



# Secondary Education: Diversity of Provision

Evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee  
on Education and Skills

Policy paper 4

## INTRODUCTION

- 1 Much of the following evidence was contained in a response made by the Secondary Heads Association in May 2001 to the Green Paper *Schools: Building on Success*. The Association has put forward a consistent view on the government's proposals for greater diversity in the secondary school system.
- 2 SHA accepts the government's aims, set out in the Green Paper, *Schools: Building on Success*, for a secondary school system in which:
  - every pupil is good at the basics and strives for excellence in areas of strength;
  - every school is good at the basics and excels in many fields;
  - every school has a distinct ethos and the autonomy to manage its affairs.
- 3 SHA accepts the constraints on autonomy through which a limited range of services, such as school transport, are administered at a strategic level. SHA does not believe, however, that the Green Paper has placed sufficient constraint on the development of a diverse system of secondary schools.
- 4 **SHA believes that the government's diversity agenda, with its emphasis on labelling secondary schools and according higher status to the schools with those labels, creates an unnecessary and unwelcome hierarchy of secondary schools in England. This hierarchy is reinforced by superior funding for schools with certain labels. SHA notes that Scotland and Wales, which have traditionally shown a stronger commitment to a comprehensive school system than England, have not introduced different labels for secondary schools.**

## DIVERSITY

- 5 SHA believes that many of the government's assumptions about secondary education are not based in reality and SHA would be happier if there were a firmer grounding in research for the government's proposals on diversity.
- 6 Much of the government's rhetoric about the Green Paper reforms suggests that secondary schools are failing to improve and are therefore in urgent need of reform. Regrettably, recent governments have too often denigrated the achievements and magnified the faults of the public services, and of schools in particular. Yet, as the Green Paper itself states, the secondary sector has improved steadily in recent years. Its record of success, as mentioned in paragraphs 1.26, 4.3 and 4.7 of the Green Paper, is part of a year-on-year improvement of which any commercial organisation would be proud.
- 7 The government stated in the Green Paper that it "*wants to encourage all secondary schools to develop a distinctive mission and ethos*". SHA members have expressed amazement that the government should appear not to recognise that one of the hallmarks of British schools for many generations has been the distinctive ethos of individual schools.
- 8 SHA is deeply concerned at the promotion of diversity between schools as a central tenet of government policy on secondary education. The phrase, *diversity and excellence*, used in the Green Paper, is little more than an abbreviation for "diversity between schools and excellence in some of them". SHA stands for equality of educational opportunity for all and seeks to uphold John Dewey's notion,

That which the best and wisest parents would want for *their*  
children, so must the community want for *all* its children.
- 9 Consistent with this principle, SHA believes that the government should be striving to promote diversity **within** each school, rather than the diversity **between** schools that the government seeks to extend. In reality,

diversity between schools already exists to a much greater extent than the government appears to believe. It is a hallmark of the professional work of SHA members that they develop in their schools a distinctive mission and ethos. Rather than implying that such distinctiveness hardly exists, the government could more accurately say that “*it is part of the great tradition of British schools that they develop an individual ethos within a wider system. The government seeks to encourage this and build on it.*” SHA members would have understood this and supported it.

- 10 SHA members do not recognise the “bog-standard comprehensive” that the Prime Minister’s official spokesman offensively referred to in a remark that, for many school leaders and teachers, remains a shadow over government policy on secondary education.
- 11 We welcome the encouragement from the government for schools to develop a distinctive mission and ethos although, as stated above, we believe this to be a prominent feature of schools already. It comes from the vision of the governors, head teacher and leadership team of the school and the context in which the school is placed – particularly its history, premises and catchment area. Often the distinctive nature of a school is changed by the expertise of individual teachers in music, drama, science or other fields in which students then excel in the school. It may arise from church school status. There is, SHA believes, already sufficient capacity within the secondary school system for individual schools to develop a distinctive mission and ethos. To extend this will, in some areas, put at risk the collaboration between schools, creating unnecessary competition and unwelcome hierarchies.

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### SPECIALIST SCHOOLS

- 12 On specialist schools, the government must surely now be aware of the danger of creating a two-tier system of secondary schools, with specialist schools accorded higher status and benefiting from half a million pounds of extra funding over each three-year period. Such a system creates a sharper hierarchy of schools in every town. It reduces the life chances of children who attend the school that is perceived to be lowest in the pecking order. There is evidence that the division between specialist and non-specialist schools is already widening in some local areas.
- 13 Some studies have been carried out on the achievement of students in specialist schools, but these focus on the individual schools. It is important to understand the effect of specialist schools, not just on the school itself, but on the wider secondary school provision in the area. No research has been carried out on achievement levels in areas covered by both specialist and non-specialist schools.
- 14 Where there is a single secondary school serving an, often rural, area, the specialist school policy breaks down completely. Pupils in these areas have no realistic choice of school and the quality and breadth of their education depends upon the quality and breadth of what is offered in the single school. For this reason, rural schools do not want to adopt a particular specialism and would welcome the opportunity to apply for specialist status as *specialist community schools*, the only designation that makes sense in their situation. A further problem for these schools is that they are nearly always the biggest employer in their area and the raising of £50,000 from other small employers is often impossible.
- 15 Leaders of many schools have seen the potential benefits of specialist status and have put a lot of work into the production of their bids. The process of application requires school leaders to spend too much time on the bid process and the need to raise £50,000 takes up far too much senior management time that would be better spent on the development of teaching and learning. It also has the effect of further rewarding schools that serve the more advantaged areas where it is often easier to raise the money.
- 16 SHA recognises that it is for funding, rather than curriculum, reasons that the vast majority of schools have applied for specialist status. Most specialist schools retain their existing special areas of expertise. The specialist schools themselves welcome the extra funding for their schools and community work, as well as the challenging targets they set themselves. SHA is therefore pleased that the government has responded positively to many of the proposals put forward by SHA in the General Secretary’s letter of 5 December 2000 to the Secretary of State. We welcome the opening of the initiative to all schools that want to apply, the removal of the artificial limits on the number of applications from each area and the increase in the categories of specialism.

