

## **An Introduction to the London Education 'System'**

### **GELP Personalized Learning study visit – April 2014**

#### **London and its governance**

London is the capital city of England of the UK, and its centre of finance, government and commerce. Since 2000 it has been a mayoral city (one of only six in the UK - many having obtained their first elected mayor in 2012). The Mayor's office has responsibility for transport, strategic planning and crime policy but has no formal powers in education. London is made up of 32 Local Authorities (or boroughs) which are responsible for most other aspects of local government.

#### **Structural change**

Historically, London's school system has been the responsibility of its 32 Local Authorities. Since the introduction of Academies (schools outside local authority control, accountable directly to the central Department for Education) in 2000 first a trickle and then a flood of secondary schools have left local authority control. Thus, as it stands, 223 of London's 922 secondary schools are independent of the education departments of local authorities, and funded directly by Department of Education in central government.

Of these 223 schools, 62 are part of chains, overseen by not for profit organisations (such as Ark Schools or the Harris Federation), and 146 are entirely independent.

Since 2010, Free Schools have also been established - new schools set up by parent, teacher or voluntary groups that, once open, operate as Academies with the same freedoms. London has 32 primary (4-11 year olds) Free Schools and 19 Secondary (11-16 or 11-18 year olds) Free Schools. Controversies surrounding Free Schools include issues of faith (16 are faith based schools) in one of the world's most diverse cities, and concerns that the new schools are not necessarily located in the areas that have most need for new places, an issue created by London's booming primary-age population.

In theory, academy status confers additional freedoms on schools: structurally such as freedom over pay and conditions of teachers, and educationally such as freedoms over curriculum. In practice, the vast majority of Academies follow the English National Curriculum (which is mandated centrally for all schools still controlled by Local Authorities) and have made few if any significant changes to other aspects of school. English schools have for a long time been relatively autonomous, controlling their own budgets and recruitment, and so the difference in practice between an Academy and a Local Authority-controlled school can be little. Amidst the conformity, however, a few London schools have developed new thinking and models to meet the real needs of their students, resulting in small bright spots across the system.

Alongside partial school control, Local authorities retain responsibility for ensuring that all children have a place at school. They are also responsible for setting admissions rules and have special responsibilities for children in care, and children with special

educational needs. However, most have had to radically rethink their role in the wake of dramatic loss of funding and a challenge to the monopoly provision of services to schools.

### **Dramatic improvement**

London contains some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest neighbourhoods in England. Nationally 7% of students attend a private fee paying school - in London it is 10.6%. The national rate of registration for Free School Meals is 18.1% whereas the London average is 23.7% and as high as 45.9% in some boroughs (such as Islington).

Yet over the past ten years London state (public) schools have improved from some of the worst performing in the country to some of the best. Across London students on Free School Meals outperform their peers in other areas on final GCSE qualifications, taken at age 16. In Tower Hamlets, a London borough with the highest child poverty rate in the country (42%), all the schools are rated as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted (the national inspectorate of schools), and the average GCSE key threshold pass rate in schools is 61.8% - higher than the national average of 58.8% for all students.

### **What next?**

Many credit the London Challenge programme for this transformation (see separate note for information about the London Challenge). Certainly the explanation cannot be the structural changes alone (Tower Hamlets schools, for example, are all still under Local Authority control). Whatever caused the improvement, more and more people are now looking at what is next for education in London. In 2011 the Mayor's office launched an enquiry into London education, and the GLA (Greater London Authority) is hosting events in 2014 to explore how the phenomenal improvement of the past decade can be built upon. Others are calling for an iZone for London to generate the kind of step change in learning that New York City has sought. Despite no clear London education 'system', the appetite for a strategy for London education is strong. As an environment rich in learning opportunities – both within and outside schools – and with many potential levers for change – both as part of and external to formal governance structures – it is an opportune place to pose questions and test ideas.