

Filming for the One Show!

It was fun to be asked to do some filming for the One Show today. This request came via my press officer at MMU (thanks Chris!) and the result should be broadcast this Thursday (subject to change).

The topic of the interview was free schools. The feature is about a group of parents in an area of Leeds who are setting up a free school as, apparently, there were no places in any local schools for their children. I'm not sure about the detail of all this as this was not shared with me.

As is the nature of media engagements, the BBC crew were after someone with an opinion on free schools and a willingness to share this to provide a contrary voice to what could be an overly positive piece. So, the challenge for me was to try and get some key pieces of information about free schools across in a few seconds with a positive attitude (not grumpy!).

For those of you who are interested, and read this far, these were the key points I had in my plan for the interview:

1. Free schools are not free. It costs around £3k more per pupil per year to educate them in a free school (£7,761 compared with £4767, DfE figures).

2. Free schools do enjoy some freedoms. They can employ who they want to teach in their schools, and they can ignore the National Curriculum. These are not good things in my opinion. Parents expect teachers to have a degree and a professional teaching qualification at least. This can't be taken for granted. In fact, 15% of teachers in free schools do not have these qualifications (compared to 4.5% in other types of schools, including academies). Again, DfE figures as submitted to the Education Select Committee. Parents can also rightly expect schools to teach the legally constituted set of subjects, knowledge and skills as outlined in the National

Curriculum as a minimum.

3. Free schools are free from Local Authority control. Again, I don't think this is a good thing. Local Authorities can provide helpful structure, support and advice for schools. But, perhaps more importantly, free schools need to be locally accountable. The Local Authority provides that democratic framework for schools. Outside of this, free schools are not accountable to their communities in any meaningful way. In fact, huge amounts of publicly owned land, buildings and other resources are transferred on 125 year leases to the private companies without a second thought. I'm with Jeremy Corbyn on this one: "Why was it believed that the ability to run a business, to sell carpets or cars, might make you best placed to run a school?"

4. Free schools are not being built in the right areas. 52% are built in areas where there is no shortage of pupil places, or not foreseeable or forecasted need for pupil places either. Surely a better way forward is to build capacity in existing schools rather than waste billions of taxpayer's funds on new, experimental schools like this.

5. Free schools do not improve educational standards. Ofsted have reported this recently, saying that, in general, free schools succeed or fail for broadly the same reasons as any other type of school. Time will tell if free schools do perform better; I strongly suggest that they won't.

However, free schools are a massive drain on the public purse. They take much needed funding (probably around £2 billion in total so far) away from the broader educational provision at a time of apparent austerity. They should not be a priority and are, for the reasons outlined above, a risky experiment and, in my opinion, a waste of money.

Do watch the broadcast on Monday 14th December and see what you think?

