

# Winning back our schools

## Fighting academisation with the Give Us Back Our Schools campaign

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### Abstract

In the light of the government's recent White Paper, we outline the history of the academisation programme, positioning it as part of the neo-liberal privatisation drive which has been sustained since the 1988 Education Reform Act under governments of all stripes. We contest central claims made for the supposed benefits of academisation, and call for a national campaign to bring all schools and education services under democratic local authority oversight, in line with policy endorsed at the 2019 Labour Party conference.

**Keywords:** academisation; marketisation; privatisation of education; Give Us Back Our Schools campaign; Labour Party education policy

### Forty years of marketisation

The March 2022 White Paper marked the culmination of four decades of policies, which have progressively outsourced and marketised our education system. As expected, the paper shows that the Tories have no intention of either changing structures or democratising schools.

Just over half of all pupils now attend academies rather than local authority schools. Academies are independent but state-funded schools outside of council control oversight. Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are groups of academies, varying in size, where each individual academy has lost its status as a legal entity and has been subsumed into the trust. According to the White Paper, the government now wants all schools to be part of a 'strong trust' by 2030, or be in the process of forming or joining one. Given current rules, this implies that remaining local authority-maintained schools would change status to become academies. The White Paper also promises new quality standards for MATs, and a unified system of oversight and regulation.

The current model of education in the UK is now an incoherent and fragmentary 'market'. These plans would bring all schools into a unified system, apparently even allowing local authorities to establish MATs in areas where there's a shortage – albeit with limits on their level of involvement in trust boards. In order to understand the significance and effect of these proposals though, we need to understand how school

structures have changed over recent decades and how school structures fit into the neo-liberal agenda.

In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher forced compulsory competitive tendering on councils and over the last 40 years governments of all persuasions bought into the idea that 'private' was good, 'public' bad. As John McDonnell said, at the launch of Labour's 2019 report *Democratising Local Public Services: a plan for twenty-first century insourcing*, this inevitably led to 'the outsourcing scandal, which has seen private companies rip off the taxpayer, degrade our public services and put people at risk whilst remaining wholly unaccountable to the people who rely on and fund these services'.<sup>1</sup>

Outsourcing has allowed employers to cut workers' terms and conditions in the search for ready profits. But of course, the true motives of the elite were hidden, dressed up in waffle about 'efficiency' and 'value for money'. In the education system the key buzzword was 'freedom' for schools to spend money as they saw fit. This, it was argued, would allow individual schools to better meet the needs of their pupils and target money more efficiently. School structures have been deliberately built around the claim that schools would be forced to improve by introducing competition. Schools would be made accountable to 'stakeholders' with the introduction of league tables, Ofsted and 'parental choice'.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The structures put in place mean that schools are now actually less responsive to the needs of 'stakeholders' and less financially efficient.

Before the 1990s, the local education authority (LEA) was the employer of teachers in schools and central service staff – cleaners, cooks, advisory teachers, caretakers, educational psychologists and so on. The model of a strong LEA acting as a central service provider had its downside. Bureaucracy could be entrenched and inflexible. But, as experience has demonstrated, the *pros* clearly outweighed the *cons*.

First, these arrangements encouraged fair recruitment practices and ensured that staff were suitably qualified. LEAs provided professional development centres and teachers' centres where staff could go for advice, meetings and training. These created opportunities for teachers from different schools to meet and share good practice. Schools were not in competition with one another. Schools and staff from within an LEA, and sometimes between LEAs, worked together. Sharing practical services also had advantages. Centrally provided services were able to avoid unnecessary duplication of back office functions and economies of scale. This meant better value for the taxpayer and left school leaders more able to concentrate on the task at hand: educating children.

But in 1988 the misleadingly named Education Reform Act (ERA) took the first steps in trashing this 'cooperative' integrated education system, and that agenda has been pursued by all governments since. The ERA transferred many of the powers (including some financial powers) and responsibilities from LEAs to heads and nominally

governing bodies. It also gave the option for head teachers to go further and turn the schools they managed into grant maintained (GM) schools. GM schools got their funding directly from central government, bypassing the local authority (LA) completely. The funds given to GM schools were then deducted from LA budgets.

