



Sunshine after the rain

Schools are facing a difficult time – but today's reforms should mean a brighter future for many, says European Electronique's **Yolanta Gill**

The government wasted little time before moving to radically reform the schools sector. Within a few months of coming to power, it had announced plans to axe billions of pounds worth of Building Schools for the Future (BSF) projects that had yet to reach financial close, and had launched a major expansion of the academies programme.

All this has left the future looking uncertain, both for schools and for the companies working with them. But there are reasons to be hopeful that the reforms will create opportunities as well as problems.

For one thing, the BSF programme had many drawbacks for schools and suppliers alike. Its 'one size fits all' approach, for example, limited the ambitions of many schools, while the costly bidding process attached alienated many suppliers.

With BSF gone, money that was previously wasted on this bidding process can be spent instead on refurbishing schools, providing ICT services and supporting education.

The end of BSF also re-opens doors to smaller suppliers. Despite our record in the education sector, as a medium-sized company, we'd found breaking into the BSF programme very difficult and cost prohibitive: the programme seemed to be designed for larger players. In future, school leadership teams will have greater flexibility to manage their ICT supplies, allowing and encouraging greater innovation.

Last year's academies bill, too, can offer significant benefits to those in the education sector. The expansion of the programme has so far met with a mixed response. But it will allow schools to recover as much as 10% of their budget, that was previously top-sliced by their

local authorities; and it will give schools more freedom to make their own decisions. All this means they can use their funding to procure services from whichever organisations with which they choose to work. This should result in better provision of ICT solutions and services.

Of course, no matter what funds there are available, the real key to success doesn't lie in new buildings and ICT. Instead it lies in visionary leadership, clear strategy and an educational vision to deliver a successful 21st century learning environment. In the past, many staff and head teachers felt restricted by local authority control.

Now, though, the sky is the limit, and it's a very exciting time to be working with academies. I recently visited one of our academies in Kent, where the classrooms had gone, replaced with an ICT-rich open learning environment. The atmosphere of learning was

brehtaking. When considered carefully, innovation in ICT can be a powerful tool that will benefit learners.

In a time of cuts to public sector funding, of course, there are likely to be reductions in spending across all areas, including ICT. In that environment, schools are facing difficult choices – whether to rebuild or refurbish; to use capital or revenue funding to acquire new services or equipment; to invest in new technologies such as Thin Client, VDI, or Cloud Computing, which cost money now but could bring cost savings.

Choosing the right path will be more important now than ever before. But the academies programme and the end of BSF should mean a brighter future for many schools. ■

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