
Mr Gove's Road to Privatisation: forcing primary schools to become Academies

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ABSTRACT Not content with the response to his offer to outstanding schools to become academies, Michael Gove's next move has been to force schools to become academies. Resistance from parents and the local community has made no difference. This article explains what happened in Haringey and how undemocratic the whole process has been.

Haringey, along with some 13 other local authorities, has been targeted, bullied and bombarded by Mr Gove and the DfE to force some of its primary schools to become Academies.

Decisions have been taken mainly on the basis of SATs results – which are only in English and Maths. This is such a limited indication of the quality of education being offered to the children. How their needs are being met and their well being are, it seems, of no concern. It has created a climate of fear among all schools. Ofsted inspections since January have put more schools into special measures – not only in Haringey but across the country – and this has become a trigger for a school to be forced to become an Academy.

Gove's offer to 'outstanding' schools to convert to Academy status immediately after the Government came into power in 2010 did not create as many new Academies as he had hoped. His offer of 'freedom from the control of the local authority' did not attract many schools since local authorities have not been 'controlling' schools since the introduction of Local Management of Schools. This gave schools their own budgets which they could spend as they wished. They could also buy services from outside the local authority if they were not satisfied with what the local authority was offering. This has been the case for more than twenty years. So there was no 'control' and in most local authorities there is support and guidance – financial, pastoral, and so on. Much of this has now been reduced in many authorities due to the massive cuts they

have had to make. Freedom from having to teach the National Curriculum has resulted in schools offering less than a broad and balanced curriculum in order to improve their results and position in the league tables. This is not about educating young people either. Freedom to change the pay and conditions of teachers has meant that teachers are often working longer hours and being paid less in many Academies. Freedom to determine the length of the school day and terms is the fourth 'freedom' on offer to Academies. In most other respects the DfE website claims Academies are like other schools. However, the fundamental difference is that they are tied to the Government through a funding agreement and the school buildings are taken out of the public realm. The DfE cannot possibly have local knowledge about all schools. Academies receive additional money, taken from their local authority, and £25,000 to set up. Most schools admit that it is the additional money that attracts them, yet this takes funding from all other schools in the local authority. The idea of collaboration also tends to go since Academies are encouraged to be 'autonomous.' Converting Academies do not have to have a sponsor but have to set up a trust which is the body which signs the funding agreement with the DfE. This states what they have to provide for the money they are given.

However, forced Academies do have to have a sponsor. In March 2011 Michael Gove wrote to all local authorities asking them to send him plans about how they were going to improve their schools – this at a time when they were also being asked to make huge cuts. In July 2011 he informed local authorities about which schools he intended to target to become Academies – due to, in his view, their poor results. Haringey received a list of 19 schools even though none of them came in the worst 200 schools listed by Gove. The local authority decided not to tell any of them because the summer holiday was approaching. Eventually they were all called to a meeting in October. In the meantime the local authority officers had been having some very difficult meetings with the DfE. Four schools were initially targeted, seemingly as agreed between the local authority and DfE. Once the governors of the schools found out, they were extremely angry that they had not been told before. The Downhills Governing Body then started their campaign to remain a local authority school. They gathered support from parents and from many others in the local community. The campaign has gone from strength to strength, with a debate in Parliament led by David Lammy, the local MP and former pupil of Downhills School, a 600-strong meeting in February, a march attended by 1000 people, petitions to Parliament, letters to Michael Gove and recently a strike by teachers and then another by support staff when a double decker bus took parents and others to the DfE to protest. They have had a huge amount of media coverage.

The four schools were sent a letter on 13 December 2011 – just before the Christmas holidays – saying the Secretary of State was minded to make their schools Academies and offering them the opportunity to choose a sponsor. They were given until 13 January 2012 – a week after the beginning of the new term. Two schools did suggest a sponsor – the London Diocesan Board for Schools – but this was rejected by Mr Gove. One school asked for more time

and Downhills did not respond. Following this, officers from the DfE visited the schools and said the governing bodies had to consider the Kemnal Trust as a sponsor. Representatives from the Trust met members of the governing body in each of the schools. They did not look around the schools nor ask for information about the schools but presented what they would be offering. The meetings were arranged at short notice which meant that a number of governors could not attend. The DfE insisted that governors should make an immediate decision. All three governing bodies rejected Kemnal Trust as they did not have experience of inner-city schools and seemed less than interested in trying to understand the issues the schools were facing. They were then sent another sponsor, the Academies Enterprise Trust, which seemed better. Two of the schools reluctantly agreed to go with AET while saying emphatically that neither they nor the school community wanted to become an Academy. The third governing body, after consulting parents and staff, and explaining what work had been done to improve the school, including the departure of the head teacher and appointment of an interim head, said they were not prepared to go down the route of becoming an Academy. They sent a letter saying this but were immediately dismissed through an email from the DfE and replaced by an Interim Education Board appointed by Michael Gove. This took place during the February half-term. They were then told that they were to become an Academy and their sponsor would be the Harris Federation, which currently has 12 secondary schools in south London – six in Southwark and the rest in outer London boroughs and one primary school also in Southwark.

Downhills governors had refused to have meetings with the DfE. In February they had an Ofsted inspection, although were not due one until May 2012 and the school was put into special measures. Then the DfE dismissed their governing body and appointed an Interim Education Board. A parent has initiated a judicial review about the legality of this action. The head teacher had resigned in January. A consultation was then conducted with parents, staff and members of the local community, organised by Cambridge Education Association. Five questions were asked: Do you agree that Downhills Primary School should convert to become an Academy? Should it stay as a local authority maintained school? If the Secretary of State decides the school should become an Academy should the Harris Federation be its sponsor? Are there aspects of the Harris Federation proposal which you support? Are there aspects of the Harris Federation proposal that you do not support? Ninety-four per cent of respondents said that they wanted the school to remain a local authority school but Michael Gove has recently written to say that he has signed a funding agreement with the Harris Federation for the school to become an Academy. So much for consultation, listening and democracy.

Meanwhile, the Haringey Governors' Association, teachers' organisations and other local parents have tried to involve the local authority in bringing schools together – head teachers, teachers, governors and parents – to support each other and look at ways in which the successful schools in Haringey can help those in difficulty. A conference, 'Our Community, Our Schools', was

organised in April with excellent speakers which was attended by 120 people – parents, governors, staff, some local councillors and two heads who explained how they had turned their schools around. Other head teachers did not attend, nor did the local authority. Since then consultants have been appointed to help with school improvement but it has been almost impossible to bring all stakeholders together. The Leader of the Council has set up an Education Commission to consult with all parties about the future of education in Haringey. They will be producing a report in December. There is considerable disappointment and anger that the local authority appears to have worked with the DfE and not defended its schools. It is likely that the other schools listed by the DfE will also be forced to become Academies. None of this disruption has been good for the schools or, of course, for the children and their education. The local authority has been in a vulnerable position ever since the case of Baby P, which resulted in the dismissal of its Director of Children's Services by the previous government and a total focus on safeguarding for the last three years.

Gove's insistence on Academies as being the only way to improve schools has no substance – some Academies have improved but their intake has changed, they tend to have fewer children with special needs and exclude more children than do other schools. There are also Academies which have been put into special measures. He is at the same time removing funding from local authorities as never before so they are even less able to support schools. Meanwhile there are numerous companies claiming to offer support of all kinds and it is very difficult for schools to make the right choices. They are also likely to pay much more in the long term. Privatising the state system is what this is about and the aggressive way in which schools and governing bodies have been treated in order to achieve this with no regard for the children and their families has been grotesque. We need a coherent, fair and democratic education system but it is becoming fragmented, hierarchical and unaccountable. Like Downhills we all need to fight back in any way we can but certainly by presenting a credible alternative which everyone can endorse. This is the intention of CASE and other organisations in a conference they are planning for 17 November 2012, entitled 'Picking up the Pieces'. Gove is doing irreparable damage which has to be challenged.

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