Headteachers were given control of school budgets and the 'opportunity' to opt out of using local authority-provided services and so the floodgates to outsourcing were opened. Scouting profitable opportunities, a host of consultants and companies targeting the lucrative education market were ready to pounce.

This change to the way money was provided for central services had a devastating effect on local authorities. Once a certain tipping point was reached, it was no longer viable to provide many school services as LAs could no longer be sure of finances year to year. Inevitably, over time, central services diminished. Teachers' centres closed, central service staff were made redundant, years of capacity, experience and expertise was lost. This in turn made it much easier to convince schools to opt out entirely and become semi-privatised academies and join unaccountable multi-academy trusts (MATs).

## **New Labour**

At the 1996 Labour Party conference, Tony Blair proclaimed that his top three priorities were: 'education, education, and education'. We might have hoped that after the big majority Labour achieved in 1997 Labour would bring all schools into a coordinated, collaborative, non-selective, locally democratic system. But no. Labour continued with the Thatcherite project.

The new Labour government reneged on its pre-election promise to abolish selective secondary education, keeping grammar schools unless parents voted locally for the change. The 1998 Education Act even enabled secondary schools, if they became 'specialist schools', to select a proportion of their pupils on the basis of 'perceived aptitudes'. As early as 1999 so-called 'failing' schools were taken away from local authority control and handed over to private companies. Local authority services continued to be contracted out. In 2000 the entire local education authority in Leeds was privatised, and in 2001 the Blair government awarded a 10-year £360 million contract to private company Serco to run schools in Bradford.

In 2000, privatisation of education was further pushed forward when David Blunkett announced the start of academisation. Its aim, apparently, was to challenge under achievement in the country's poorest performing schools. The programme had many similarities to Thatcher's failed city technology colleges (CTCs) programme of the early 1990s, and to charter schools in the US.

Concerns were being expressed that schools in some local authorities (usually

those serving disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods) were not delivering pupils a good enough education. Instead of re-establishing local authority funding to properly provide central services again and fund all schools on a needs basis rather than the crude use of pupil numbers, the proposed ‘solution’ was to turn a so-called failing school into a new type of state school managed by a private team of independent co-sponsors. And so the academy was born.

## **Academisation as the tip of a Tory iceberg**

This brings us to today, where the academy system is merely the tip of the iceberg. All schools compete for pupils and funding with other local schools, and because the system is now so fragmented and incoherent most schools, even local authority schools, are not really accountable to their communities. Parents, guardians, pupils and staff who, for whatever reason, encounter issues in the school system often find they have no voice with which to make their case.

The 2022 White Paper talks of ‘a stronger and fairer school system’. The government states: ‘We have a decade of evidence that academy trusts can transform underperforming schools’.<sup>2</sup> However this just isn’t true. There’s no evidence that academies are ‘stronger’, even according to the government’s own metrics. Research conducted on behalf of the Local Government Association (LGA) found that more local authority schools than academies were classed as outstanding or good by Ofsted in January 2022, and a 2018 report by the Sutton Trust found that two-thirds of academy chains performed below average for disadvantaged pupils. It’s also difficult to see how MATs encourage fairness. A quick Google search will pull up a number of stories telling of corruption and excessive salaries in MATs across the country, including a number of executives earning more than £200,000, according to research from 2021. This has to mean public money being directed away from the day-to-day running of the school into the pockets of individuals not democratically accountable.

To achieve a fairer school system, the academy system must end. But this in itself would not be not enough, for the root problems can be traced back to the structure of school governance and procurement created by the 1988 Act. The changes introduced in this act must be reversed.

Some of the contradictions presented in the White Paper, and in the way school structures have developed, became clear when the Schools Bill was published. For years the argument was made that academisation gave individual schools more freedom, for example to vary the curriculum for the benefits of their pupils. The focus was on school autonomy. However, MATs actually take power away from individual schools. Each academy in a MAT ceases to be an individual school at all, and each former school – now just a site – becomes part of a corporation controlled by the MAT CEO. The combination

of MAT membership and Department for Education (DfE) regulation is the opposite of school autonomy. The government has been forced to withdraw from the Schools Bill many clauses increasing central control. MAT CEOs don't want that level of interference from the secretary of state. They want to be free to use the schools they control in whatever way they wish.

