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How Academies Threaten the Comprehensive Curriculum

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ABSTRACT The Freedom of Information Act (FOI) was used over a three-year period to investigate the curriculum of state schools and academies. The resulting data has shown that spectacular apparent school improvement, in terms of five or more A*-C GCSE /GNVQ passes has been largely brought about by the substitution of mainstream curriculum subjects by much easier vocational alternatives with disproportionate and unjustifiable equivalence to GCSE. Despite academies being exempt from FOI, and their refusal, supported by DCSF, to reveal their subject examination results, strong evidence has been found in individual cases of an extreme use of this strategy to boost headline results and league table performance. Examples are given of worryingly degraded curriculum opportunities in a number of academies for which data has been indirectly obtained, giving rise to concerns that some or even all pupils in some of these schools are being denied a right to a broad and balanced educational experience appropriate to full participatory citizenship in a modern European democracy. Private control of academies is revealed as likely to give rise to the differentiation of curriculum pathways with academic or vocational outcomes designed to meet the needs of the business interests of the sponsor. Questions are raised over the ability of academies to staff a full range of subjects at GCSE and sixth form level with serious consequences for progression to higher education especially for those pupils drafted at an early age into vocational pathways.

The privatisation of secondary education through the academies programme raises serious concerns with regard to ownership, control and public accountability of schools. The most destructive change of all, however, is likely to be the final dismantling of entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils regardless of ability. This principle underpinned the rationale for replacing 11 plus segregation with a system of common schooling for all, with the aim of spreading access to all levels of education to all sections of society.

Between 1997 and 2007 there has been a spectacular increase, from 45% to 63%, in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent (%5+A*-C). This has been encouraged by the annual publication of the 100 most improved schools list comprising those schools with the biggest gain in %5+A*-C over the previous four years. The highest performers in the list have regularly achieved spectacular progress even over this short time period.

In order to investigate this remarkable educational phenomenon I teamed up with a professional statistician, Roger Davies, and with the support of the *The Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, we attempted to analyse the Key Stage 4 (KS4) curriculum and 2005 results of the schools in the 2004 'most improved list'. This work was featured in *TES* in January 2006 and our full article 'Curriculum Change and School Improvement' was published on the *TES* website.

Our first finding concerned the value of the %5+A*-C measure that drives league tables and is still used by DCSF to measure and define school improvement, especially in the case of the new academies. We showed that such school improvement was linked to poor comparative performance in English and maths. We demonstrated this by calculating %5+A*-C including English and maths divided by %5+A*-C and then relating this to the level of DfES defined school improvement from 2001 to 2004. We went on to show that such 'school improvement' was largely explained by the introduction of one or more GNVQ courses, where a single GNVQ pass counts as four A*-C GCSE passes and where pass rates are very high. We showed that the degree of improvement as indicated by the place in the '100 most improved schools list' for 2004 was strongly related to the average number of A*-C grades attributable to GNVQs.

Our second finding concerned provision of courses in science, European languages and history. We found a tendency for GNVQ science to replace GCSE science to such an extent that in some of the most improved schools no pupils took GCSE science courses at all. We showed that 'school improvement' was also linked to poor provision and take up of European languages and history and that the 'most improved' schools tended to have the most impoverished curriculum in terms of pupil access to these subjects.

Our third finding concerned the problems we encountered in obtaining curriculum information from schools. We believe the issue of curriculum entitlement to be important and that parents and the wider community should have ready access to information about the range of examination courses available in schools, which subjects are compulsory, which are optional, and the restrictions placed on subject choice. There should also be full disclosure of the examination entries and results in each subject. Despite being able to call upon the administrative resources of the *TES* and the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) we had difficulty obtaining this information from many schools. Unwillingness to disclose curriculum information and subject-by-subject exam results was linked to the degree of 'school improvement'.

