

# THE KEY ISSUES FOR ISC AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN 2014



*The start of the New Year is always a busy and exciting time for Heads, examining and interviewing new faces who will become the future of their schools. But what about the bigger picture for 2014? Barnaby Lenon, Chairman of the Independent Schools Council, shares his perspectives.*

Like all Heads around the country, here at the Independent Schools Council (ISC) we too are looking to the future. We're kicking off 2014 in a robust way with the launch of the *Economic Impact* report which lays out our case for the importance and value of our schools to the UK economy. This will be a crucial year in the political landscape as politicians fire up for the next election, and we need to make sure the issues facing our schools are a firm part of the agenda.

But with academic reforms to all stages of school education, from early years to A-levels, being pushed through hard and fast, calls to tinker with university access for students and a press that is not always on our side, it is easy to wonder what kind of challenges the year may bring.

We should take heart. First of all, we must not forget that our schools are at the forefront of educational achievement – whether that's academic, sporting or cultural – and are recognised by the

OECD [The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] as being among the best in the world. Once again last summer, independent schools dominated the nation's exam results at A-level and GCSE.

More than half of entries from pupils at ISC schools achieve A\* or A grades at A-level, compared with a national average of 27%. GCSE and iGCSE exam results from 561 independent schools show that the proportion of entries awarded grade A\* this year has risen to 32.0% compared with a national average of 8.2%.

Even though we have a struggling economy and falling incomes, pupil numbers have held remarkably steady. In 2008, our annual census reported 511,677 pupils. Five years on our most recent 2013 census reports 508,601 pupils. An overall drop, yes – but of just 0.6% over five years. Of course, there are some regions in the UK that are under far more pressure than others, and it is no surprise that London and the South East continue

to remain strongest. But overall, such stability in the face of a double-dip recession would be applauded in other parts of the UK's economy.

We have also pioneered the drive into international education. The reputation of our schools has long attracted overseas students, with 26,000 currently studying in independent schools, like ISA's CATS Colleges, or international colleges like Sherborne. Our schools run 29 overseas branches, attracting over 20,000 pupils.

Indeed the Government, in a Department for Business Innovation and Skills report last summer, acknowledged our contribution to British education and the help it offers the UK economy as they launched their own strategy to increase the number of overseas students by 20% over the next five years. They recognise that overseas students who study at our schools will often go on to study at UK universities, providing a ready pipeline for higher education.

But the real strength of our schools lies in their diversity. Whether it is a small family run school, like The Old Vicarage in Derby; the local highly regarded prep school, like Cherry Trees in Bury St Edmonds; specialist music and drama schools like Arts Educational, The Hammond or Tring Park; or the schools offering the best help to special needs pupils, like More House or Moon Hall School, our independent schools offer excellence in their specialism and a tailored education for their children.

What all of these schools have in common is independence. And what that means is the freedom to offer the very best education that they can, in the way that we can. We have complete control over admissions and the curriculum, we can recruit the best teachers, without Government interference and we manage our own finances. We are accountable only to parents for the quality of the



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(Pictured: Thorpe Hall School.)*

education and are not compromised by accountability measures, Ofsted frameworks, league table thresholds or other centrally imposed measures which distort the focus away from the child and onto the school.

It also means we are free to innovate and to introduce some of the best ideas in education. We have pioneered the introduction of the IB and the Pre-U, as well as the Extended Project Qualification, much respected by universities, as broader, more challenging alternatives to A-levels. Our schools have also increasingly turned to IGCSEs, where they consider they offer a better curriculum and more rigorous examinations. Schools are also able to channel resources into using technology to inspire even more stimulating teaching.

And looking back over the last 12 to 18 months, I'm also encouraged by the obvious alignment of our priorities at ISC with what you tell us you want us to do.

ISA's annual poll of members tells us that your top priorities include the following: ensuring that reform of the public examinations system is fit for purpose; equal promotion of all schools under the banner of diversity and choice; pressure on the cost and burden of inspection; removing independent schools from EYFS legislation and dealing with Local Authority bias against the sector. So I'm proud to report some of ISC's achievements in these areas:

- We have led successful legal action against Local Authorities where they have set admissions criteria to publicly funded schools which discriminate against feeder prep and middle schools. The Office of the Schools Adjudicator has now upheld several of our complaints, most recently against eighteen community schools in Sheffield, where LAs and schools have discriminated against independent school pupils applying for oversubscribed places at 11+, 13+ and 16+ entry.

- We have finally seen the fruits of five years of work and campaigning to overturn the mandatory learning and development goals of the EYFS for good independent schools, who can now opt out. And, incidentally, we have ensured that DfE guidance on the free entitlement prevents LAs from discriminating against opted-out settings.

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- We maintain pressure on the regulatory burden of inspection, negotiating directly with DfE on the content of the Independent Schools Standards, and the raft of additional guidance against which ISI inspects. Notably, various documents which used to have the force of law as 'statutory guidance' have now been removed or downgraded to 'advice', returning autonomy and discretion to you. (We can do little about the direct cost of inspection since you, through ISA and the other member associations, own ISI and therefore have it within your own control to discuss cost recovery directly with the inspectorate.)

