

# A grave warning

*Richard Harris*

## **How to Dismantle the English Education System in 10 Easy Steps.**

Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons, Zero Books, 2020  
150pp, paperback, £12.99, ISBN 978-1-78904-430-0

Terry Edwards, a retired secondary school teacher, and Carl Parsons, retired professor of education, have produced a book which chronicles the destruction of the democratically accountable, local authority state school system and its replacement, by design, of a privatised system of academies, multiple academy trusts (MAT) and free schools. A system wherein schools – often over a hundred miles apart – are managed with no cohesion, through which senior leaders can make excessive financial gains, and in which admission practices are skewed to attract the highest achieving pupils and discard those in year 11 whose exam performance might damage the school's position in league tables. As the title suggests, the book is written with irony but contains many pages of evidence making plain how academisation has changed the education landscape for the worse. As David E. Ewens puts it, in his brief review on the rear cover, 'An energetic and passionate book, and full of useful and indignation-inducing information for those of us appalled at the direction public education is taking, and a reality check for academy ideologues'.

The damaging policy of academisation makes me angry, so I can't say I was exactly looking forward to reading the book. Not because it's not very readable – it is – but because I knew it was well researched and would pile up evidence of the abuses academisation has produced, even as the Conservative Government praises the success of the policy with false information. Boris Johnson's 80-seat majority is going to make it almost impossible to halt the direction of travel. In the week I wrote this review, the Guardian ran a headline announcing: 'Gavin Williamson wants to turn more state schools into academies'. His argument is that academies turn round failing local authority schools! The evidence does not support this and is just one of the issues dealt with in this book. When did the Conservative Government let evidence get in their way of privatising everything they can?

The book has ten chapters, each dealing with one of the titular 'Easy Steps'. These steps, representing the chapter titles, are shown in the first chapter in diagrammatic form, illustrating how each leads to another. Starting with, 'Embrace the Third Way', they go on to, 'Rubbish the Schools', 'Cut Budgets to Local Authorities', 'Broadcast Local Authority (LA) Schools are Failing', 'Standards and Structures', 'Screw the Vocational

Curriculum’, ‘Senior Leaders’ Pay Rockets and Care Plummet’, ‘Slick Outsourcing to Related Parties’, ‘Lean Oversight by Minimal Government Agencies’, and ‘Forget Democracy, No Local Responsibility for Schools’. The first chapter goes on to explore how the third way, public-private partnership, has become the preferred *modus operandi* of the Tory Governments, irrespective of the failures and scandals it has produced. Thus, CAPITA came out of CIPFA, (Chartered Institute of Public Affairs), and Babcock, an engineering firm, spread its wings into education including buying out Surrey Schools Support Services, (4S), and is now, on-line as Babcock 4S. The chapter is full of evidence of the effects of ‘Education – a billion-pound business for sale’. You have the growth of Academies, particularly multiple academy trusts, (MATS), along with excessive salaries of the top staff, way beyond the salaries of local authority education officers, yet with far fewer schools to manage.

The second chapter – ‘Rubbish the Management of State Schools’ – has subsections which are self-explanatory, and include ‘Criticise Attainment Levels’, ‘Control Regulatory Agents’, ‘Behaviour is Bad’, ‘Privatise Support Services’, ‘Freedom has to be Good’, ‘Training or Education of Teachers is not needed’, and others. Each is detailed to show how the Tory narrative has gradually, and sometimes not so gradually, whittled away public belief in local authorities, in the success of their local schools, in the professionalism of teachers, and in the view that co-operation is better than competition and that there is more to education than assessment. It is a salutary read across fifteen pages of ample evidence laying out how clever the Tory preparation for their changes has been. The chapter ends with an alternative story, sub-headed, ‘A land far away’, and starts; ‘There is a secret not to be shared’. That secret is, of course Finland, and the authors draw the distinction between the direction of travel of English education and the success of the Finnish model.

The contrived demise of LAs, including a cut of 40p in every £1 of their funding, is well covered in the third chapter. The freedoms of academies and free schools are pointed out. However, LAs still exist and have a large range of statutory duties. More could have been made of this and the difficulties they now have in carrying them out.