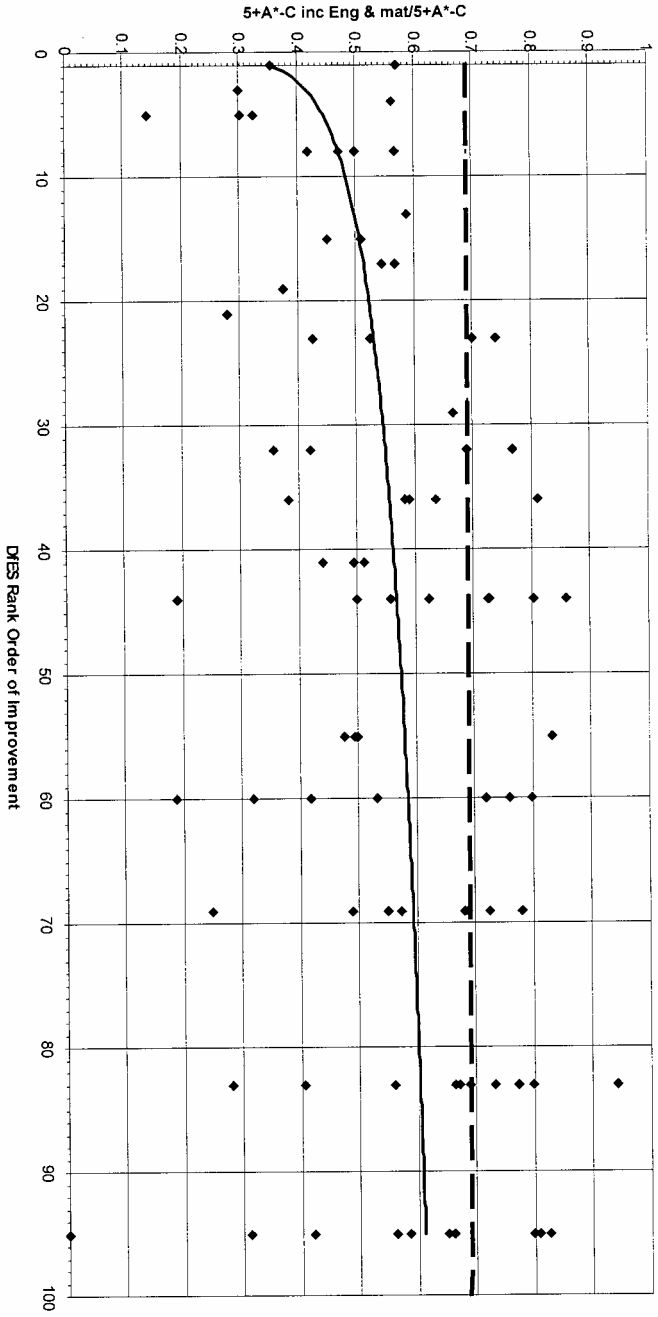

Chart 1. 5+A*-C inc English and Mathematics divided by 5+A*-C.

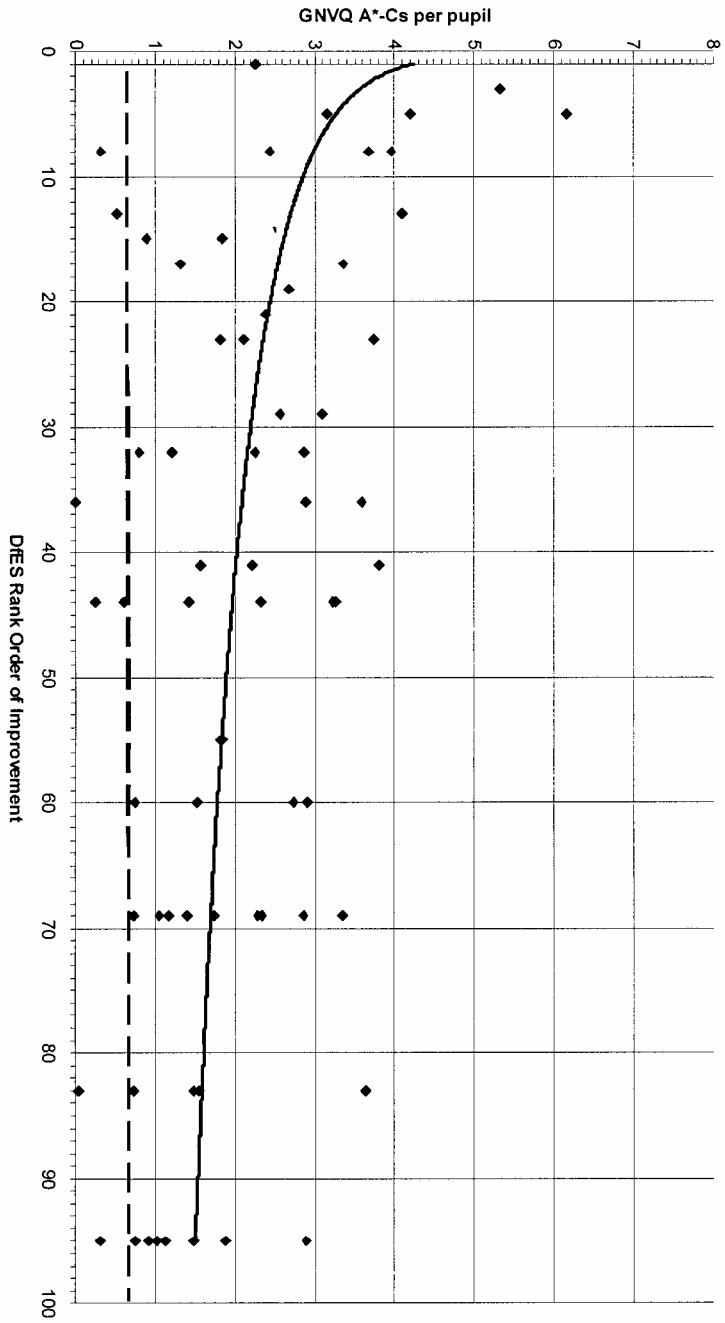

Chart 2. A*-C equivalents by pupil by means of GNVQs.

