
Free Schools and Academies

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ABSTRACT The number and range of problems associated with academies and 'free' schools is worrying and can be attributed to the lack of ability of central Government to oversee the increasingly fragmented education provision. In this article, the author looks at just a few of those problems which have been reported since she started to log them at the beginning of 2014.

Michael Gove was criticised by the National Association of Head Teachers for prioritising visits to academies and schools which had applied to become academies. In November 2012, a Freedom of Information request was made asking for a breakdown on the proportion of visits made by Michael Gove to academies, as opposed to local authority schools. It took almost 6 months for the response that 24 secondary academies or free schools had been visited. A subsequent request established that 88% of the secondary schools visited by Mr Gove were either academies or had applied to become academies.

Why does this matter? A visit by a government minister raises the profile of the school, gets press coverage and praise for the standards in the academies, disadvantaging community schools. Ministers repeatedly cite Mossbourne Academy as a justification of the academy programme by falsely claiming it 'replaced a failing Hackney Downs'.

To counter this I was prompted to start logging some of the problems which have occurred in academies and free schools and which have been reported in papers or in the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) reports. Putting all the bits and pieces together creates a very worrying picture of: financial mismanagement; academies which are downgraded by Ofsted; covert selection; poor planning and more. It should be noted that I do not pretend that my list is comprehensive, for example I have logged only those academies which were graded less than 'good' and, because of the way they are sorted, I will have missed some which should be on the list.

However, there is sufficient evidence to show that becoming an academy may worsen the educational provision.

Some of the difficulties associated with this task have been:

- the government websites change repeatedly. Some aspects of the old Department for Education (DfE) website can be found by doing a search, but, whether accidentally or deliberately, information seems never to be in the same place for longer than a year;
- some of the URN numbers of Ofsted reports do not relate to the school, making it difficult to be sure of the information;
- it is difficult to follow a school through its reincarnations on the DfE lists. For example, Middlefield School of Technology and The Castle Hills Community Arts College became Trent Valley Academy, sponsored by E-ACT, according to the February 2014 list. On the August 2014 list, these same two schools are recorded as becoming the Gainsborough Academy, sponsored by the Lincoln College Academy Trust (confirmed by Wikipedia);
- the Ofsted reports for schools which preceded academies are not always available;
- other errors can be found in the lists of schools converting to be an academy or being sponsored to become an academy and there is inconsistency in the information. One example is that in the June 2014 list of academies some of the Ofsted ratings are for the open academy and some are for the predecessor school, with no distinction.

This means that providing accurate figures is incredibly time consuming and difficult because the comparative data is unavailable, inaccurate or difficult to find. Whether this is as a consequence of inadequate staffing to deal with the changes, a lack of clarity in responsibilities or deliberate policy is unclear.

Given that my list has approaching 500 entries covering a wide range of problems, I have chosen to focus on just 2 aspects: Ofsted and Finance. Ofsted is used by the government to justify the forced academisation of schools and it is, therefore, reasonable to look at their assessments.

Ofsted

Ofsted's Data View throws doubt on how well secondary sponsored academies are doing in the category of 'deprived' or 'most deprived'. The government would argue that the predecessor schools were 'failing' before being taken over, but this is not necessarily true and does not explain why only 49% of sponsored academies in the 'deprived' category are recorded as 'good' or 'outstanding' as of March 31 2014, with 17% 'inadequate', against 54% and 10% for local authority maintained schools.

There are academies, both sponsored and converter, which have been deemed to be 'inadequate' or 'requiring improvement' by Ofsted and which were rated as 'outstanding' or 'good' before becoming academies. One example of this is Datchet St. Mary's Primary School which was considered 'outstanding'

in 2007, with an interim assessment in 2011 supporting this grading. In 2014, as a converted academy, the school was deemed to be 'requiring improvement'.

Other examples of schools which were 'outstanding' or 'good' before conversion and are now 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' post conversion include Kidbrooke School in Greenwich which was rated as 'good' prior to becoming a Co-operative Academies Trust, but is now rated as 'inadequate'. Other schools which were 'outstanding' before conversion, but which are now 'inadequate', include The Willows School in Hayes, and the Willow Primary School in Doncaster.

When the idea that schools could voluntarily convert to become academies was put forward, we were assured that only schools which were graded 'outstanding' or 'good' would become academies. This quite clearly has been altered in a bid to encourage more schools to convert. For example, Boyton Community Primary School was deemed to be 'inadequate' at the time it was allowed to convert. Denefield School and Armthorpe School, along with many others, were deemed to be 'satisfactory' before conversion.

Financial Mismanagement

There have been several cases of poor financial controls and even fraud.[1] Perhaps the biggest offender has been one of the largest academy trusts, E-ACT. E-ACT has had a long history of financial problems, leading to the resignation of firstly Lord Bhatia in 2009 and then Bruce Liddington in 2013, who was also criticised for his high salary in 2011.

Two other academy trusts which have been repeat offenders have been the Barnfield Education Trust (see below) and the Kings Science Academy.[2] Haberdashers Aske's Federation Trust has been subjected to a police investigation into a seven-year long fraud.[3] The Grace Academy Trust paid more than £1million to companies with a connection to the founder, Lord Edmiston.[4]

Other issues include:

- two private schools having their debts being paid off before becoming academies;
- a police investigation into the Lincoln Priory Federation leading to a file being handed to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS);
- the Education Funding Agency concluding that the Education Fellowship Trust operated some 'highly unusual financial practices';
- the financial controls by Barnfield being investigated by the Further Education (FE) commission, the DfE and the Education Funding Agency;
- the Public Accounts Committee reporting that the financial management in some free schools was inadequate.

The United Learning Trust (ULT) were involved in an argument with the DfE over the attempt to clamp down on the practice of academies to overestimate the predicted number of pupils.[5]

Wider Issues and Conclusions

There have been problems with free schools which have been due to open and which are offering places to children, but which fail to open at the last minute, leaving children without a school place.

It has been reported on several occasions that in some areas, where there is a surplus of school places, permission and financing have been given for the opening of a free school, whilst in other areas there is a shortage of places, with the local authority unable to take any action to correct the situation.

In some academies there have been staffing problems. One example reported was that 76 teachers left the Basildon Academies over 2 years, but there have been others.

Overall, it is very clear that without the oversight of a local body, money has been wasted, control of academies and free schools has been weak, and the education of many thousands of children has suffered. It is, perhaps, too much to hope that politicians might admit that the experiment has failed, but, at the very least, they should halt the increasing fragmentation and privatisation of the management of schools.

Notes

- [1] <http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/Royston-Schools-Academy-Trust-bailed-government-faces-an800000-deficit/story-22821312-detail/story.html>
- [2] <http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/kings-school-merger-council-uncovers-4685901>
- [3] <http://www.newshopper.co.uk/news/11324520.display/?ref=twtrrec>
- [4] <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jan/12/taxpayer-funded-academy-paying-millions-private-firms-schools-education-revealed-education>
- [5] <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/25/united-learning-academy-chain-accuses-dfe-acting-illegally>

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