
Southampton: a case study on why Academies are not the answer

RICHARD HARRIS

ABSTRACT The author recounts the arrival of two Oasis Community Learning Academies in Southampton through a process of failed political courage to continue supporting the Local Authority. He tells of the subsequent impact when children and parents react against the regime in one of the Academies. In conclusion he challenges the Labour Government over the issues that arise from this case and similar Academy problems.

The City of Southampton, a Unitary Authority of about 218,000 inhabitants, in 1997 inherited 14 secondary schools, excluding special schools, of which 6 were single sex.

Early in its life as a Labour run Authority Southampton received a good Ofsted report with promising capacity to improve. At that time Secondary pupil numbers were predicted to rise and so a proposal for a PFI rebuild of three of the secondary schools included some increased capacity.

Despite its good Ofsted report Southampton was in the bottom quartile of the national league tables. It was improving at a better rate than the national rate meaning, in due course, it should reach the national average but this would be some years ahead. A significant minority of parents were using their preference to successfully get their children into Hampshire Schools in the middle class areas of Romsey, Chandlers Ford, Hedge End and even as far as Winchester.

When I became the City's Cabinet Member for Education in 2001 Southampton was continuing to progress and the three PFI New Builds commenced. I attempted to stem the flight of middle class children to neighbouring Hampshire correctly claiming, during my two years as Cabinet Member, that we had no schools in Ofsted categories of serious weakness or special measures.

With the completion of the three PFI buildings in 2003, and with new senior Education Officers in place it became clear that the numbers of students in secondary schools would be lower than predicted. One of the three new build schools, therefore, would take in far fewer students than its capacity. The Council had become a hung Council with the Liberal Democrats holding the Cabinet positions and I became Chair of Scrutiny for the next three years. I tried, but failed, to find out why the predictions on secondary student numbers had been so far out. This is significant because the Liberal Democrat decision for a further review of secondary provision was based on a combination of empty places, above 25% in some schools, and the predicted secondary population from 2008 onwards. Important decisions would be based, in part, on 'prediction' which had already been shown to be an inexact art.

From 2003 to early 2006 considerable discussions took place within the Local Authority and the secondary school community concerning falling rolls. Despite some interim measures the number of surplus places grew. In early 2006 the Liberal Democrat led Council put out consultation papers on the Secondary Schools' Review, titled 'Learning Futures', which finally led to a decision making paper in November 2006. By this time 4 of the 14 schools had more than 25% surplus places with a fifth school likely to be in the same position by 2008. Under Audit Commission requirements and cost effectiveness something had to be done.

FORUM 50(2), 2008 (<http://www.wwwords.co.uk/forum>) discussed 'School Size'. The Southampton situation illustrates the dilemma of conflicting Government policies of, on the one hand, seeking to match the level of provision in the Independent Sector of which class size is a major factor, and on the other hand its requirement to remove surplus places rather than reduce class size.

The outcome of all this was a decision in November 2006 to turn the 4 Local Authority single sex schools into mixed schools starting with the 2008 intake and to merge two schools on the west of the City and 2 schools on the east of the city. The East/West divide is significant in Southampton, created by the river Itchen which has only three major crossing points one of which is a toll bridge.

There was significant support for removal of the single sex schools while the Catholic separate boys' and girls' schools were to remain. Even among the faith communities there was mixed reaction to losing two girls' schools. In one of the consultation meetings I attended in the Inner city the major issue seemed to be to have a 'good school' to send your child to rather than a 'single sex school'. It is generally agreed that now, in 2009, this change has gone well and the evidence of parental preference for the 2009 intake supports this.

The creation of the 4 schools into 2 is however, very different. None of the four schools was in Special Measures. One of them had a very small intake, served a Council Estate with high levels of deprivation, and had low levels of achievement. Being squeezed between two higher achieving schools and also geographically close to them it was going to be a long haul to turn it round.

However, none of the other three schools fitted this picture and the general trend of all three was of improvement and, in the Southampton context, reasonable results. The decision to close four schools and create two new ones was driven by surplus places not low achievement. Clearly the Local Authority was also seeking to improve achievement but this was not the driving force for the closures.

The Local Authority was subject to the 2006 Education (New Secondary School Proposals) (England) Regulations, as amended requiring it to seek competitive bids for the new schools. (Note: If a Local Authority takes part with a bid then the decision on who runs the new school goes to the adjudicator. If the Local Authority does not bid then it decides who runs the new schools.)

