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Reshuffle redux

In July, the Prime Minister replaced all his top education ministers as part of a pre-election reshuffle. What impact will the newcomers have on the education industry, asks Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit

Schools: Michael Gove out, Nicky Morgan in

A radical overhaul of the national curriculum, the introduction of free schools, the dramatic Trojan Horse scandal. These are just some things that spring to mind when thinking about the former education secretary, Michael Gove. His four-year reign at the Department for Education (DfE) will certainly be remembered.

The reshuffle in July saw Gove transferred – or ‘demoted’, depending on who you ask – to a new position as chief whip. Many were shocked, even embarrassed for him. However, with less than a year until an election that is likely to be as tight as the last, replacing him was in PR terms a sensible move.

Simply put, Gove was too unpopular with parents and teachers and had become an electoral threat to his party. Sift through the press coverage on his reforms since 2010 and you’ll often find them described as “dangerous” or the cause of “incalculable damage”.

“To teachers, it was like a stranger suddenly telling them they were not very good at their job. Parents also saw him as very opinionated,” explains Richard Muir, associate director for public service reform at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

This reaction was in large part because Gove was an ideological and radical minister. Ideological because of his fervent belief in the reforms he put in place, radical because of the breakneck speed with which they were introduced.

Others would argue that Gove had a lot of political prowess, though. Through sheer force of character he pushed through some of the deepest, most unpopular reforms to state education since the 1980s. With more than half of English state secondary schools now independent of local authority control (up from about 200 in 2010), some argue that he achieved all he could have at the DfE and was ready to move on.

‘A very safe pair of hands’

So what does his successor, Nicky Morgan, bring to the table? Tom King, associate director of due diligence at GK Strategy, suggests that Morgan will be a “very safe pair of hands”, designed to appease more moderate voters. Indeed, many see her as a pacifying force, a dove replacing the educational hawk.

To an extent, they’re right. Morgan has already tried to cosy up to the teaching profession, labelling them as “outstanding” in mid-August. Around the same time, she told shadow education secretary Tristram Hunt that academies were “just one part of the picture”. This is a far cry from Gove’s more hard-line approach. At one point in 2012 he accused those who were against academies of being “ideologues who are happy with failure”.

However, while this softening in approach is palpable, King believes Morgan is more likely to continue implementing Gove’s policies than try to unwind them. “[The reshuffle] is not a judgment on the reforms themselves... The recall of Nick Gibb to the DfE [as minister of state] is also highly significant from this perspective. He was schools minister for the most radical period in Gove’s tenure and is closely associated with the changes.”

The industry view

Gove’s reforms have of course been challenging for education suppliers and publishers. A key issue has been the barriers to marketing products to schools in a newly ‘academised’ sector. As Caroline Wright,

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director at the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA), describes: "The sales model has got trickier: as opposed to around 150 local authorities procuring on behalf of schools, you now have around 24,000 target schools to focus on."

Suppliers wouldn't turn the clock back, though; teachers tend to make better customers than LEAs after all. What's really needed, then, is more collaboration between academies, so that they can spread best practice and cut costs. On this, Morgan is yet to announce any change of course; the government says it is encouraging the formation of academy groups and partnerships are booming.

But critics say more 'carrots' are needed to get schools clubbing together, and that would include more funding. If Morgan really wants to win friends in the industry, she'd do well to start here.

Another challenge has been the pace of reforms to the new national curriculum and introduction of more rigorous qualifications. But Michael McGarvey, director of UK Schools at Cambridge University Press, believes there'll be no let up on Morgan's watch.

"In education terms the timelines for the planning and deliverables for the new curriculum and new qualifications can be counted in years, so changing direction at this stage seems unlikely and very difficult."

Election time

All of the above comes with a caveat, of course: the election is but nine months away and, after a period of relative silence, Labour is on the offensive. Shadow education secretary Tristram Hunt has already threatened to overhaul many of Gove's reforms if his party wins office; that would include delaying A-level reform; insisting newly qualified teachers (NQT) were formally trained; and reviewing the free school programme.

As such, we're likely to see an interesting role reversal in the coming months: Labour will begin to position itself as a harbinger of change, while Morgan tries to convince voters that Gove's tough love is over and we're all better off. This will create even more incentive for her to play dove with teachers, parents and businesses alike.

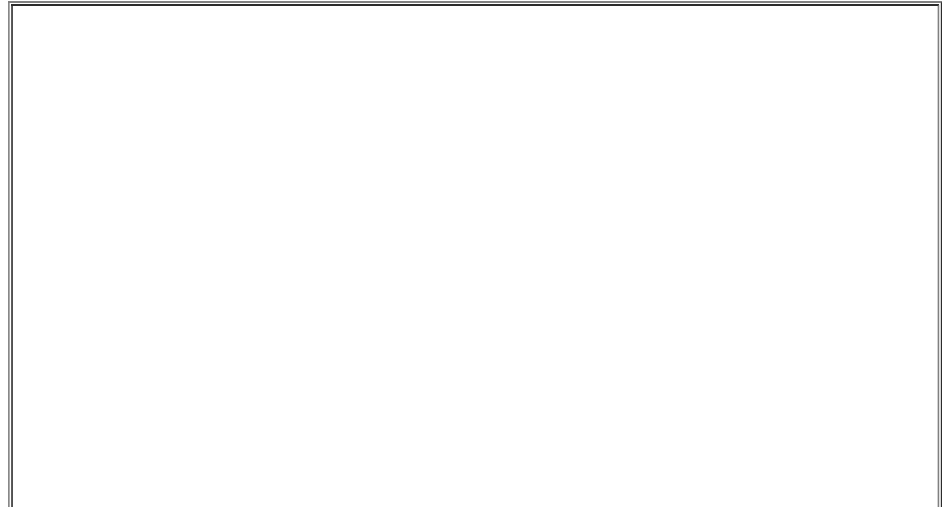
Higher education: David Willetts out, Greg Clark in

So much for Willetts' promises of parity between the private and public higher education sectors. His 2011 white paper, 'Students at the heart of the system', committed the government to opening up the higher education market to 'alternative providers' (APs) by creating a level playing field. But while the government has reformed loan funding (see page 24) and removed barriers to new providers, a new higher education bill to finish the job remains elusive.

