
Another School is Possible: developing positive alternatives to academies

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ABSTRACT Low-attaining schools have been targeted by government for closure and transformation into academies. This article argues that opposition to academies is necessary but not sufficient. It is vital to do more than simply defend the status quo. In the city of Leicester an alternative vision for high-quality education, local authority led and grounded in community comprehensive schools, is being actively pursued. Its hallmarks are innovation, creativity and collaboration between schools and their teachers. The successes already achieved in Leicester under this new approach reveal the government's policy of 'academisation' to be 'last year's model'.

'We don't need no Education!' so sang Pink Floyd in the 1970s. I'll bet the band never expected that to become government policy. Yet, in practice this is effectively what we have now. SATs tests, league tables and the dull directed learning promoted by government departments are not about 'education' but about *control and the market*. So is their infatuation with privatisation.

For teachers and many other participants in the education community the government's obsessive drive to create privately run academies may be educationally unsound, if not slightly mad, but it exists and has clear economic drivers. In response to this concerted attack on comprehensive schools the main education unions have resolutely opposed the creation of academies and helped to set up the Anti Academies Alliance, which now also boasts the affiliation of the TUC. Building such a coalition of opponents to privatisation is of itself a huge achievement. It has brought together parents' groups, unions, students, councillors and politicians in opposing academies. However, we do still need to ask ourselves a simple question: 'Is it enough just to oppose privatisation and demonstrate with placards saying "No to Academies"?' Or do we need to do more?

One of the problems facing any anti-academy campaign is that the schools selected for so-called 'structural intervention' have often been in areas of high social deprivation and consequently comparatively low achieving in terms of government league tables. It is a sad fact that in England at present the best predictor of educational outcomes is social class and in particular poverty. This is despite the fact that the former Labour Government originally set out to eradicate child poverty, beginning by halving it. Their failure to do so, and within a year instead to see the numbers living in poverty begin to rise again, has had major consequences for the life chances of thousands of young people. But for the government, where accountability is only something other people suffer, their failure to seriously address poverty simultaneously entitles them to blame schools, and in particular neighbourhood comprehensive schools, for not overcoming the consequences of endemic social deprivation.

Academies: no alternative?

The corollary of this is that these schools, serving areas of high social deprivation, can conveniently be claimed by government to be 'underperforming', either in terms of National Challenge targets, league table scores or Ofsted categories. The move to becoming an academy is then offered as a 'school improvement' solution. 'We will not tolerate failure', as the Minister might say when commending the option of a privately run new school.

In these circumstances, simply defending the status quo against the threat of academies is problematic. It can be taken by parents, the media and even other trade unionists to imply that we are happy with low-performing schools. The opponents of academies can, of course, point to all sorts of demographic factors, to Fischer Family trust data which shows that the results are entirely understandable, but the bottom line is that many students in these schools do indeed leave with few qualifications. To outsiders, with little detailed knowledge of education, this can be easily portrayed as outright failure, however unfair that judgement may be.

In December 2008 the *Independent* newspaper, not normally a hod-carrier for the government, carried an editorial headlined 'Opponents of Academies have no Alternative'. This article argued that since school improvement was important and there appeared to be evidence that many schools performed badly the government should push ahead with its academies programme in the absence of anything better. To say that the relation between ends and means had become hopelessly confused is obvious. But this naivety in the face of government propaganda is what we face.

What the *Independent* offered was no ringing endorsement of academies. In fact, outside of the DCSF you would be hard pushed to find one. Even Price Waterhouse Cooper, charged with evaluating the Academies Programme, were unable to say that academies did lead to school improvement. After five years they concluded that there was 'too little evidence'! But what the *Independent* said was important and reflected a serious issue of public perceptions that we need to

address. Once the focus is on providing high-quality education for all pupils, *what is our ideal vision of a way forward for education?*

Leicester Looks to Innovate

In Leicester, where we have faced all these problems, including a full frontal assault on the very existence of the local authority, we decided to adopt a different approach. While resolutely opposing any academy plans, we decided that we also needed to articulate our *vision* for high-quality education. Beginning from the NUT policy 'A good local school for every child and every community', we began to develop a worked out *educational* alternative to academies.

The Labour Government model for education was autocratic, inflexible and singularly poorly suited to meeting the holistic needs of children and young people, which clearly include the creative, the emotional and the social. In effect what New Labour developed was a 'factory' version of education. It was based on testing, league tables, negative inspections, meaningless competition and with privatised academies as the preferred outcome. The new Government is no different in its aims.