**17 SHA calls on the government to go further than this and make the following changes to the specialist schools initiative. The government should:**

- **increase the speed of growth in the number of specialist schools in order to remove the inequity of the two-tier system as quickly as possible;**
- **change the present bidding system so that there is a clear set of criteria against which an application is considered; if the criteria are met, specialist status would be granted;**
- **remove bidding deadlines, so that applications can be submitted at any time;**
- **remove the obligation on schools to raise £50,000 in order to apply for specialist status;**
- **improve the accreditation process for specialist schools by reducing its bureaucracy;**
- **encourage schools, each with a different specialism, to make joint applications as groups, with each school receiving the full amount of funding for specialist status; funding should not be divided between joint applicants;**
- **strengthen the requirement for collaboration by specialist schools with other schools and the local community;**
- **create a category of community specialist schools, so that they do not have to pretend to emphasise a single curriculum area when they want to strive for all-round excellence; and**
- **remove the capacity for selection, which is used by few specialist schools and rejected by many, but lurks dangerously in the background, with the potential to put other schools in a disadvantaged position.**

**18** SHA believes that selection is used by only a limited number of schools because the market is already working in favour of specialist schools in many areas. When many more schools attain specialist status, selection is likely to be used increasingly in order to attain an advantaged position.

**19** SHA is unconvinced by the arguments for selection by aptitude. All the evidence suggests that, with the possible exceptions of music and sport, selection by aptitude at the age of 11 is little more than a proxy for selection by ability. It is impossible to design subject-specific aptitude tests for 11 year olds that distinguish between the specialist school categories. Even if it were possible to create such a test, the changing talents and interests of young people would still mean that many students would be in schools with the 'wrong' specialism before they are 16.

### BEACON SCHOOLS

**20** Beacon school status represents recognition of exceptionally good practice and the capacity and willingness to disseminate it. All categories of school are eligible for beacon status and thus beacon schools do not form a separate category. It is therefore difficult to see why government ministers continue to cite beacon status as a separate category of schools in their diversity agenda.

### ADVANCED SCHOOLS

**21** Advanced schools offer opportunities to some schools to share good practice with others in a similar way to the beacon school scheme. However, advanced schools represent another category of schools, extending the hierarchy of categories and make life more difficult for the schools at the bottom of the pecking order.

### TRAINING SCHOOLS

**22** While supporting the concept of training schools, SHA believes that this opportunity should be open to all schools able to demonstrate sufficient expertise in this area.

### FAITH SCHOOLS

- 23 Increasing the number of faith schools will cause considerable dissent among secondary schools in some areas. If the government or a local authority decides to create a faith school, careful consideration should be given to the effect on other schools in the area and thorough consultation should be carried out before a final decision is made. The question of admissions should be central and the effect of a new faith school on admissions to other local schools should be taken into account. The rights of families of other faiths, or none, must also be protected. Their children should have access to local faith schools and feel comfortable in attending them. The difficulty of appointing headteachers of faith schools, which normally attract only a small number of applicants for headships, should be taken into consideration.

### CITY ACADEMIES

- 24 City Academies are a further response to assist schools in difficult circumstances to raise student achievement. Their status as state-funded independent schools gives serious cause for concern that they will not operate as part of the family of local schools. The critical question in introducing city academies is admissions policy. City academies may be perceived more favourably by local people and may therefore draw potential students from other schools, creating a destabilizing effect on local education provision. SHA is particularly concerned at the potential effect of city academies in London, where more than 20 are planned.
- 25 The structure of governance of city academies gives cause for concern on several counts. On curriculum, there is concern that it may be unduly affected by the preferences of their sponsor. On finance, there is concern at their accountability for the spending of public funds. On structure, there is concern where a city academy is 11-18, but most local schools are 11-16 feeding into a sixth form college (in Middlesbrough, for example).

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### DIVERSITY WITHIN SCHOOLS

- 26 The policy of diversity **within** schools would fulfil the government's aim of enabling schools to recognise and provide for the particular talents of each individual pupil. Within their limited resources, this is what secondary schools strive to do. The Prime Minister has said that he wants "*first-rate secondaries for all, with the excellence and flexibility within every school to make the most of every pupil*". That is SHA's aim too. It is very far from the "one size fits all" mentality - with no setting, undifferentiated provision, hostility to specialisation and holding back gifted pupils - against which government ministers inveigh, but which is no necessary part of comprehensive education, and these days rarely found in our schools.
- 27 SHA's greatest disappointment is the government's failure to support the principle of the comprehensive school in providing an education to meet the varied needs and talents of all the young people whom it serves. Doing this through *diversity within schools* would have our fullest support.