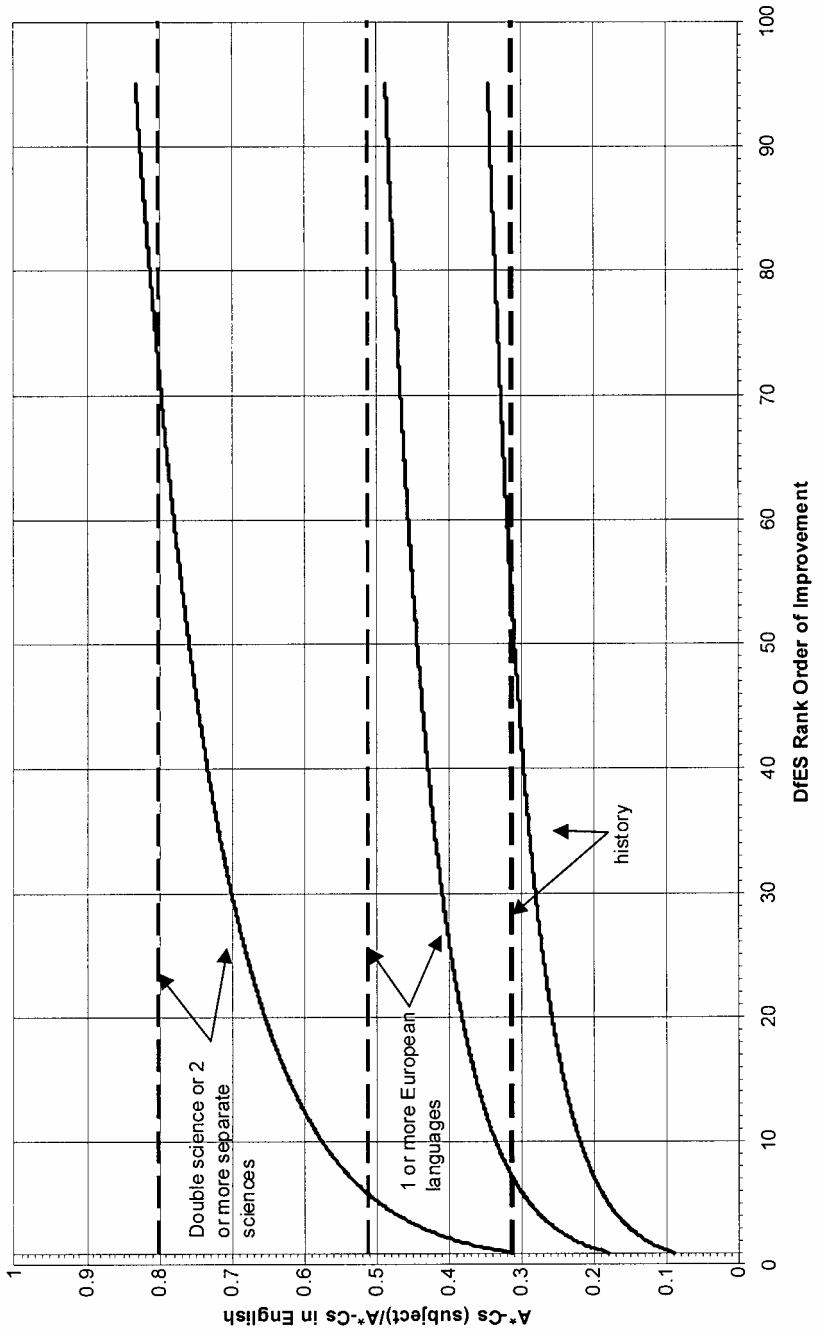

Chart 3. A*-Cs in Double Science, Languages and History divided by A*-Cs in English.

These conclusions are illustrated by Charts 1 to 3. Chart 3 can be interpreted as indicating the chance that a pupil with an A*-C in English also gained an A*-C in the other mainstream subjects. As well as for the 'most improved' schools, we carried out the same exercise on a control group of 60 schools chosen from the same Local Authority areas but having recorded no gains in %5+A*-Cs in the previous four years. The average performance of these schools is shown by the broken lines on the charts.

We intended to include the 2005 results of the new academies in this work but we were prevented by the refusal of these schools to disclose their subject-by-subject results. TES had been assured by DfES, prior to the study, that academies were covered by FOI. Shortly after the first questionnaires were sent out DfES reversed their ruling and supported academies in keeping this information secret. DfES has since repeatedly refused to provide the information from its own records arguing that it does not hold it. Even a direct parliamentary question from David Chaytor MP (Bolton North) failed to extract the information (see *Hansard,* 21 June, 2007). Since then I have been trying to obtain the subject results of academies with limited success. The 2006 results for a small number of academies have been obtained from Local Authorities and these reveal an alarming pattern of curriculum degradation along the same lines as the 2004 'most improved' schools but with even more draconian outcomes in terms of restricting access to mainstream curriculum, not just to less able pupils, but in some cases to all pupils.

In one academy, there was no GCSE science at all on the KS4 curriculum: just 1% of pupils gained an A*-C in history, and 6% in geography. This school achieved an impressive 61% 5+A*-C but only 15% when English and maths were included. Despite this in its 2004 OfSTED inspection report HMI Joyner wrote, 'Standards in science lessons are rising…'. She goes on to note that the curriculum is 'sound' for most pupils but unsatisfactory for those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and that it had been 'broadened' at KS4 and 'unusually' at KS3, 'where pupils in Y9 are taking up to two vocational GCSE courses'. The overall conclusion was that the academy was, 'improving rapidly', the quality of leadership is 'sound' and 'the new principal is providing good leadership'. This latter is a recurring theme in academies', reflecting a very high headship turnover. HMI Joyner is a member of a small special team of HMIs that is uniquely allowed to lead inspections of academies. A Protocol agreed between the DCFS Academies Division and OfSTED (revised November 2004) states that this select team is necessary, 'to ensure that a consistent approach is adopted'. Two HMI members of this academies inspection team represent OfSTED in regular meetings with the Academies Group at DCSF to monitor the progress of academies and also to plan inspections, and brief inspectors of possible predecessor schools in areas where feasibility studies for the introduction of academies have taken place.

In another academy, despite achieving 34% 5+A*-Cs, just one pupil achieved an A*-C pass in double award science (the science course

recommended for all pupils at the time by DfES), one in Spanish, and none in history or geography.

In a third academy just 9% of pupils gained an A*-C in double award science, 5% in history, 2% in geography, 1% in French and 3% in German, yet 48% gained 5+A*-Cs. The only comment in the 2006 OfSTED inspection report related to these results is, 'The secondary phase curriculum is satisfactory''. The judgements on the sixth form are however damning. The curriculum provision is graded as inadequate, lacking breadth and balance, and offering only a limited range of courses. The lead inspector did not made the obvious link between the poverty of provision for mainstream academic subjects at KS4 and the ability of the school to provide a full range of opportunities in the sixth form. The report says nothing about the expertise and qualifications of the teaching staff and their consequent ability to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils. It is not just the curriculum in the sixth form that is judged inadequate, but also the general provision of education and services for meeting the needs of these learners. This would seem to be a clear judgement of inadequacy of the sixth form as a whole, inviting the conclusion that the school is failing to give its sixth form students an acceptable standard of education; normally a signal for the imposition of *Special Measures* or at least a *Notice to Improve*. However, this is what lead inspector HMI Cusdin wrote in her post-inspection letter to pupils.

