



Swedish entrepreneur Anders Hultin at one of his company's schools in Chelsea: 'I believe in profit-making as a way to deliver high-quality education' Photographs: Frank Baron

## The prophet's motive

The Conservatives have based their plan for schools on a Swedish model. But its architect now says the party has got it all wrong. He talks to **Polly Curtis**

**T**he Conservative party has clocked up thousands of air miles on round-trips to Sweden over the last few years, interrogating every element of its school system. The Swedish-style "free" schools are at the heart of the party's plans for education should it form the next government. From 6 May (the most probable morning after the general election), if the Tories win, any group of parents, charity or business will be allowed to set up a state-funded, independently run school. Shadow ministers describe it as the "Blair-plus" form of academy.

In the next few weeks, the shadow education secretary, Michael Gove, is due to unveil a raft of potential sponsors who are, the party claims, queueing up to run the schools. Under the system, over 220,000 new school places would be created, allowing popular schools to expand to meet parental demand while struggling schools will wither and die. It will, the Tories say, create a true market in schools in which consumer demand will force up standards across the system.

The Swedish school model will be a key pillar of Gove's speech to the Conservative party annual conference in Manchester tomorrow. But last week, Anders Hultin, the Swede who designed the system as a political adviser to the Swedish gov-

ernment in the early 1990s and ran Kunskapsskolan, one of the largest chains of Swedish free schools, stepped into the debate by declaring the Conservative plans flawed. In this newspaper, and in an article for the Spectator magazine, he set out the reasons why, in his opinion, Gove and his team have got it wrong.

"They [the Conservatives] think they can get another 2,000-3,000 new schools under voucher reforms. What I'm trying to point out is you can't use Sweden as an example because if you're not allowing profit-making organisations the scheme could fail," he says. The Conservatives have stressed that they would not allow the most controversial of the Swedish reforms: to allow the operators behind schools to make a profit from government funds.

In an interview to mark his new job as chief executive officer of Global Education Management Systems (Gems), the firm that operates nearly 100 schools

with more than 90,000 students in nine countries, Hultin told Education Guardian: "There are school providers out there - Kunskapsskolan is one, Gems is another - that are really trying to become highly professional school operators, but they are locked out because they are profit-making organisations. They can't step into this programme."

### Business model

It's worth noting that Hultin has a motive here. After designing the system in Sweden, he left the government to form a representative group for the existing schools and went on to found Kunskapsskolan, backed by investors including the people behind Sony Eriksson mobile phones. In 2007, he began talks with Lord Adonis and the Westminster government to sponsor some UK academies, and then he moved to Gems. His business is for-profit schools.

He describes his two motives for looking to England. First, the Kunskapsskolan model needed proving in the English language and curriculum as a springboard to taking the model elsewhere in the world, where English education still holds the biggest currency. The second was with an eye to being allowed to make a profit if the academy model - or a Conservative government - allowed it.

From Hultin's point of view, that plan went terribly wrong. The process of setting up academies was too slow for him;

he wasn't allowed to use his tried and tested architects but had to abide by EU laws to put contracts out to tender. He also felt the financial arrangements were unfair. He says: "To be honest, if we spend a lot of money and make a lot of investment we should have some return to at least cover our costs, but they got so nervous because they didn't want to see any transactions between the trust and the company in Sweden."

Hultin is angry about this. "I find the academy programme a strange body. There are some car dealers becoming sponsors for schools and teaching creationism. The basic idea behind academies is nice, to bring the private sector in to improve state education. But I am really surprised that you can invite car dealers in to take over schools. I don't understand what they can contribute. Sure, they can run the administration in a more efficient way, but they are not educationists."

He clearly understands the controversy of private companies making profits from running schools. He sets out the difficulties that England would face if existing private schools wanted to opt into the voucher system, meaning the state would be subsidising wealthy schools.

He rejects one of the criticisms often levelled at the Swedish system, that it has fuelled social segregation, but adds: "Previously, private education was for the privileged, but with

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the voucher you can make private education for everyone."

Hultin speaks passionately about the Kunskapsskolan system. The schools are alternately described as being more like universities than traditional schools, or like a Swedish version of Summerhill, the progressive school where pupils are allowed to opt in and out of classes according to their mood. They have no timetable, no set lessons and little sense of a traditional classroom.

Last year, when the Guardian visited Kunskapsskolan Nacka, on the outskirts of Stockholm, Hultin's policies in practice seemed chaotic, but that impression of freedom masked a highly structured plan. Each child has a weekly target in every subject. Fail, and their personal tutor will want to know why at their weekly meeting. So will their parents, who can follow their progress online. The teenagers are set targets, but have complete freedom in deciding how to reach them. Hultin says it is a personalised form of education that offers an alternative to Swedish families in a previously very uniform education system.

To claim that the schools have not made a lot of money for investors, he responds

**'For me, there's no conflict between profit and education. They go hand in hand'**

that they are queueing up to invest in the projects and that it is a healthy business. "Education correspondents just don't understand balance sheets," he says.

He is passionate about the education system and also speaks proudly of being an "entrepreneur", restless at the thought of only running a handful of schools. What's his principle motivation? "I believe in profit-making organisations as a way to deliver high-quality education. For me, it's not a conflict between profit and education. It goes the same, hand in hand. I know that. I'm an entrepreneur, I like to set up new things. I'm happy when I see pupils enjoying the system and coming back a few years later saying university was so easy."

Because of his frustration with the academy system, Hultin has now jumped ship on it, and Kunskapsskolan, to join



Hultin: 'Sweden can't be an example'

Gems, which is rapidly expanding across the globe. Kunskapsskolan is still setting up two schools in Richmond, but the transition is gradual. Hultin will continue to argue that he should be allowed to run schools in England for profit and believes that despite Tory assurances, at some point, they will change their minds.

#### Voucher system

The voucher system, he insists, gives parents back power over their children's education, and that power creates a market that encourages schools to provide the kind of education they want for their children. "It's not rocket science," he says. "It's what's happening all over society. Life is becoming more personalised. You expect to be treated as a human being. You would like your own responsibility; you are not ready to be just part of a collective. You are individuals."

The Conservatives are adamant they won't go down the schools-for-profit route, all too aware that any move to fully privatise education would be explosive. The unease some have with academies would be as nothing compared with the row over vouchers. For this reason some within the party are now even questioning whether the Swedish branding could backfire. One source says that perhaps they should have dubbed them American-style schools, after the charter school movement there, which might have had the added bonus of capitalising on the Obama effect.

But Hultin isn't giving up hope of capitalising on the English education system. "I talk to them [the Conservatives] from time to time, but they are very concerned about this profit-making thing. I don't expect them to open up the profit-making at least in the first stage. It will come later than that. We have a high expectation."