Continuing the theme of how Tory policy has been based on criticism of LA schools and the apparent success of academies, Chapter 4 details how this narrative, that has traction, is based on totally false information. A key quote is from the Education Policy Institute in June 2018, stating that:

Overall, we find little difference in the performance of schools in academy chains and local authorities. The type of school – academy or local authority – is therefore less important than being in a high-performing school group. We find that both academy chains and local authorities feature at the very top of our performance tables, and at the very bottom.

On testing, they quote from *Schools Week* of 23 May 2019 the headline: 'Councils better at turning round failing schools than academy chains'. This claim was based on a Local Government Association report that looked at schools previously rated as inadequate where 75% of 152 schools that stayed with the LA became good or outstanding, but only 59 per cent of schools since becoming sponsored academies, saw their Ofsted ratings achieve the same improvement. In keeping with the book's pugnaciously cynical style, the last paragraph of this section is titled, 'Never mind the data if it does not fit'

In the same vein, Chapter 5 looks at how the Tory Government, while trumpeting 'standards not structures', has, in fact, created new structures on a false narrative, such as Academies and Free Schools, and has also continued to support grammar schools. The Government blames schools, rather than entrenched poverty, for academic failures. They show how academies and grammar schools manage to avoid having many children from deprived backgrounds on their school roles. Chapter 6 takes this further, attacking the Tory national curriculum, which is compulsory for LA schools but from which academies are allowed to opt out.

Chapter 7 is especially worth reading as it addresses the scandal of high financial rewards for the top people in academies and Multi-Academy Trusts at the expense of the school budgets for the pupils. It includes a useful chart, taken from *Schools Week* of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019, which lists 20 Academies or Multi-Academy Trusts whose top earners earned £210,000 or more in 2018, the highest amount paid being £440,000. I remember David Cameron damning LA Officers as bureaucrats, when, in fact, they were mainly former headteachers; now we have businesspeople running school organisations on inflated salaries. Chapter 8 deals with some of the many scandals associated with academy chains, including outsourcing of services, and supplies contracted from family, friends and even companies owned by the chief executive.

Chapter 9 covers the impact of Michael Gove's Academy Act 2010 with reference to imposed academisation, initial bribes to schools to become an academy, and freedoms from LA control. It looks at the freedoms, the abuses these make possible, and the paucity of regulatory control. This issue is covered in such areas as pay and recruitment, staff discipline and dismissal, curriculum content and teaching methods, and, not least, exclusions, managed moves/transfers, and 'off-rolling'. It is well known that academies use 'off-rolling' to improve their results. There is a horrifying account of one special needs pupil at Ark Greenwich Free School being moved to another school and the impossible task for the parents, who objected, to get the academy or any of the relevant agencies to take up their issues and respond appropriately. The authors make the point that, had it been an LA school, the LA officers would have enforced the applicable regulations. This chapter also uses the example of The John Roan School, Greenwich, and its enforced academisation. A campaign by parents and unions against the takeover by University Schools Trust had some success, but the academisation

order was still invoked. The school was finally taken over by United Learning Trust and sadly the local Labour Council showed no support for the parents. The saga, which ran from September 2017 to September 2019, is a sad reflection on the Tory narrative of minimal state control and the reality of the removal or denial of rights for the parents, the headteacher, the staff, the unions and, importantly, the children.

Finally, Chapter 10 deals with the democratic deficit in the Academy model for schools. It is not happy reading. The authors list the advantages of the academisation policy to the Tory party, which I summarise:

1. The policy creates an extensive market where previously there was little.
2. It paves the way for privatisation.
3. It allows for even more government control of the curriculum.
4. It introduces greater competition between schools and between MATs.
5. It undermines national pay and conditions and reinforces the ability to employ unqualified teachers.
6. It makes life difficult for trade unions as academies do not have to recognise them.
7. It diverts criticism to academy trustees and away from government.
8. It opens the way for private contractors to operate ancillary services.
9. It enables school managers to increase staff workloads with little opportunity for staff to complain and with the threat of capability procedures.

The authors sum this up as ‘What’s not to like?’. With similar tongue-in-cheek, they show academy supporters how to maintain their grip on the system. In so doing, they give a grave warning to those who believe in a local democratically managed system, with pay and conditions determined nationally, high status for teachers, an accessible curriculum professionally determined, and in which co-operation between schools is the norm and children from whatever background are central to the school’s ethos. This book shows what life in education could become without a concerted campaign to halt the progress towards a right-wing privatised system.

All the evidence is there in 150 pages.

**Richard Harris**