> We were thrilled to see the huge improvements since our first HMI visit over a year ago.
> Your GCSE results were really good.
> The principal, the headteacher and the academy leadership team have worked really hard and it's(sic) paying off.
> Your academy is remarkable.
> We hope that your academy, with your help, just keeps getting better and better.

A fourth academy achieved 50% 5+A*-C but only 18% including English and maths. Compared to the previous examples this school did slightly better in mainstream subjects achieving 15% in double award science, 5% in history, 10% in geography, 3% in French, 1% in Spanish and 2% in German. But compare this with the 2002 results in the last year of existence of the allegedly failing school replaced by the academy. This former school achieved 39% in double award science, 19% in history, 9% in geography and 10% in French.

A fifth academy managed to produce only 9% of pupils with an A*-C in double award science, 4% in history, 4% in geography, and just 5% in European languages.

These findings are confirmed by the work of Terry Wrigley at Edinburgh University who has analysed 2006 pupil level results obtained from DCSF for all academies. Wrigley found that of those pupils gaining 5+A*-Cs, barely half had an A*-C in GCSE science, nearly two thirds did not even study a foreign language in years 10 and 11, and only ten percent of such pupils gained an A*-

C in French: this is ten percent of those with 5+A*-Cs, not ten percent of the pupils in Y11. Only a quarter of level 2 qualified pupils gained an A*-C in either geography or history, and only half had an A*-C in both English and maths.

No doubt then that radical changes have taken place in the curriculum of academies, but are these changes for the better? Academies have increased their use of vocational qualifications like GNVQ by a factor of fourteen times compared to the predecessor schools. However, far from radicalising the curriculum, academies have largely concentrated on just two GNVQs: science and ICT both of which are just easier versions of existing well established GCSE subjects. Just how easy has been determined by statistical analysis of exam results by Wrigley. This showed that a GNVQ pass was equivalent to about Grade E at GCSE. Yet each such GNVQ pass counts as four A*-C GCSEs. In 2006, pupils in academies gained 4712 A*-C equivalents through GNVQs, of which 4024 were in science and ICT.

With only token provision of mainstream academic subjects many academies must be finding it hard to recruit or retain expert graduate teachers, increasingly replacing them with teachers without appropriate subject qualifications or even by unqualified teaching assistants. Many OfSTED reports hint at this. The knock–on effect in the sixth forms of academies is obvious, as are the diminished opportunities for pupils from poorer backgrounds to progress to higher education and especially to our top universities.

It is not just access to a broad and balanced curriculum that is suffering in academies. When 5+A*-Gs, the level 1 qualification, are analysed Wrigley has shown that a higher proportion of pupils in academies failed to achieve even this lowest level benchmark in 2006, than in their predecessor schools five years earlier. So despite massive investment by the taxpayer, plenty of time for innovation to take effect and expulsion rates of three times that of state schools, academies are doing worse with the very pupils (those that survived into Y11) that they are primarily intended to benefit.

Academies are independent schools and despite being paid for by the taxpayer the sponsors have had complete power to dictate how and what pupils learn. New tighter regulations apply only to new academies and fall short of what is required for state schools. Much bizarre and educationally doubtful experimentation is taking place based on the whims and prejudices of sponsors, ranging from the evangelical presentation of religious mythology as historical truth and the discrediting of science, to a belief in the need to rigorously train all pupils in the practices and ethics of free market capitalism so as to properly prepare them for employment. One academy is installing a 'call centre' so that 'pupils' aspirations can be raised' by training for this type of work, and in Manchester and Birmingham a whole range of academies are being planned, each specialising in preparing pupils for employment in specific industries or commercial activities. Manchester Airport, one such prospective sponsor, has overtly stated that the principle purpose of its academy will be to provide employees for the airport.

