
Co-operative Schools: a democratic alternative

JAMIE AUDSLEY & PHILIP COOK

ABSTRACT Many fear that the pressures of running an Academy will be too great for individual schools, and that they will be forced to join chains run by private companies. These may offer hard-pressed school administrators valuable management expertise and back-office support, but seem to offer wider society little accountability and transparency. Are private Academy chains the best option, where Academy schools have been cut adrift from the support and democratic legitimacy of local authority governance? The authors argue that a democratic alternative must be found.

As the tide of Academies rises, the role of local education authorities in the democratic accountability of our schools recedes. Justice and democracy demand accountability for our schools, but how can schools be held accountable in these uncertain waters?

Many fear that the pressures of running an Academy will be too great for individual schools, and that they will be forced to join chains run by private companies. These may offer hard-pressed school administrators valuable management expertise and back-office support, but seem to offer wider society little accountability and transparency. Are private Academy chains the best option, where Academy schools have been cut adrift from the support and democratic legitimacy of local authority governance? We argue: no. A democratic alternative must be found.

An explicit aim of recent school reforms has been to introduce market-style accountability into schools. The market offers the simple litmus test of growth or failure. Popular schools are allowed to expand, new 'free' schools can be created, and unpopular schools may close or be taken over by other providers. Many will accept that there is a role for parental choice in schooling. But the market alone cannot fulfil the demands of accountability while upholding freedom and justice in a democratic polity. Individual parents must choose the school they think best for their own children. But society must consider the good of all children, and the good of our communities as a whole.

For this reason, chains of academies are incapable of providing the democratic accountability required. Even chains motivated by educational equality, and which seek no profit from their operations, are accountable primarily to their owners, shareholders, and the Secretary of State. This may ensure legality and propriety but cannot provide local communities with scrutiny and power over the role of schools in their area.

Happily, in this harsh environment – characterised by competition between schools and predation by private chains – a social democratic alternative is emerging. Co-operative schools are forging alliances characterised by the values of mutuality, reciprocity, and civic participation. In areas where most schools are now Academies, co-operative values offer an alternative model for school partnerships and governance. We may not see the return of municipal local authority governance of schools in the near future. But we can all strive for a new form of civic local governance of schools inspired by the work of the co-operative movement.

The 2006 Education Act allowed for a wide diversity of partners to participate in the running of maintained schools. Rather quietly, one of the more rapidly expanding partners – alongside foundation trusts and now Academy schools – was the co-operative model. Over 200 schools (largely in the form of co-operative trusts) have now embraced co-operative values of mutuality and shared responsibility. The co-operative movement prizes democracy within its organisation, and promotes an active membership of the wider community (over 13 million of us are members of a co-operative). Faced by the withdrawal of local authority accountability, co-operative schools are providing new and imaginative answers to the demands of justice and accountability in school governance.

One co-operative school we visited recently has just become an Academy, and is expanding to welcome others into its network to form a multi-school trust. Co-operative Academies are therefore offering an alternative to the threat of private chains consuming schools. They emphasise the values of self-help and shared accountability to partner schools, and crucially, the wider community. Co-operation between schools and communities offers an alternative to the solitary isolation of individual Academies and predation by chains.

The governance of co-operative Academy networks aims to ensure equality of power and shared equity in decisions and direction. All schools within the partnership have equal representation, and participate in the governance of the partnership actively. This enables parents, teachers and students to be represented, and to be actively involved too. Importantly, it also gives the opportunity for members of the wider community to participate in school governance by becoming members of the co-operative, broadening the involvement and accountability of the school beyond its walls and those who have a direct self-interest as a student or parent.

This alternative model of school governance being developed by co-operative schools offers a more democratic, inclusive, and accountable form of governance than do Academy chains. It is able to broaden the horizons of the

school and those in its network to consider others in the wider community. Local business, community groups, trade unions, churches, and concerned individuals all have the opportunity to shape the policies and character of the school, and invigorate the curriculum by tapping into local knowledge and skills. Co-operative school partnerships are also passionate about the broader benefits this can have beyond the curriculum, as they seek to contribute to the renewal of local economies through co-operative principles of purchasing, and establishing credit unions for the good of the school partnership and wider community. The model provides the possibility for development of something that could be seen as a 'civil society LEA'.

The co-operative model of school governance also has the potential to resolve one of the most challenging paradoxes posed to social democrats by recent school reforms. It is chastening for opponents of the recent reforms to speak to teachers who, whilst also opposing the reforms because they fear they will create educational injustice, find themselves working in Academy schools. Many of these same teachers also feel simultaneously excited and empowered by the freedoms these reforms provide. The co-operative model of assembling the local community in a participatory democratic forum of school governance promises to balance the freedom of academies with the values of mutuality and shared responsibility to other schools and society.

Whilst in its early stages of development, the co-operative model of school governance provides a vision of a different future for schools. Co-operation between schools offers an alternative to isolated Academies competing for resources, vulnerable to predation by private chains. Co-operative schools' underlying values of mutuality, accountability, and participation offer fruits ripe for picking by those seeking a social democratic policy response to recent reforms. Justice and democracy demand transparency and accountability in school governance, and the emerging co-operative model offers hope that such demands can be satisfied.

JAMIE AUDSLEY works in education and has a background in teaching and youth work. **PHILIP COOK** is a lecturer in political theory at the University of Leicester, United Kingdom. *Correspondence:* jamieaudsley@gmail.com