- My own position on the Board of Ofqual has enabled me to maintain a dialogue between us and them. We have also provided opportunities for all our member associations to talk collectively and with great force to DfE officials tasked with undertaking exam and curriculum reform.

- We have placed many high profile articles, opinion pieces and comments by both myself and Matthew Burgess in the national media, most recently with BBC News, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The TES*, highlighting issues and stories about the

sector. We work hard to maintain good relationships across the press, ensuring they come to us first for comment and explanation.

But there are challenges ahead and not least is the reform to A-levels and GCSEs. Revised linear A-levels in English language and literature, physics, chemistry, biology, history, psychology, art, sociology, economics, business studies and computing will be in place from 2015 and those syllabuses are due to be available to schools in the autumn this year. This will clearly put pressure on you to assess these quickly, so you can make information available to students as they start to choose their subjects.

Revised A-levels in maths, further maths, ancient and modern foreign languages will be taught from 2016, allowing a little more time to prepare in those subjects. All other A-levels will also be taught from 2016, if they can be revised in time. Revised AS-levels will be stand alone and taught from the same timescale.

The new GCSEs are being introduced in Maths and English and will be first examined in 2017, which for some schools will mean the introduction of the new courses later this year. Again these specifications are only expected to be



with schools this autumn.

The good news is that the revised GCSEs will be demanding, matching the best in the world and the revised A-levels will be good preparation for university study, since they are being revised by the universities.

There are also continuing economic pressures for parents and schools, with the press making much of stories of boarding school fees exceeding the average wage in this country, although of course, many of our schools have fees that are a lot lower than that. Increasingly, more schools are able to offer fee assistance and bursaries to many of their students and have started development funds to finance these. Last year, more than a third of pupils at our schools received help with their fees, with ISC schools providing more than £620 million annually, up £19 million on last year's figures. Almost 5,000 children paid no fees last year as a result of means tested bursaries and 16,500 children paid less than half fees.

Other schools, such as Gosfield School in Braintree have used imaginative ways to address the problem, and in September 2012, reduced their fees by up to £1,000 per term by increasing class sizes. Their pupil numbers have grown by 15% and last September they had the largest Reception class for a decade. The Tax Free Childcare Scheme may also provide some relief for parents and opportunities for schools to be creative in their before and after school care and holiday club provision. Being introduced in 2015 for children up to age five, it will give working parents £1,200 in tax credits to spend with the childcare provider of their choice. The following year it will be extended to children up to age 12, and it is looking likely that parents will be able to spend it on wraparound care at our prep schools.

But while one hand giveth, the other taketh away. A looming threat to our boarding schools is the tightening of the rules over the application of the Continuity of Education Allowance for children of service families. At the same time, army bases are being closed in Germany which is leading to a rethinking of education for children of service personnel. The ramifications for our schools are, as yet, unclear. There is also the continuing fee freeze on music and dance funding which, after four years, is



becoming a matter of great concern. Demographics are also playing their part in affecting pupil numbers. While there is a boom in the primary years which prep schools will benefit from over the next few years, there is a dip in the middle years, around the age of 12, so senior schools may see a few years of lean before the increased birth rate affects their enrolments.

University access stories keep appearing in the press, with pressure on universities to offer differential grades for students from lower performing maintained schools and to introduce access targets for increasing quotas for state educated pupils. It must be genuinely confusing for parents to know whether attending an independent school improves or weakens a child's chances of getting into your university of choice and, once there, of coping with the different challenges of higher education. Different research reports appear almost weekly, taking contrary views on these questions of access and performance.

The ISC is clear however. We don't agree that universities should be targeting particular percentages of state and independent school applicants and offers – school type is a very poor proxy for addressing questions of disadvantage, which needs to be done on an individual basis. We do agree however, with the Russell Group, that getting into selective universities depends upon taking the right subjects, getting the right grades and having the aspiration to apply in the first place. Our schools are very good at supporting and advising on all these aspects and students continue to get offers at the universities they want to study at.

But this is the year when the government are firing up for the long haul into the general election. So what of the political landscape we are in? The government continues to push its policy of Free Schools and academies, with nearly thirty ISC schools sponsoring academies. But there has been a mixed picture of success across the country, with several free schools, including Al-Madinah in Derby, being described as 'dysfunctional'. Last November the Education Select Committee, who were looking into the issue of school partnerships, agreed with us that independent state school partnerships are more important than academy sponsorship.

So the landscape is shifting. While Michael Gove has made clear that there will be no change to the radical programme under his watch, it seems likely that Labour and the Lib Dems will enter the next election promising to reform Free Schools, insisting on only using qualified teachers and teaching a national curriculum. But on the plus side for us, Tristram Hunt, the Shadow Education Secretary, has made it clear that QTS will not be imposed on our sector and has even come out and said that he would not rule out sending his own children to an independent school.

And quite right too. He has benefitted from an independent education and every year over 500,000 children do too. But we are not resting on our laurels. We are constantly looking for ways to improve, innovate and develop and at our core is the belief that we want to continue offering the best education in the world. And as we move into 2014, whatever the challenges, we will do just that.