Vocational courses on the NVQ model are different in principle from traditional school qualifications like the GCSE. The aim of vocational education is to bring as many trainees as possible, regardless of ability, up to a threshold level of competence. This is achieved by requiring trainees to demonstrate familiarity and competence with a limited number of closely specified scenarios. It is therefore training in how to respond to the circumstances required to be met in a specified job application. This criterion-referenced approach is entirely appropriate to job training where uniform standards are required. Such teaching is carefully structured to make minimum possible cognitive demands and is unconcerned with general intellectual development.

Intellectual development however has always been regarded as what schools are for. Subjects are studied not just for their own sake but also for their value in developing the wider cultural, scientific or artistic understanding of the individual. These fundamental educational assumptions are rooted in the rational values of the European enlightenment, and the comprehensive school movement was about ensuring that the advantages of such an education were made available to all. The levels achieved as a consequence of such schooling depend on the prior cognitive ability of pupils as well as on the quality of teaching so a wide range of performance is to be expected. This does not mean that broad and balanced education only benefits the most able. A participatory democracy requires the highest possible level of intellectual development in all sections of society. The national curriculum was introduced in order to secure this aim. The difficulties in implementing it with the less able half of the ability range gives rise to pedagogical challenges that our comprehensive schools were meeting with ever increasing success before the introduction of arbitrary standards that the government defined as thresholds that all pupils were expected to meet.

By this argument a less able pupil, and society in general would benefit from and should feel able to value, D to G grades obtained at school in mainstream GCSE subjects more than pseudo-vocational qualifications that fail to stimulate or provide intellectual challenge, and lack credibility with Further Education providers and employers; despite equivalences with GCSE that all sections of the educational community, except QCA regard as ludicrous.

This is not to devalue vocational education in general. Mechanical Engineering is clearly comparable in difficulty and esteem to physics. Flower Arranging, however, is not comparable to GCSE biology, nor is Cake Decoration comparable to GCSE art, and we should be ashamed of an education system that uses such means to artificially boost the illusion of school improvement. This is not to deny a value for such activities within the wealth of experiences that a comprehensive curriculum should provide for pupils of all abilities.

The secrecy that surrounds the KS4 curriculum of academies, combined with huge discrepancies between %5+A*-Cs with and without English and maths suggests that at least some of these schools have something to hide. If this is a misplaced suspicion it can be readily laid to rest by requiring academies

and all other schools to publish their subject examination results in the annual prospectus, as was required by law until September 2005. In the meantime academies, like all other schools, should be required to provide this information on request.

The admissions arrangements of many academies raise more curriculum concerns. 'Fair Banding' is increasingly being used by academies to provide 'balanced intakes'. Walsall Academy, for example, requires all prospective pupils to take the NfER – Nelson Non-Verbal Cognitive Ability Test (CAT), a form of intelligence test, as part of its admissions process. The school defines five bands on the basis of the national normal distribution of standardised scores in this test. The local catchment of the school results in local over-subscription in the lower bands (a fact with disturbing implications) and surplus places in the upper bands, which are filled by pupils from more affluent areas further away. The rejected lower band pupils enter the surrounding state schools and the more distant state schools lose their more able pupils to the academy. Other academies make even more unjustified use of 'banding' admission systems.

The curriculum implications arise if individual pupils' CAT scores are used to place them in designated streams in the academy. Given the equivalences to GCSE, there would be a strong temptation on the part of the academy to tailor the curriculum of each band in order to maximise performance outcomes for the school. Future vocational academies in Manchester and Birmingham might be tempted to differentiate the curriculum between the bands in order to meet the employment needs of the sponsor. For example, Manchester airport academy might design the curriculum of the bottom band to produce baggage handlers and the top band to produce Air Traffic Controllers, so realising George Orwell's worst fears.

Is there any evidence of this? Under the present legal framework there never will be, as academies, with the support of DCSF, can keep the curriculum secret. The Walsall LA has asked Walsall Academy for its subject results. The academy has declined to provide them. The same is true for the annual pupil census, so the Walsall LA is not only unaware of what is being taught to whom in the Academy, but also it does not even know how many pupils there are.

Are such privatised academies really a desirable model for the future of the English education system, or are they just the latest and most extreme manifestation of an approach to education that is being increasingly discredited wherever independent research is applied, and which has been abandoned in all other parts of the United Kingdom?

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