The two fundamental problems with the current MAT system are that it ignores the importance of accountability and of place. The larger MATs have no geographical coherence. It is very difficult to see how a trust with, say, 10 schools in three or four widely dispersed locations can be called in any meaningful way a family of schools. Even within the government's own thinking, this is an issue both of efficiency and of how trusts can build local networks and relationships. Academisation removes schools from local authority oversight and places them under the control of independent private bodies funded directly by central government. This puts decision-making power in the hands of a distant bureaucracy – one that often knows nothing of the local area and the challenges facing workers, pupils and families there. When there are problems, parents and guardians can only appeal to the secretary of state. There is no local democratic oversight. Change is needed: schools need to work together. But this must happen within a local democratic framework where communities, staff and pupils have a voice.

The reality is it's not been in the best interest of communities for their schools to leave the family of local authority schools and convert to becoming an academy, or to join a large MAT. Recognising this, delegates at the 2019 Labour Party conference voted for a policy which would bring all schools and education central services back under local authority oversight. However, since 2019 things have moved on in the Labour Party, and perhaps not in a good way.

## **Enter Give Us Back Our Schools campaign**

In light of this situation, the Socialist Educational Association (SEA) set up in 2020 the 'Give Us Back Our Schools' (GUBOS) campaign. GUBOS aims to put pressure on the Labour Party to commit publicly to the 2019 conference policy, to ensure that all schools and education central services will be renationalised and taken back under local democratic control under a Labour government. GUBOS also aims to work with unions on a publicity campaign to educate the wider public on the need to reverse privatisation in education, a plan that the National Education Union (NEU) conference committed to in April 2022, alongside the development of 'an industrial strategy to aim to reverse deregulation enabling a return to national pay and conditions for all education workers'.<sup>3</sup>

## **What is to be done now?**

So what else can be done? First we must campaign against the White Paper and Schools

Bill. While this drive to move all schools into a multi-academy trusts is being couched in terms like ‘strong’ and ‘fair’, we must show it up for what it actually is – a neo-liberal drive for private organisations to run all of our country’s schools, overseen (or perhaps not) by the secretary of state. It is the end of any semblance of local democracy and accountability in the school system. In the fully private education system this drive envisages, the very worst features that already exist in academies would be further amplified: nepotism, corruption, competition rather than cooperation, and a narrowing of the curriculum to maximise target-driven ‘results’ rather than provide a balanced and nurturing educational experience.

We need to lobby our elected representatives to oppose the bill. That opposition should focus on:

- the importance of devolving and democratising decision-making, rather than hugging power to the centre
- ensuring academy standards are in line with regulations for maintained schools
- enabling greater LA powers (hinted at in the White Paper) over opening, closing and changing schools, school admissions and exclusions, and the care of vulnerable and special educational needs and disability (SEND) pupils
- the right of schools to leave a MAT, and the requirement for MATs to have local governing bodies for each school – devolving power within MATs is important.<sup>4</sup>

For those who are Labour Party members it’s important to prioritise education policy in branches and CLPs, to keep the vision of a national education service alive, and to push the Labour leadership to commit to the 2019 Labour Party conference vote which unanimously passed the SEA motion calling on an incoming Labour government to return schools and education services to local democratic control.

Perhaps more importantly, we need to bring to public attention the need to reverse privatisation in education, along the lines of the way NHS privatisation has been publicised. We need to encourage an understanding among those experiencing problems in the education system, or campaigning to solve them, of the root cause of these problems, and of the need to broaden out their campaigns. It is still true that some people are not fully aware of all of the structural changes made to the school system since the 1988 Education Act. We need to demonstrate why it is essential that we change the structure of our education system, and provide a vision of how we could achieve this change.