As such, many inequities still exist between APs and the state, including: unequal work rights for international students attending APs; caps on AP student numbers from 2014-15 (as caps in the public sector are lifted); and inequitable access to funding like Research Council grants.

Greg Clark, who replaces Willetts, will no doubt have his ear bent about all of this in the coming months. But the chances of him tabling a bill before the election seem slim. For one, he will have a more on his plate than his predecessor, with new responsibilities including "preventing violent extremism" and "widening participation for students and providers" (although arguably APs could play an important role here).

He's also taken over at a time when Labour is getting fiercer in its opposition to private HE. For similar reasons, he may find greater resistance from his Lib Dem colleagues in the business department (BIS). Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and a former special advisor to Willetts, says: "I am a big fan of Greg Clark's, but I rather suspect the balance of power has shifted back a bit towards the Lib Dems who are obviously more sceptical about all of this. And of course it's Vince Cable's department."



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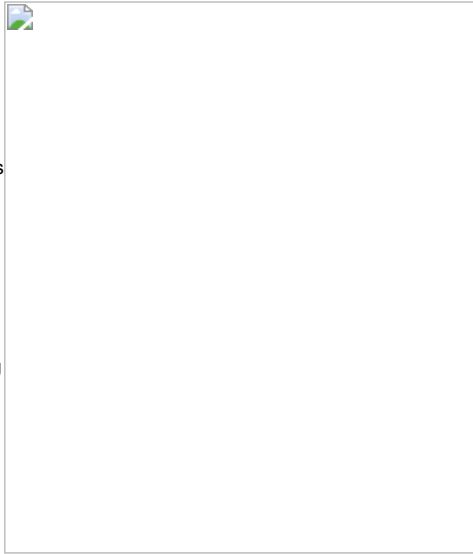
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Skills: Matthew Hancock out, Nick Boles in

Nick Boles was an interesting choice for minister of further education and skills. As Stewart Segal, chief executive at the Association of Employment & Learning Providers, points out: "By his own admission, Nick Boles does not have any previous experience of skills." Ministerial changes sometimes mark a new direction of travel, but Segal fears that Boles may "play safe" until the general election.

That would be a shame. Operators broadly welcomed Matthew Hancock's positive approach to apprenticeships and training. But radical policy ideas have made them jittery. Chief among these is a plan to reroute apprenticeship funding from training providers to employers in 2017—something that could end up discouraging smaller businesses from taking on apprentices in the first place.

There are some positive signs, though. Segal notes that, on his second day, Boles promised to review concerns on whether the vocational qualifications review led by Alison Wolf had "gone too far". This could be a "promising indication" of a more conciliatory approach to come.

**Early years: Elizabeth Truss out, Sam Gyimah in**

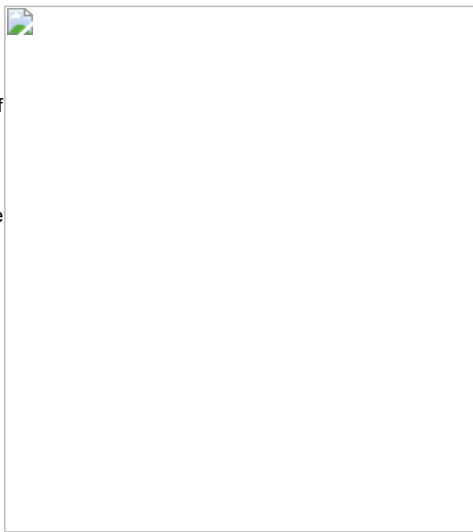
Elizabeth Truss' "less is more" idea for nursery staff went down like flat, warm beer. If we legally reduce the number of staff a facility must have, but train staff better, we'll be getting more for less she enthused. Parents were unconvinced, as were the Liberal Democrats who eventually halted the plan.

More recently, she held up the French system as the model that British nurseries should base themselves on. As such, reforms were passed to increase the amount of free childcare from 12.5 hours to 15. Yet Truss said much less about the private, independent and voluntary (PVI) sector, which delivers some 80% of all childcare.

According to Purnima Tanuku OBE, chief executive of the National Day Nurseries Association, the government could be doing a lot more to level the playing field between PVIs and state-maintained providers. PVIs must pay VAT and business rates while their state-maintained peers are exempt; many also make a loss on the 15 hours of subsidised funding they receive, too.

Former government whip Sam Gyimah, who replaces Truss, seems like a step forward, though. "Sam Gyimah has a solid background in banking and developing small enterprises so will understand the business challenges being faced by childcare providers," says Tanuku.

"Early in his new role, the minister has shown he is ready to listen to the sector taking the decision to re-think GCSE entry requirements for the Early Years Educator qualification. It is an encouraging step."



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