It is a crude model, premised on – and designed to create – failure. It fragments local provision, to the detriment of all. Instead of facilitating caring and success, it institutionalises bullying and fear. With such a regime in place in the Department for Children, Families and Schools it was hardly surprising that Leicester, with half of all wards in the lowest 10% nationally, should become a target. In October 2007 the government announced that it would intervene and outsource the whole of the education service in Leicester unless major improvements in performance were achieved by the summer of 2008. In practice that was giving the LEA and schools seven months to devise an action plan, put it in to practice and achieve concrete results.

What a stupid, bombastic and thoroughly confrontational approach to a complex task! The local authority inevitably responded with a mixture of disbelief and panic. Initially it declined to even discuss what the government was demanding with the unions. But head teachers were willing to talk. The government's scatter-gun threats were affecting them directly and they had no desire to see Capita or Edison marching in to run our local schools on the whim of a government minister.

The unions were equally determined not to surrender education to the dubious priorities of 'for-profit' organisations with no knowledge of Leicester and no commitment to the city. We had been arguing for some time about strategies for school improvement. If we were going to take up the challenge from the government then we wanted to be active participants, working in partnership with schools and the LEA. A packed public meeting in mid November 2007 confirmed that as our direction of travel.

What we wanted to offer to parents, teachers and the wider community was a positive vision for the future that promoted *innovation, creativity and*

collaboration as the pathways to real and sustainable success. We wanted education to become exciting and stimulating again. We wanted every pupil to feel that they mattered and that if, or when, they needed help and support it would be there for them on a non-judgemental basis.

The first step we took was to create a broad 'Support Our Schools' campaign in support of local authority led Community Comprehensive Education. We brought together all the main teaching unions and support staff unions, plus education unions in further and higher education. We involved the local Social Forum and Education Forum. And in due course we got political parties like the Greens taking an interest. Our first activity was to run a 'We are proud of our School' art competition to combat the negativity about Leicester schools that was being incited by government statements.

Simultaneously, to develop the aims of the campaign, we looked at what parents wanted from education for their children. They wanted their children to be happy at school, to be safe and to learn effectively so they could fulfil their potential.

So our model was premised on entitlement, but entitlement in its widest sense:

- The right of pupils to a broad, balanced and stimulating curriculum that is not tied solely to testing.
- The right of those pupils with SEN, EAL or literacy and numeracy difficulties to ongoing, appropriate support so that they do succeed.
- The right of teachers to be creative and innovative in their teaching without fear of interference.
- The right of teachers to access high-quality, relevant CPD from outstanding practitioners to help them improve their teaching.
- The right of those schools with the greatest need or which face challenging circumstances to receive additional financial support.

We also asserted several basic principles: that the experts on learning and the needs of Leicester's children were our *local teachers*; that we needed to draw on and harness the expertise, talents and creativity of the whole local education community; and that *Leicester schools were OUR schools*.

Collaboration for Education: Leicester's voluntary partnership

Anyone with any sense knows that every teacher wants to be a good teacher. There is no such thing as the teacher who goes in to work intent on giving bad lessons. Yet the DCSF and Ofsted often act as though there is, and encourage head teachers to act accordingly by beating teachers over the head with competency procedures. Rather than accepting this negative approach we prioritised practical support, not from drop-in consultants, but from other, experienced local teachers and through the sharing of good practice.

Alongside this we argued that the competitive model of education that compares schools according to their results and gradings is damaging to all. It creates winners and losers, a culture of blame and encourages parents to follow the league tables in choosing their schools. So, the cycle for creating 'sink schools' that are drained of high-achieving pupils is institutionalised.

Against this we counterposed schools working together collaboratively, supporting each other. We promoted the idea of mutual responsibility so that successful schools in leafy suburbs had a duty to support schools in areas of high social deprivation because *collectively we were educating Leicester's children*.

We were aided in this by the fact that the secondary head teachers had set up an Education Improvement Partnership (EIP). Run by the heads, it pooled funding from the schools to deliver mutually agreed activities and support arrangements. We urged the extension of this idea to primary schools – which has now happened – and incorporated the EIP into our planning, using this as a hub around which coordination could take place. Working with the head teachers and the unions we were able to produce a city-wide collaborative model based on voluntary partnership working across the city.

