
Academies: a breakthrough or yet more spin?

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ABSTRACT In this article the General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers outlines the reasons why the Union opposes Academies, and gives an overview of the changes in the relationship between local authorities and Academies. The NUT recognises that the change of government presents an opportunity for a change of direction and welcomes reports that a study has been commissioned. An analysis of recent evidence on Academies, including that of the influential House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, is followed by the NUT's views of the what the next steps should be on Academies and on supporting schools in challenging circumstances.

The latest version of the National Union of Teachers' campaigning document, *Academies – Looking Beyond the Spin: why the NUT calls for a different approach* (2007) sets out the key reasons why the Union has consistently opposed the establishment of Academies. We use evidence gathered from research, press reports, the experiences of NUT members involved with Academies and other campaigning groups, including the Anti Academies Alliance, which bears the flaws in the concept driving the Academies programme, that of competition and private sector involvement in education.

Why the NUT Opposes Academies

The NUT opposes the transfer of publicly funded assets in the form of school buildings and land being transferred into the hands of unaccountable sponsoring bodies. Sponsors are not required to have educational expertise or experience and some sponsors have been involved in the 'cash/loans for honours' investigation, pursue specific religious agendas or have used Academies to further their business interests. The governance structure of Academies allows sponsors to dominate the governing body to the detriment of a fair balance of other 'stakeholder' governors.

Academies threaten fair admissions policies and have a destabilising effect on the pupil intakes of other neighbouring schools, not just because of their glossy and expensive new buildings and high media profile. A survey reported in *The Times Educational Supplement* of 18 May 2007 showed that because of preferential funding, Academies received almost £1,600 per pupil than neighbouring comprehensives.

It is not surprising that some Academies have proved to be popular with parents and many of them are vastly oversubscribed. They can set their own admissions procedures (consistent with the Admissions Code of Practice), which can be a complex mix of entrance tests, various forms of banding, sibling places, random selection such as lotteries and distance from school. There is a lack of transparency for parents in understanding how these arrangements work and some evidence that the pupil intakes of Academies do not match their neighbourhood profile. Similarly the exclusion rates for Academies are significantly higher than for neighbouring schools. These factors leave other local schools with more pupils with learning and behaviour problems.

The Government concentrates relentlessly on the statistics on test and examination results for Academies and their apparent faster rate of improvement. This is, of course, positive for pupils and their teachers but these statistics need to be treated with caution. The latest statistics show that Academies still lag behind the national average at 5 A-C GCSE grades (41.5 per cent compared with 59.2 per cent) with an even greater differential when English and maths were included (21.8 per cent compared with the national average of 45.8 per cent). These figures also showed that Academies trailed other categories of schools with high level of deprivation such as Excellence in Cities schools and those in the 10 per cent most deprived areas.

As a trade union, the NUT opposes Academies' ability to operate outside the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document, with many Academies instituting their own pay and conditions. While the NUT has secured recognition and collective bargaining in a number of Academies, difficulties remain in others.

Changes in the Relationship Between Local Authorities and Academies

Local authorities are in a difficult position regarding Academies. The requirement on schools to promote community cohesion is in conflict with the requirement on local authorities to promote diversity of school provision. How can local authorities develop strategic frameworks for extended schools when Academies are outside the maintained school system?

The NUT knows that the Government has used the carrot of much needed capital resources for schools through the Building Schools for the Future programme to promote the Academies programme. Many local authorities have been put under pressure to include Academies within their BSF proposals to ensure approval. Examples are Wolverhampton, Newcastle, Barnsley, Sandwell,

Liverpool, Lambeth, Darlington. Some areas, however, have stood out against this pressure and still obtained funding: Barking and Dagenham, Tower Hamlets and Burnley within Lancashire.

Some local authorities have embraced Academies as part of their secondary education plans with an emphasis on vocational education. Manchester is an example of this with proposals for six new Academies partnering other secondary schools with six industry growth centres (health, construction, business, finance, creative, digital communication) and six corporate partnerships. Similar developments are taking place in Birmingham, Sheffield and Leeds.

Other local authorities, like Sunderland, are building on a partnership/collaborative model with three Academies planned with local sponsors in partnership with the authority and other secondary schools.

Some authorities, like Kent, with diverse school provision anyway, are extending their 'choice and diversity' credentials through Academies. While others, such as County Durham, are acutely aware that they need to demonstrate 'choice and diversity' to the Government's Schools Commissioner.

Another key driver in relation to the attitude of local authorities to Academies is the new schools competitions legislation. Authorities are aware that proposals for an Academy, rather than a new community school, exempt the authority from having to undertake a lengthy and costly competition for new provision. It also means that authorities have a choice of sponsor, rather than having to accept whichever sponsor enters the competition, as has happened with the two new Oasis Academies in Southampton.

The ability to chose their Academy partners – Academies on their terms – is a powerful argument for local authority officers and politicians. But however much an authority is involved, it can only be the junior partner in terms of governance and control of the Academy, with no more than 19.9 per cent of governing body places. The external sponsor continues to hold the majority.

The New Government

The NUT recognises that the new Government under a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State gives the opportunity for a much needed change of direction on Academies. *Academies – Looking Beyond the Spin* therefore contains the following call to the Government:

A different approach should be adopted by the Government. No one with any understanding or commitment to education would want a school to fail whatever its status. Children only have one chance to have a successful education in school. The NUT believes that it is precisely because Academies are outside the local authority of schools that their isolation from local authority support makes them more vulnerable than other schools when problems arise. The NUT believes, therefore, the Government should:

- return Academies to maintained status;

- halt the expansion of the Academies programme and evaluate urgently the evidence on how schools in very challenging circumstances can be helped to make a difference to pupils' life chances. This evaluation would draw on such initiatives as the Academies programme, Excellence in Cities, the London Challenge, as well as research evidence from the UK and internationally;
- engage in a dialogue with teachers, parents, governors, local authorities, trade unions and other stakeholders on how such schools can be supported, and how the principle of locally accountable, comprehensive education provision can be enhanced;
- establish a forum to encourage businesses or individuals wanting to make a contribution towards the education of young people to support schools rather than as a take over; and
- legislate for all state-funded schools to be part of their local authorities' admission arrangements and to apply national pay and conditions for staff, including trade union recognition.

It may be that the Government has listened. There is some evidence that it appears to be willing to ask the difficult questions about Academies that trade unions, teachers, governors and parents and politicians in local and national government have been asking since Academies first appeared on the scene.

It appears that the Secretary of State, Ed Balls has requested the Prime Minister's delivery unit to carry out an intensive study within an eight week timeframe to 'gather the lessons learned so far in addressing disadvantage'. In particular, the study will see whether Academies are achieving their original goals of tackling the weakest urban schools.

This would be very welcome news. However, for such a study to be meaningful, it must not be a 'window dressing' exercise; it needs to be more open and considerably wider than the press reports. The opinions of Academy sponsors and headteachers would inevitably produce a narrow and biased perspective, which has been one of the criticisms of the PricewaterhouseCoopers' evaluation of Academies for the Government. Academies have an impact on whole communities and whole communities should have an input into this evaluation.

Other Evidence on Academies

The National Union of Teachers has called consistently for an independent review of Academies and would want to have the opportunity to give its views on Academies. There are now a number of other research reports and evidence on Academies which need to be taken into account.

The evidence from the Anti Academies Alliance Committee of Enquiry in the House of Commons on 12 June 2007 revealed a damning indictment of the Academies initiative: unsuitable sites, undesirable sponsors, the closure of good and improving schools, local consultations ignored, local authorities bullied

through Building Schools for the Future funding, the manipulation of pupil intakes and admissions policies, scant regard for pupils with special educational needs and concerns about the curriculum being offered to pupils in Academies. Overwhelmingly, the message was that the Academies initiative was damaging local schools and was being foisted on reluctant local authorities, parents, governors and teachers.

The report commissioned by the TUC from the Children's Services Network, *A New Direction: a review of the School Academies Programme* published in July 2007, for instance, examines the impact of Academies on the six objectives established by the Government in the early stages of the programme as well as setting out key recommendations for addressing the most obvious flaws in the programme.

But possibly the most revealing of the recent evaluations of Academies comes not from trade unions or pressure groups but from the influential House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, published on 18 October 2007 in the light of the report of the National Audit Office earlier in the year. The report and the transcript of the evidence session make fascinating reading.

The report displays a great deal of scepticism about the 'value for money' basis of Academies, best summed up in point 9 of the conclusions – 'Academies are a relatively costly means of tackling low attainment' and by Austin Mitchell MP's description of 'the impetuous enthusiasm behind this programme.'

The Department for Children, Schools and Families comes in for major criticism for its failure to monitor costs and disseminate lessons learnt, not just on building management and sustainability costs but on sharing of best practice, on the need to have robust monitoring systems in place on pupil achievement, OFSTED inspections, exclusions, admissions, the impact on surplus places and on other schools.

The report acknowledges the early improvements in pupil achievement which reflect the renewed energy and enthusiasm of staff and pupils, high levels of expenditure on buildings and start up costs but questions the sustainability of these improvements. But the low levels of literacy and numeracy in Academies in terms of GCSE grades is noted, as is the poor record of Academy sixth forms.

The report is very critical about poor cost control on Academy building projects and highlights that of the first 26, 17 incurred cost overruns averaging £3.2 million – well over 10 per cent. It also criticises those Academies which have paid sponsors to provide services, saying that these should be put out to competitive tender. The removal of the VAT liability which acted as a disincentive for Academies to share their buildings with the community is welcomed as long overdue.

In the light of the high costs of Academies, the Committee was concerned that in future the value for money case for an Academy might not be made and in particular recommended that the DCSF should reject proposals that put at risk the viability of local schools and colleges and where a less costly solution would provide better value for money.

The transcript of the evidence session on 14 March with David Bell, Permanent Secretary at the then DfES and Peter Houten, Director of Academies and Capital is particularly revealing.

While clearly impressed by their visit to the City of London Academy in Southwark, members of the Committee, irrespective of political party, gave these senior civil servants a thorough grilling on the points highlighted above. They were also probed away on the suspicion that the National Audit Office report on Academies had been influenced by the Department to give a more positive assessment than the evidence warranted and had failed to look at the impact of Academies on LA surplus places.

Overall, members of the Committee seemed to conclude that any improvements in Academies were the results of additional funding and the Hawthorne effect of change, rather than any specific 'Academy factors'.

The publication of this report might well have been the tipping point for the Government to recognise that it was time to take a fresh look at Academies.

Where Now?

The NUT hopes that the Government will show the courage of its convictions and undertake a proper evaluation of Academies rather than buckle before the inevitable criticisms of the Conservative Party which has portrayed the review as 'a retreat'. That would be the act of a responsible and responsive Government genuinely committed to ensuring that public funds for education were spent in the most productive way.

The NUT believes that Academies should be returned to the maintained sector and that, given political will and the necessary statutory and legal changes, is confident that adjustments to governance, staff pay and conditions, the curriculum, and other areas relating to Academies could be made relatively easily. As has been well documented, not least by PricewaterhouseCoopers, genuine innovation in Academies has been limited and the so-called 'freedom' of Academy status has not been a pre-requisite for innovative practices in schools.

Importantly, the Government must reassure teachers and pupils in Academies, who after all have been working hard to fulfil the Government's expectations, that any changes would be undertaken sensitively and incrementally.

The Bigger Question

Leaving aside a review of Academies, the bigger question of how best to support schools operating in the most challenging circumstances remains. It is positive, therefore, that the Government's review is to focus on the 'lessons learned so far in addressing disadvantage' which echoes what the Union has said in its call to the Government quoted previously in this article.

The National Union of Teachers would want to be the forefront of the debate about such strategies and would draw on its record as a union committed to sound education and equal opportunities policies and principles, based on research evidence. The Union's new education statement 'A Good Local School for Every Child and for Every Community' exemplifies the Union's approach. This focuses on the role of the school in relation to the community, the impact of poverty and social deprivation, the voices of young people in their learning, and the future of the teaching profession. Above all, the statement is about children and young people and about the power of education to enhance their learning, happiness and wellbeing. Academies and the choice and diversity agenda are costly and misguided irrelevances to these aims.

References

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STEVE SINNOTT was elected as General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers in June 2004. His first teaching post in 1975 was at Shorefields Comprehensive in Toxteth, Liverpool, where he taught humanities. He later moved to Broughton High School near Preston where he was head of economics and business studies until his election as NUT Deputy General Secretary in November 1994. As Deputy General Secretary, Steve had responsibility for the Union's international work, speaking widely on education and human rights. He has received a number of international awards.

Steve was the first NUT President – and now the first NUT General Secretary – to have attended a comprehensive school. Steve is Convenor of the Commonwealth Teachers' Grouping, an ambassador for Education Action International, a trustee of the No More Landmines Trust and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. *Correspondence*: Steve Sinnott, General Secretary, National Union of Teachers, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BD, United Kingdom (j.theakston@nut.org.uk).

Erratum

In the special Plowden 40th anniversary number of *FORUM* (Volume 49, Numbers 1 & 2, 2007), Derek Gillard's article 'Presaging Plowden: an introduction to the Hadow reports' contained (on page 8) a paragraph about A.J. Mundella, a member of the Hadow Committee. He was not, as Derek Gillard surmised, the son of the Liberal MP of the same name, but his nephew. The paragraph should thus have read:

A.J. Mundella (1859-1933) was Secretary of the National Education Association (formed to promote non-sectarian and free national education) from 1898 until his death. He was Secretary of London County Council's Committee on Children's Care and Chairman of the Committee on Wage-earning Children. He wrote many newspaper articles and publications, including *Labour exchanges and education* (1910) and *The Cry of the Children: a reformer's diary* (1912). He was the nephew of Anthony John Mundella (1825-1897), the Liberal MP for Sheffield Brightside after whom the 1880 Education Act (The Mundella Act) was named.

The author is grateful to Robin Houston, the grandson of Victor Mundella, for supplying this information.