The Liberal Democrat Council was unsure as to whether it should bid to provide the new schools or not. With knowledge that there would be a bidding process a Local Education Trust was being formed comprising the 2 Universities, FE College, Sixth Form Colleges and a range of local agencies and major employers led by the Vice Chancellor of Southampton Solent University. The Labour Group on the Council were hopeful of being the largest party at the following year's election and, if that occurred, would either be responsible for the City's own bid or able to make the decision as to who was to run the new schools. The Labour Group sought the view of party members at one of their monthly meetings. Given the continuing low, albeit improving, achievement of City schools there was considerable concern that the Local Authority would not be favoured by the adjudicator and also that the adjudicator might not choose a provider that the local Labour Party would choose. I was the only member to propose, very strongly, that it is better to bid with a chance to be the provider than not bid which would mean the new schools would have to be either an Academy or Trust – both removed from Local Authority influence albeit by different degrees. (I remain a strong believer in Local Authority schools subject to democratic control through the local electoral system.) The Party members were convinced either they or the Liberal Democrats would be in control and no way would they support Academies but would go for a Trust, the strong contender being that led by the two Universities. My lone plea to remember the old Labour values and local democratically run schools, long since abandoned by the Labour Government, was not heeded especially following the contributions of the two local MPs who gave a damning view of the chances of the adjudicator choosing a Southampton City Council bid. The die was cast and the Labour group influenced the Liberal Democrats to not bid but be the decision maker and not the provider. Sadly the news of the first ever decision by the adjudicator, following a bidding process, to favour the Local Authority, Haringey, came too late to influence the debate.

The bidding process began, bids were received and a further set of consultations took place. The Labour Party came out publicly in favour of the Southampton Education Trust and Rt Hon John Denham MP's endorsement is still on their website.

Meanwhile parental disquiet on the east of the city rumbled on. The more popular school was on a very restricted site, but the school had very strong support from its parents and it served part of the inner city even though the children had to cross the long toll bridge over the River Itchen to get there. It was the children of this school that would have to travel out to the city outskirts to the site of the other school. In 2007 the school on the site being closed gained 46% A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths, the national average, and the school on the site being retained 33%. Whoever took on the new school would have a difficult job to bring together the two sets of students whose parents were opposed to closure and which, until a new building was completed, would be operating on the two sites.

The outcome of all the consultations was that parents, headteachers, teachers, governors and the public at large were not in favour of an Academy running the new schools but were supportive of the local Trust, it being made up of organisations with a proven interest and record of achievement in Southampton. This was also the view of the Labour and Liberal Democrat Councillors.

Disaster struck politically as far as the campaign for the Trust was concerned and my worst fears realised. In the May 2007 elections both Labour and Conservatives made gains and ended with the same number of councillors. With a Labour councillor as Mayor the expectation that Labour would return to administer the City looked assured until, at the first Council meeting of the year a Liberal Democrat Councillor defected to become an Independent but voting with the Conservatives thus putting them in power.

Although not co-ordinated the Anti-Academy movement gained some momentum with letters in the press, speakers at meetings and renewed pressure from Headteachers, Teacher Unions, parents and individual governors and the now 'out of power' Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups to favour the Southampton Education Trust. With the Cabinet system of local government the decision would be made by the Cabinet Member. The Conservative leader had already publicly declared himself a supporter of selection. The new Cabinet member for Children's services sends his children to the Independent sector. The Conservatives embraced the opportunity of having Academies in the City. Despite the opposition from the majority of all those consulted it was clear the City was going to have two Academies to replace four Local Authority Schools.

An article in *The Times Education Supplement* in March 2009 [1], alleged that Academies were the 'cornerstone' of Tony Blair's Education Policies. When I was the Labour lead spokesperson on Education on Southampton City Council I had the opportunity to meet many other such Labour Councillors. Few, if any, supported the Academy Policy, however as one said to me recently, 'It was the only game in town'. This is a terrible indictment of a Labour Government especially considering its roots. The fact that the Tories are lapping up the opportunity to have Academies should tell them it is wrong.

