

NEWS REPORT

Anti-academy Group in Barrow

An academy is planned to replace three of the five state secondary schools in Barrow-in-Furness. It is to be sponsored by BAE Systems, the giant arms manufacturer which builds nuclear submarines in the town, by a property developer and by the chair of the road hauliers, Eddie Stobart. These business sponsors will be joined by the University of Cumbria and two local colleges.

John Hutton, Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, is the town's MP. He supports the academy. *Our Schools Are Not For Sale* (OSANFS) was set up to oppose the academy plans.

The OSANFS website claims it is not a political party, but a campaigning group organised in the main by concerned parents. One of its main spokespeople is Roger Titcombe, who used to be the head of one of the three schools facing closure and 'academisation'. He is currently an education consultant. He has contributed to *FORUM*.

At the local elections on 1 May 2008, four OSANFS candidates were elected to the borough council, and a fifth failed by a single vote to secure a seat. The leader of the council, a Conservative, lost his seat to one of the anti-academy campaigners. OSANFS candidates took one-sixth of all the votes cast in the election. Five other elected members have come out against the proposed academy, making a total of nine councillors united against the academy plans. They hold the balance of power on the 36-seat council.

On 12 May 2008 the Government approved the 'Expression of Interest' in the academy, ignoring the wishes (as expressed in the local election) of a majority of people in the wards directly affected by the proposed school closure/new academy plan, and in which OSANFS won majorities.

The current heads of the three targeted schools then came out in favour of the proposal, as did the head of Barrow Sixth Form College.

The new academy will specialise in sport and maths. It will also have a key focus on 'technology and enterprise', raising the concern that students will be readied for work rather than for life. The secrecy which attends all academy proposals (over admissions, curriculum and qualifications to be offered) has featured in the local arguments, with OSANFS trying to use the Freedom of

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Information Act to elicit specific details and their requests being denied. Significant questions still to be answered satisfactorily include the destination of some one hundred local students who will not, seemingly, find a place in the new academy.

OSANFS has an alternative 'collegiate academy' proposal which they argue would allow the three threatened schools to remain open, while improving facilities and prospects for their students at a substantially lower cost than the £30m estimated for the new academy. OSANF intends to ask for a Judicial Review of the current proposal, and may stand in next year's county council elections.

More information about OSANFS can be found at <http://www.osanfs.co.uk>