This has included introducing the sharing of teachers across schools, so that schools in challenging circumstances benefit from access to a wider pool of high-quality teachers. Previously, one of the big problems facing schools with low results or in Special Measures was the mundane task of recruitment. There were few applicants for posts. Now, we have successful schools loaning staff to support other schools and even recruiting specifically with this in mind.

Alongside this, a CPD model based on sharing good practice has had a significant impact. This has taken two distinct forms. In the first place, a Hub and Spoke model of best practice in secondary English, Maths and Science was developed. This was based on identifying the most successful and innovative departments for each subject and then having them lead in the sharing of expertise and good practice. Local teachers supporting other local teachers. The fact that two National Challenge schools secured double digit improvements in their GCSE A-C grades including Maths and English scores since the summer of 2007 speaks for itself. Both are now well above the National Challenge benchmark.

But there has also been a more personalised sharing of expertise, with groups of teachers at similar points in their development being brought together to work on the curriculum and to examine innovative new ways of working that can improve the quality of learning. No threats, no shouting; no dire warnings of the consequences of failure – just a calm, collective effort to improve the educational experiences of children and young people. It seems such a long time since we were allowed to work like this.

Where Next?

Ideally, the next step would be to move towards an exchange of students, with able, articulate youngsters from high-achieving schools going to work

alongside their peers in schools in areas of high social deprivation for short periods of time, and vice versa. This would widen the experience of all the students involved, break down the 'Chinese walls' in the comparative intakes of schools that has been created by parental choice and allow all sorts of curriculum innovation to take place.

For now, this latter is just an idea on the drawing board. The important thing is that there is indeed a drawing board. This means that teachers can play a genuine part in the shaping of strategies for learning and change. Educationalists are enormously creative, given the opportunity.

The development of our alternative model has meant two things:

- When we criticised the Council's academy plans, we did so from the standpoint of having a clear, Community Comprehensive alternative model for school improvement based on partnership and making the best use of the expertise of local teachers.
- We were able to demonstrate to parents, governors and the local community that what we offer is less disruptive of current educational arrangements, is tightly focused on making every school a good school and, crucially, has the support of staff and the local family of schools.

In fact, we have increasingly moved to a standpoint of saying that 'Academies are last year's model'. They are the tired debris of a government privatisation agenda that lacked vision, excitement or real innovation.

The jewel in the crown of our educational strategy has been a Leicester-wide Literacy Crusade: effectively a commitment to ensure that every child in the city is given the 'Right to Read', with fully funded support for any children who start to fall behind. When we first promoted this idea it fell on deaf ears. Twelve months later the proposal was up and running having been embraced by officers and the Council as a sound, common-sense approach to meeting children's needs. The campaign is sponsored by the unions, the LEA, the EIP and other local voluntary groups. It is a real, living partnership to provide a service for the community. The Launch Conference on 2 October 2009, which included local children's writer Chris De Lacey among the speakers, was a huge success. Under the slogan 'Whatever it Takes', Leicester is committed to collectively liberating each child's learning through literacy.

Over time, the impact of this literacy campaign will undoubtedly raise the performance of pupils and schools at both Key Stage 2 and at GCSE. Able to read, our children will be better able to access the curriculum, better able to express themselves and better able to fulfil their real potential. So, in a sense, we will have delivered on the original government ultimatum to 'raise standards' in Leicester. But we will have done it our way, in an environment of support and cooperation, where sharing is seen as a virtue not a 'crime' and every child is valued for themselves.

We have seen the future and we think it works. On 5 October 2009 the Council cabinet in Leicester unanimously agreed to shelve proposals for academies. The rationale for this decision was that academies are not

appropriate to Leicester's situation. Tackling school improvement does not require business interventions. It does not require spurious privatisations. Rather, it requires compassion and creativity, plus a willingness to re-embrace the notion of public service. From our point of view, the *collaborative model* of working is the right one. Maybe the new Government, given the pressures of the credit crunch, could belatedly consider this as a cost-effective alternative to academies, trusts and privatisation. After all, it does have the advantage that it will actually work!

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News Item

Many people were genuinely shocked when the new Tory Liberal Coalition Government announced, within a few days of taking office, that it was giving a senior advisory post to Evangelical Christian and failed Tory candidate for Sutton and Cheam Philippa Stroud. Ms Stroud, it will be remembered, sparked a furious row during the election campaign when it was revealed that she had been involved in the setting up of churches which, for a decade, attempted to 'cure homosexuals by organising prayers to drive out their 'demons'. Ms Stroud already heads the Centre for Social Justice Think-Tank. She will now be principle adviser to new Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith.