
The Devon NUT Campaign Against Trust Schools

DAVE CLINCH

ABSTRACT When the Devon County Council announced that six secondary schools in the South Devon area were to become 'Pathfinder Schools' for trust status, the Devon National Union of Teachers set about organising a campaign to defend the county's comprehensive schools. This campaign has proved successful in the case of Tavistock College, causing other schools to review their position, but the NUT is not allowing itself to be complacent, and recognises that the very concept of community comprehensive schools is under threat from Gordon Brown's Government.

The Background

It came as something of a surprise to the teacher unions in Devon when it was announced in September 2006 by the County Council that six secondary schools in the South Devon area were to become 'Pathfinder Schools' for trust status. They were Coombeshead College, Ivybridge Community College, Kingsbridge Community College, Knowles Hill School, South Dartmoor Community College and Tavistock College. This was the largest group of schools seeking Trust status in any county throughout England. The news release was buried in the council website, immediately raising suspicions about how the decision had been arrived at, for example no consultation with staff unions or parents took place prior to the announcement.

Immediately, the Devon National Union of Teachers (NUT) began to organise a campaign to defend comprehensive schools. First it was necessary to issue a Press Release in which we argued for *A Good Local School for Every Child*, the title of the NUT document written in response to the 2005 New Labour Education White Paper. We also sent a copy of the document to all of our members in the six schools.

During the previous academic year (2005-6) Devon NUT had been campaigning against the 2006 Education Bill. We held a public meeting in June 2006 addressed by Christine Blower, Deputy Secretary of the NUT and Melian Mansfield, Chair of the Campaign for State Education (CASE), which received positive coverage in the local press. We were in a good position, therefore, to conduct a campaign against the New Labour Trust School Project in Devon.

What are Trust schools then? Trust schools are voluntary-aided or Foundation schools with a charitable foundation. As the foundation is set up as a charity, members of the foundation are Trustees. Under the legislation, the charitable foundation can nominate a minority or a majority of governors for the school's governing body. The charitable foundation is made up of external sponsors. The Government's policy aim is to persuade all schools to convert from community to Trust status.

The chief concern from the NUT centred around the proposal for representatives of private organisations to be appointed to a school governing body. 'Through their Trustee status, they could gain control of school land and premises; be able to shape the curriculum; and dominate governance of schools.'^[1] Currently schools can control the relationship they might have with a local business, for example, by inviting a company to support an educational project or to arrange work experience.

Another concern was that trust schools would have their own admissions policies, thus raising the possibility of covert selection on the grounds of ability and background for example. It was, and is, an attack on the very idea of comprehensive education and threatens the notion of the local community school where children of all abilities and backgrounds are taught.

We could also see similarities with the Academies Project inasmuch as this was privatisation, albeit by the back door. The Academy Programme revealed a significant level of corruption in the 'cash for honours' scandal. Sponsors, it was alleged, were encouraged to help bankroll these new establishments with the prospect of some kind of 'gong' as a reward. The Trust Schools Programme, however, required schools to find 'partners' who would then take a place on the governing body of the school. 'Partners' would be appointed in a minority role in the Devon schools. There would be a £15,000 startup fee from the Government to cover administration costs.

The Arguments Against Trust Schools

Devon NUT produced a campaign leaflet, *Ten Things They Don't Tell You About Trust Schools*, in which we argued:

1. There would be no democracy. The governors would make the decision to become a Trust school, parents wouldn't even have a vote.
2. Using 'the power to innovate' (which the Government encourages) schools could alter their admissions policy. There were no guarantees that this would not happen.

3. Once the decision had been made there was no going back for at least seven years (currently there is no process for a school to opt back in to the Local Authority.)
4. There would be disastrous consequences for teachers and non teaching staff because the Trust School would become the employer and could alter pay and conditions, again through the 'power to innovate'. Roger Pope, the Head of Kingsbridge Community College, had mused in his article in the 1 December 2006 issue of *The Times Educational Supplement*, that he looked forward to the day when teachers' national pay and conditions were swept away.
5. Devon NUT argued that this privatisation would also damage students' education. Private businesses or interest groups had no right to be dictating what students should learn. A broad and balanced curriculum should be maintained, we said. The Academies experience had already shown how religious views of sponsors could be reflected in the curriculum, for example.
6. The secrecy surrounding these proposals was a key concern. Why had the trade unions and parents been excluded from the discussions which it emerged Devon County Council had conducted with Headteachers in the previous school year?
7. Ray Tarleton, Head of South Dartmoor Community College, Co-ordinator for the National College of School Leadership, and self styled 'forward thinker', said that the six schools were a 'close knit group . . . that have found a new shared enterprise to engage in.' Later events were to show that this was hardly the case. Our immediate concern, however, was that a two tier system of education would be created with a group of Trust schools succeeding at the expense of others.
8. Devon NUT argued that grounds and school buildings should not be handed over to private trusts who could decide to sell off assets such as sports fields, for example, which belonged to the whole community.
9. The Government poured large amounts of money into Academies with little or no evidence of improved results. Devon NUT argued that the time and money being spent on promoting Trust Schools would be best spent on improving existing school facilities and student learning.
10. We also emphasised that the City Academies, which were built at huge cost were untried and untested. They had a high exclusion rate and relatively poor results overall. We noted that Devon County Council itself was not clear on the gains for students from Trust School status, recognising that it could lead to 'increased complexity, fragmentation of services and increased tensions between schools.'

The Campaign

The campaign against the move to Trust School status was initiated by Devon NUT. In February we organised leafletting and petitioning in the towns where the schools were situated. We had a positive response. Parents we met were generally unaware of any proposed changes in the schools. We maintained links with them, in particular a group of parents at Tavistock College.

The consultation process was handled in different ways. For example, at one school parents were invited to a 'consultation day' which was primarily to meet teachers and to focus on the progress of students. Any questions about Trust School status would be dealt with at these meetings. There was no attempt to hold either a parents' meeting or a public meeting where the arguments for and against could be aired.

At another school where a public meeting was held, the Headteacher was challenged by parents on his attempt to dominate proceedings and his failure to mention any of the drawbacks attached to moving to Trust School status (a common failing in each of the proposals of the the six schools)

During this meeting, and at every other opportunity, it was argued by the NUT and the other unions, that a public debate should be held, where the arguments for and against Trust School status should be heard, followed by a ballot of parents and staff at the schools.

The response from the schools was that there was no requirement in the legislation for a ballot. Our response was that that there was no requirement *not* to have a ballot either.

The NUT campaign was also being conducted through the local media. Lord Adonis, no less, felt compelled to respond to the Devon NUT arguments in a debate with the South West NUT Regional Secretary, Andy Woolley, through the pages of the *Western Morning News*. Local radio and television also covered the campaign.

In March 2007 a senior figure in the Department of Education, Lesley Longstone, Director of the School Formation and Investment Group, wrote to the NUT General Secretary, Steve Sinnott complaining that the Devon NUT campaign was dealing in misinformation and proceeded to reiterate the government spin on Trust Schools. The General Secretary dismissed this attempt at a smear and responded to Ms Longstone and the then Secretary of State for Education, Alan Johnson with a vigorous defence of the NUT position.

Because of the failure of the schools to hold a debate and a ballot it was decided at a joint union meeting at Tavistock College in early May 2007 to gauge the opinion of the staff of approx 230 people with an unofficial ballot. From the return of 153 ballot papers 140 said 'no' to trust school status with 12 'Yes' and one spoilt paper. It was a stunning result and showed that the majority of the staff had no confidence in the move. Devon NUT issued a press release which was given much publicity in the local newspaper, the *Tavistock Times*. We repeated the exercise at Coombeshead College, and again there was an overwhelming 'no' vote. It was clear that although staff did not feel confident

enough to speak out at school they were able to express themselves fully at the ballot box.

