

Chain schools

**Here come the schools without classrooms**

William Stewart

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A growing number of organisations want to run state schools in Britain as chains. In this four-page report, William Stewart looks at a radical Swedish business coming to England and, overleaf, examines some of the other contenders for franchises.

Nothing about the exterior of **Kunskapsskolan** Nacka suggests it represents a revolution in education. The compact, single-storey, flat-roofed building in Stockholm looks exactly as it did when it was an unremarkable state school.

It is only when you walk around that you realise just how different this 12-15 lower secondary really is: there are no classrooms.

**Kunskapsskolan**, the company behind this and 29 other schools in Sweden, hopes to run around 30 state schools in England within the next decade.

That could have profound consequences for how British teachers are paid and the way they work, thanks to **Kunskapsskolan's** pupil-centred approach to education.

Backing from the Labour Government has helped it become the preferred sponsor of two academies in Richmond, Surrey, with the blessing of the Liberal Democrat-controlled council.

The Conservative party has suggested that if it wins the next general election it will replicate some of the policies that have allowed **Kunskapsskolan** to flourish in Sweden.

Visitors to **Kunskapsskolan** schools have commented that "many pupils seem to be mostly hanging around". There is actually work going on, but the atmosphere is decidedly relaxed.

At the **Kunskapsskolan** Nacka school traditional rows of desks and chairs have been abandoned in favour of a large university-style lecture theatre and a series of small rooms. The smallest are no more than cubby holes with just enough space for one pupil to work, while the largest has room for at least 15.

The first room we enter is supposed to be a social sciences 'workshop' for 15-year-olds, but includes a girl two years younger working on an English essay.

She explains that she is there because she prefers to work with her friends. No one minds, because this is what **Kunskapsskolan** is all about - a genuinely personalised education where pupils decide how best to complete their work.

Some are even allowed to work at home if they can be trusted. Everything has to be agreed in weekly 20 minute meetings with a personal tutor who stays with them throughout their time at the school. Personal logbooks are filled in and individual targets set, with questions asked if they are not met.

But it is the pupil, rather than the teacher, driving the process.

Anders Hultin, a **Kunskapsskolan** co-founder now heading its UK operation, said: "Teachers are very important, but they are not the first priority of our schools. We don't say to teachers that if you are doing a good job then we are satisfied. It is about whether pupils are meeting their individual goals."

Teachers do not take centre stage, but sit at the edges of rooms on hand to help pupils should the need arise. The atmosphere is more like a chatty university library than the "on task" silence that so many teachers in England crave.

The **Kunskapsskolan** approach first emerged as a result of the introduction of a school voucher system in Sweden (see article right).

Peje Emilsson, a public relations magnate, was inspired to start up the company by his experience of helping to run a Montessori nursery in Paris in the 1970s.

"I thought the one-size-fits-all model did not offer the kind of challenges and stimulation young people need," he said. Swedish parents obviously agreed and **Kunskapsskolan** schools now educate 9,000 pupils and employ 700 staff.

Mr Emilsson has succeeded in attracting funds from one of Sweden's biggest investment firms and also has good connections abroad.

He casually mentions trying to persuade Hillary Clinton of the merits of a voucher system. He was unsuccessful, but British policymakers seem more interested.

"Choice" and "diversity" have long been buzz words in Labour education policy, and were the rationale behind the control of hundreds of state-funded secondaries being handed to private, charitable, religious and education sponsors through the academies scheme. But few have departed very far from the standard model of English secondary education.

**Kunskapsskolan** is a different proposition for teachers, pupils and parents. Its approach uses an identical system and shared back office services for schools, as a fast food chain might operate its franchises.

That produces economies of scale, allowing its Swedish schools to make a 4 per cent profit and gain above average academic results, beating municipal schools that receive identical state funding.

The common approach extends to teaching with a detailed **Kunskapsskolan** curriculum set out in 35 "steps", outlined on an online "knowledge portal" giving pupils and teachers instant access to the resources they need.

Each pupil works at their own level, regardless of age. There is less potential for creativity in deciding what to teach. But the time freed up means **Kunskapsskolan** teachers have an average of 30 hours of weekly pupil contact time, 50 per cent more than in Sweden's municipal schools.

British teachers who end up working in one of the Scandinavian chain's schools may find themselves delivering more personalised teaching, and have a better, closer relationships with pupils.

But at the same time they could also find themselves with less freedom, and even have their salary partially determined by their pupils' view of their performances.

Mr Hultin admits the chain's more centralised approach might not be for everyone. "You have the generalist who would like to do anything," he said. "Then you have the subject specialist who really loves their subject, not necessarily the kids, and they don't suit this model so well.

"If you are a teacher who really enjoys preparing lessons in your classroom then you won't fit in with this."

#### I'M MORE SENSITIVE TO PUPILS' DIFFICULTIES

Pernilla Brorsson, an English and French teacher at **Kunskapsskolan** Nacka, has seen both sides of the Swedish education coin, having started her career in municipal schools. But she is most enthusiastic about the advantages offered by the private company's unique approach.

"I enjoy the contact and the relationship you get with the students," she said. "You get so close to them and get to know them really well." Like all **Kunskapsskolan** teachers, Ms Brorsson is allocated 20 pupils who she will be responsible for throughout their time at the school. She spends at least a fifth of her week in 15-minute one-to-one tutorials with each of them.

**Kunskapsskolan** believes that by allowing pupils to take responsibility for organising their own timetables, choosing when to attend lessons and when they would rather work alone, their motivation improves.

But do any take advantage? "Of course they do," said Ms Brorsson. "But you do get to know students very well and you know which ones will take longer than they should and perhaps even leave school earlier. But I can talk to parents and keep an eye on them."

She says the system has made her better at her job. "I have got a deep understanding of how good students are and how to tackle difficult ones," she said. "I know how to work with students who are really motivated and those who are really stressed. I have become more sensitive to their difficulties and learned a lot about learning strategies with that in mind.

"When I worked at a municipal school I didn't think about that at all. Here I am forced to do it every week."

The company is also different because it pays its teachers according to their performance. But this does not faze Mr Brorsson.

"The impact hasn't been that great," she said. "When it comes to the principle of those performing the best getting the most, most people think that is quite natural."