People have been led to believe that problems within the school system could be solved by better funding and a good individual headteacher. They are not really aware of how far the structural changes, such as academisation, have taken us, and what needs to be done.

We need to bring together those who are fighting for educational reform: those fighting for the correct SEND provision for their child, or against the closure of their local school and its absorption into a MAT; those who oppose SATs and high stakes testing and the heavy hand of Ofsted; those who want curriculum reform, or an end to grammar schools, or the establishment of properly designed and higher education-led teacher education. All these issues and struggles are very important. But we have to be clear that few, if any, of these aims are achievable within the current structures.

We need to have a strategy instead of just responding to each individual problem. We need to show how regressive educational practices stem from the way education is structured, and to demonstrate how, under a reformed system, they could be solved.

Some branches of the NEU (such as Greenwich, Liverpool, Norfolk and York) have already committed to our campaign and affiliated. All of us who are involved in trade unions with an interest in education could take this motion to our union branch and press our union to prioritise the GUBOS campaign:

‘This branch of the (NEU/NASUWT/UNITE...) agrees to affiliate to the Give Us Back Our Schools (GUBOS) campaign.

It both notes and believes that deregulation, outsourcing and the academisation programme has fundamentally damaged the pay and conditions of education workers and educational experience of children.

It asks the (NEU/NASUWT/UNITE...) to prioritise the aim of bringing all publicly funded educational services back into a coordinated fully funded system with proper democratic oversight as this is the key to all progressive education reform.

While the system is so fragmented we cannot ensure pupil-centred curricula and assessment, all pupils are taught by a suitably qualified and fairly paid teacher, the needs of SEND pupils are met or guarantee that every child has a place at good local school. It is essential we bring schools and education services back into a transparent system of local democratic accountability that promotes school collaboration, and the involvement of students, parents and communities.

The branch, therefore, calls on the NEU/NASUWT/UNITE's... NEC to work with GUBOS to undertake a publicity campaign to educate the wider public on the need to reverse deregulation in education in a similar way to those organisations that have publicised NHS privatisation, and to produce literature explaining the issues including:

- the history of educational change since the 1988 Education Act;
- promote and campaign for a transparent, coordinated locally accountable education system;
- the strategy for change.



Finally, this branch requests that the NEC supports GUBOS and all other campaigns against academisation and the effects of deregulation on both our members and pupils, and in the long term develops an industrial strategy to aim to reverse deregulation enabling a return to national pay and conditions for education workers.

There is already strong anti-academy sentiment within schools and the communities they serve. Many school union groups have undertaken industrial action to prevent academisation, which is to be applauded. Some have been successful; others have not. Every academisation must be resisted, but in addition this energy should now be harnessed into a national campaign to bring schools and central services back in house.

The drive toward full academisation is nothing new. All the latest White Paper does is try to reanimate the corpse of an already failing policy. It is an attempt to pull together a fragmented and disorganised education system which is itself the product of the Tories' own legislation spanning years and originating in the 1988 Education Reform Act.

## **The SEA response to the white paper**

The Thatcherite Education Act promoted a vision of autonomous schools with powerful heads in line with the English public-school tradition. This was never the way forward. Indeed, the child Q debacle and the Holland Park bullying scandal are examples of what happens when too much unaccountable power is in the hands of one person.<sup>5</sup> Schools working together under the aegis of a democratic authority can deliver a high-quality education experience for their learners and cater for their individual needs and ambitions. This is not revolutionary. It exists in high-performing jurisdictions in Canada and Finland, for example. It even exists to some extent in the UK in Wales and Scotland. Local education authorities should be reinvented to include local councillors, parents, staff and stakeholders.

Bringing all publicly funded educational services back into a coordinated system with proper democratic oversight is the key to almost all other education reforms. The proposals to totally outsource the school system must be resisted. The people cannot control what they don't own. Give us back our schools!

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2022. Ian co-edited *Reimagining Education: curriculum and assessment*, Manifesto (2021) with Louise Regan.

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## Notes

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4. The authors are grateful here to points made in John Bolt's unpublished 'Briefing from SEA to Labour Peers on Schools' White Paper'.
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