In addition to the Southampton Education Trust which was offering two Trust Schools the bidders were CFBT which offered a Trust School on the East

site, United Learning Trust which offered an Academy on both the East and West of the City and Oasis Community Learning, also offering two Academies

Despite considerable public opposition, expressed in both the Cabinet meeting when the decision was made and the subsequent scrutiny panel 'call in', the decision stood to engage Oasis Community Learning to provide two Academies. So in Southampton was added another nail in the coffin of Local democracy. Frances Beckett has put it concisely, 'Control of Education is being taken out of the hands of voters, parents and pupils and placed in the hands of a few self-selected sponsors, and so six decades of school legislation and case law are being casually junked.' [2]

One of the objections to Oasis, apart from their lack of experience, was that they were clearly offering a school 'of a religious nature'. The Cabinet Member and Oasis claim however that Oasis Academies are not 'Faith Schools'. Following my request for information I received two different submissions from Oasis. The one received from the Education Office clearly stated the teachers had to 'own our Christ-centered ethos', the other given to me by a Councillor had this requirement missing. Certainly the consortium backing the Oasis bid included the YMCA, Church of England and Independent Evangelical Churches.

Despite being in opposition to the Academies, once the decision had been made, the Teaching Unions turned their attention to looking after the interests of their members. The uncertainty had gone on too long and there had been pressure from a number of sides to have a decision and get on with the future.

The Labour and Liberal Democrat Councillors, who, combined, could outvote the Conservatives, were left licking their wounds and contemplating how democracy equated to the Cabinet system in hung councils. They also had now to consider the impact on all of the children and families in Southampton including those that would go to an Academy. Sadly since taking control of the Council and the decision to have two academies the Tories have taken down the Ofsted Annual Performance Review of their Childrens' Services from Good in 2007 to only Adequate in 2008.

There is a dilemma for all of us opposed to the Academy programme as currently run by the Government. When you have one in your Authority you have to consider the children who go to it. What you can do is expose those aspects which tell a different story to that which the Academy lobbyists wish you to hear.

The arrival of Oasis in Southampton has resulted in further controversy, some of it sadly with little public exposure. Losing two secondary schools would lead to savings in the long term which would go to students in the City through the Individual Schools Budgets but there are some initial costs. Following the decision the Schools Forum learned that the set up costs would increase by £500,000 which was not in the original costs and would come from the Schools' Budget for the rest of the City.

Before Headteachers were appointed parent evenings of Year 6 pupils had to be held, in line with the other schools in the City, for recruitment to the

2008 intake. Again reports of these did not get in the press but one heard, through reliable sources of parents, governors, teachers and councillors of the alleged incompetence and lack of sensitivity to local concerns by Oasis in the way they ran the evenings. All four previous schools, which still had one more year to run, had proven, successful ways of running these parent evenings. Their advice was ignored. The Oasis officer arrived from London at the last minute. Many of the questions from parents were not answered directly but referred back to London. Oasis is managed by a Central Board and most decisions are made centrally. To add insult to this at one of the meetings while there were still many questions from parents the Oasis officer had to leave to catch the train to London. Doubts about the Oasis rhetoric that the schools would be focused in the local community were soon raised.

Despite these concerns, for the September 2008 intake Oasis Academy Mayfield, on the east of the City, had all 180 places offered and Oasis Academy Lord's Hill on the west had 152 of 180 places offered. Too late to reverse the decision to close schools the inexact art of predicting places threw up an unexpected need. The City was short of Secondary Places. For September 2008, the Local Authority, at short notice, had to ask two schools to take an additional intake of one full class of 30 students each! It does make it hard to defend Local Authorities when this happens and not for the first time.

Early in the term, after the opening, disquiet at Mayfield soon became apparent with reports of problems of teachers arriving late for lessons as they travelled between sites and alleged lack of communication from the school. This was always going to be a school difficult to manage with most community anger at the closures and running initially on two sites some distance apart. Lord's Hill sites in contrast are very near each other and there was far less resistance to the changes.