The lesson for Devon NUT is to try to break down the climate existing in the many schools in the division where teachers feel they have to 'keep their heads down' because of a lack of democracy and a view that the Head alone has the school's best interests at heart.

A group of parents formed the 'Campaign to Keep Tavistock as a Community School' (<http://keptavicommsch.googlepages.com/home>). The efforts of this group proved to be crucial. Meanwhile a 'blog' had been created by a group calling themselves 'Keep Politics Out of School'. They set about making personal attacks on Devon NUT members and also leading figures in the parents' campaign. The 'blog' was taken down after several complaints. The Head wrote to the NUT Regional Officer complaining about the campaign and also the conduct of the ballot. He also added that my presence on the school premises would no longer be appropriate until such time as his complaints were resolved. In response the NUT offered to conduct and underwrite a ballot of the whole staff using an independent scrutineer, the Electoral Reform Society. The offer was ignored by the Head.

The forensic analysis of the consultation process by the parents' campaign revealed major flaws. The School had failed to carry out a number of the requirements set out in the DfES 'toolbox'. Some of the feeder schools had not been contacted for example, likewise some parish councils had been omitted from the consultation. The Schools Adjudicator responded to the thirteen page document by stopping the school moving forward to Trust School status. A press release from the Head announced the withdrawal of one of the school's prospective 'partners', Westden, a private local environmental group. The School would, therefore, no longer be seeking Trust School status. This withdrawal had been precipitated by the public furore surrounding the issue. Another 'partner', The Japanese Embassy, had withdrawn earlier in the year. The college has a large Japanese language department.

Devon NUT is continuing the campaign. We believe the success at Tavistock College may have caused other schools to review their positions. We are far from being complacent though. Another of the schools, South Dartmoor Community College announced that it would have Trust School status from September 2007. So much for this 'close-knit' grouping of schools, as each decides to make its own way.

We are aware that one of the proposed 'partners' at Kingsbridge Community College is the giant pharmaceutical company Astra Zeneca. This company was convicted in Boston in 2007 of carrying out a criminal fraud over a period of six years against patients and company health insurance schemes by inflating drug prices. It pleaded guilty and agreed to pay \$355M (£178M) to end criminal and civil charges that it had overcharged the US Government for a prostate cancer drug.[2]

For the Government there is a lot to lose. The 'cash for honours' cover up and the failure of the much vaunted Academies to match their exam results with

comprehensive schools' successes has created a siege mentality at the Department of Education. Trust schools, the poor relations of academies, mimic the philosophy of the New Labour neoliberal politics across the public sector, with the emphasis on training for the job market. Private 'partner' organisations who can see the financial benefits of controlling the assets of a school and the skewing of the curriculum towards their needs are predators that need to be resisted.

Devon NUT is under no illusion that the very notion of comprehensive education is under huge threat from the New Labour Government. It is vital that we all fight for a good local school for all our children and also protect the working conditions of our teachers. The battle for ideas is being played out between those who see education as a precious right for all and not as a privilege. We know that the threat remains constant and that we will have to redouble our resistance. We believe that a positive, progressive, learning environment stripped of the obsession with testing, targets and private meddlers will ensure the broad and balanced curriculum which our children deserve.

Notes

[1] NUT Position Paper on Trust Schools, 2007.

[2] Stephen Foley, *The Independent*, 22 June, 2007.

DAVE CLINCH taught Physical Education for twenty years in comprehensive schools in Lewisham, South London. For the last seven years he has been teaching at a comprehensive school in North Devon. He has been an NUT activist throughout his teaching career. He is a member of the Socialist Teachers' Alliance, an influential grouping of rank and file teachers within the NUT, and is currently Secretary of Devon NUT. *Correspondence:* Dave Clinch, Secretary, Devon National Union of Teachers, 37 St Mary's Close, Torrington EX38 8AS, United Kingdom.