent years. Students can and do move freely in and out of the state sector and so do teachers.

Denmark is by no means a perfect society. It has, however, a great deal to teach us about high attendance rates in schools, low levels of crime and long-term economic prosperity.

A commitment to the education of our fellow citizens is possible in the United Kingdom too. But the key to this is a fairer system of educational funding, giving an equal chance to all in society — at least at the level of school provision. FTE can offer us that inclusive chance — so that those who need academic education the most are not alienated from it.

Fully-funded vouchers, as part of a raft of desperately needed educational reforms, can offer us the beginnings of healing for our divided society. This idea, once stripped of its ideological baggage, can offer emancipation and inclusion in a more participatory society.

*(Dr. de Reybekill is a teacher and researcher at the School of Education at the University of Birmingham.)*