Things came to a head at Mayfield before the first half-term. On 16 October students took action as reported in *The Southern Daily Echo* of Monday 20 October 'Dozens of Pupils on School Rampage' and nationally in *The Times Educational Supplement* on 24 October with the subtitle 'Staff demand changes to the way Christian school is organised'. Local media, particularly *The Southern Daily Echo*, ran headline news as the situation developed, and also on-line comments. Oasis backed the strong line of the Headteacher who excluded a number of students. Parents, on-line, complained of lack of communication and teachers being late or missing lessons. Parents discovered, what I had warned in my article in *The Echo* [3], during the consultation period (reprinted in *FORUM*, 49(3), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2007.49.3.347>), that going to the Local Authority was no longer an option. The cabinet member, of course, defended his decision to give the school to Oasis. Steve Chalke, founder of Oasis, visited the school but John Denham the local MP cast doubt on the ability of Oasis to make successful progress. In *The Echo* of 24 October [4], it was reported that Ofsted was going to 'move in' and the three local Labour Councillors called on the Local Authority to intervene 'as there is clearly a very significant problem between senior teachers and pupils'. They were forgetting

that the Local Authority has no jurisdiction over an Academy. In *The Times Educational Supplement* of 24 October [5], Christine Blower of the NUT said 'It is amazing that the secretary of state of a major education department has said an academy sponsor needs help because it is so inexperienced. What problems are academies supposed to solve? The solution has become the problem.'

There was no lull in publicity over the half-term. On 29 October Evangelical Minister, Billy Kennedy, chairman of Oasis Southampton Partnership [6], was reported as saying 'The Principal, senior leadership team and staff are doing an amazing job in very difficult circumstances'. 'She has our full support'. It was also reported that the City Council's Education boss pledged his support to the Principal.

News among the Secondary School community however was that parents were beginning to transfer their children to other schools with a considerable number going to the nearest school with places, which is a National Challenge School. Oasis brought in 'trouble shooters' from Education London to support the school.

On Friday 21 November, three weeks after half-term John Denham MP and local councillors had a meeting with parents from which the press were excluded. In a press statement the following week [7], a local councillor said 'It was clear that drastic steps were needed to turn the school around'. 'It was clear that many parents and pupils were not happy with the state of the new school.' This statement came in the same article that announced that the Headteacher had resigned – less than 8 months from taking on the job and 11 weeks into the school's first term and 19 staff had handed in their notice. This was a head of which Ofsted only 2 years previously at her previous school [8], had said, 'The Headteacher's outstanding leadership and drive for improvement have been instrumental in bringing about the major changes which are in progress within the school.' 'The staff and students have confidence in the HTLT, especially the Headteacher, to take the school forward'. It is also interesting to note the councillor's comment about the new Academy, 'turning this school around', when previously one of the 2 schools was performing at the national average and in 2007 better than 9 of the 14 secondary schools in the City.

I suspect there will never be a public report as to how Oasis Community Learning could allow the merger of two previously happy schools, under a Headteacher with an Ofsted endorsed good record, to descend to the unhappy place Mayfield became leading to the Headteacher's resignation.

Oasis appointed the lead trouble shooter as acting head and subsequently to the permanent post. Some of the excluded students were taken back. However 11 students were excluded permanently in the first term from Oasis Mayfield which was more than a third of the city's total. This School, of a Christian ethos, operates on a different view of Christ's teaching in the Gospels to that many would understand where Christ says, 'They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'. [9] This is not an uncommon characteristic of schools run under a Christian ethos where difficult children are excluded to be looked

after by the Local Authority Community Schools rather than being nurtured under the forgiving ethos of the Christian faith. As a person active in the Christian faith I am disturbed by this expression of Christianity.

There has still been some drift of students away from the school. Neither of the Oasis Academies was full when school places for the 2009 intake were announced, whereas 4 of the Local Authority Secondary Community School were oversubscribed as were the Catholic Girls School and the Secondary Trust School. An accompanying issue is the confusion now in Southampton for parents when deciding the preferences for their children. In 1997 we had 12 Secondary Schools with a common admission policy and 2 Catholic Schools. Now we have 2 Catholic, 2 Academies, 1 Trust and 7 Local Authority Schools with 5 different admission authorities and some conversion to more Trust Schools in the pipeline!

Clearly this is early days but the impact of Oasis Academy Schools on the City has been far from positive. The Head from Oasis Academy Lord's Hill does attend City wide Forums but it was reported to the City Governors' Forum that Oasis Academy Mayfield, even under the new Principal, did not want one of their Council members to attend. Note: Oasis Academies do not have Governors but a Council with much reduced powers and responsibilities as most decisions, including on the curriculum, are taken centrally. This is consistent with their failure to be seen at some of the other cross city forums.

On a national scale a worrying development is the power base Academy Heads and Principals are building up, reflecting the unwillingness of some Academies to be co-operative players locally. *The Times Educational Supplement* reported on 27 February 2009 [10], that The Independent Academies Association which represents more than half of academies refused to accept the Government's requirement that they be compelled to co-operate with children's trusts. They saw it as 'further erosion' of academies' freedoms. Indeed they wish to join together to take over Children's Services. Mary Bosted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers responded, 'It is a strange position to take, that you are willing to co-operate with local authorities but only if you can do it separately from them'.

This is a sad tale of one Unitary Authority, of local political second-guessing that backfired, of one inexperienced Academy provider and two Academies one of which has had major issues and, at the heart, of the policies of the Labour Government which appear to fly in the face of the evidence of what makes successful Comprehensive Schools.

Those on the left in the Labour Party, supporters of Comprehensive Schools, Headteachers of successful Local Authority Schools – of which there are many, Local Government members, Campaigners against Academies, Teacher Unions and Academics need to unite to challenge the Government on its Academy and School Places policies. The arrival in Southampton of Oasis provides plenty of evidence, among others, on which to make a case.

We must continue to ask: What evidence is there that a protracted, bureaucratic bidding process for new schools provides any better provision than

well funded Local Authority new schools? Why do we need Academies to replace non-failing Community Schools? What incontrovertible evidence is there that 'Diversity' drives up standards and, particularly, what is the evidence that Diversity made up of Faith Schools, Trust Schools and Academies, all their own admission authorities, alongside Local Authority Community Schools is a better model than Local Authority Schools which all have their own ethos and character and common admission policies? How can you possibly deem non-experienced providers such as Oasis worthy of making provision against experienced Local Authorities. Why does the contract have to be with the DCSF, be secret and not subject to the Freedom of Information Act? If this latter is because of competition rules and commercial interests, is this not an admission that the schools are run on a commercial basis and not for the greater good of the total community that is normally how Local Authorities operate? Why don't we promote as good models all those many Local Authority Community Schools that consistently receive the accolade of 'Outstanding' from Ofsted?

Readers can add more to this list. I end here before I get too depressed about what is happening and the lack of evidence on which the Government has changed and damaged the Comprehensive Schools' landscape for some time to come.

References

- [1] Did Blair Exit Hinge on Academy Deal?, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 27 March, 2009, p. 3.
- [2] Francis Beckett, *The Great City Academy Fraud*, p. 52. London: Continuum.
- [3] In My View, *Southern Daily Echo*, 28 May, 2007, p. 13.
- [4] Ofsted Moves in after Rampage at City Academy, *Southern Daily Echo*, 24 October, 2008, p. 2.
- [5] Sponsor Rebuked for Pupil Riot, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 24 October, 2008, p. 1.
Pupils Go on Rampage at New Academy, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 24 October, 2008, p.4.
- [6] School Boss Backs Staff after Unrest, *Southern Daily Echo*, 29 October, 2008, p. 14.
- [7] New Drama at Oasis Academy Mayfield – Crisis School Exodus Head Teacher Quits. 19 Staff have Handed in Notice This Term, *Southern Daily Echo*, 25 November, 2008, p. 1.
Head Resigns as Troubled School Faces Exodus of Teaching Staff, *Southern Daily Echo*, 25 November, 2008, p. 2.
- [8] Ofsted Inspection Report of Cantell Maths and Computing College, 7 and 8 June 2008. Inspection Number 285266
- [9] The Holy Bible, Mark 2 verse 17. Also Matthew 9 verse 12 and Luke 5 verse 31.

[10] Academies Want Right to Run Childrens' Services, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 27 February, 2009, p. 30.

RICHARD HARRIS has an Open University degree and was an Adult Education Institute Principal in Hampshire and Senior Manager in a Southampton Further Education College. During his seven years as a Southampton City Labour Councillor he was, for two years, the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning and Leisure. A secondary school governor for over 20 years he now is Chair of Southampton's Admission Forum and nationally is on the steering committee of Comprehensive Future. *Correspondence:* Richard Harris, 45 Hill Farm Road, Southampton SO15 5SR, United Kingdom (richandviv@tiscali.co.uk).