

# Britain: government to expand privately-run state schools

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According to an article that appeared last month in the *Guardian* newspaper, the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair withheld an officially commissioned study that raised criticisms of privately-run academy schools. It did so in order to press ahead with plans to increase the number of such schools to 200 by the year 2010.

Since they were first introduced in 2000, the publicly-funded but privately-run schools have been a central plank of the Blair government's drive to privatise huge sections of the state education system.

Currently, 17 academies are operating, and a further 40 projects are underway. Run by private sponsors outside of local authority control, the schools are targeted at "areas of disadvantage." Sponsors are invited to invest up to £2 million in an academy, whilst the running costs of each facility are paid directly to the school from central government funds, enabling the school to be run independently from the local authority.

Each academy specializes in a subject that reflects the interests of its sponsors, which are usually business- or faith-based. They are not required to teach the National Curriculum, but only to provide a "broad and balanced curriculum with a particular focus."

Last year, it was found that the Bexley Business Academy had allocated one day a week completely to business studies, whilst at the two academies run by the Christian fundamentalist Peter Vardy Foundation, creationism is taught as a valid scientific theory. Blair personally opened one of the Vardy Foundation schools in March 2004, praising its prospectus as "one of the best examples of modern social justice that I can think of."

The sponsors are able to determine staff pay, conditions, and the education curriculum at each academy, and need have no prior experience running

schools.

The *Guardian* claims that the study by consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) was given to ministers in November 2003, eight months before the government announced its expansion programme. The study included the warning: "There are significant concerns in the research literature about the extent to which quasi-markets can contribute to the development of a two-tier system which results in an increase in stratification of students by social class."

The report also refuted government claims that academies would lead to innovations in teaching and learning, saying that any improvements were modest. Furthermore, it noted that staff in academy-style schools spent more time on non-teaching jobs, such as marketing and profiling the school, than their counterparts in state schools.

Despite these criticisms, a government devised "Five Year Strategy" for education proposed that academies be introduced "in areas of low educational standards and disadvantage where there are insufficient good school places—either replacing existing schools where other measures haven't helped them improve, or creating wholly new schools."

The academy initiative will do nothing to resolve the problems faced by such schools, as it does not address the social deprivation that is at the root of the problems many of them face. The project has met with opposition from teachers and parents.

A major concern of schools in regions targeted for new academies is that their newer buildings and better resources could draw pupils away from local authority-run faculties, possibly causing the closure of some schools.

There have also been objections over how the new schools will be governed. Currently, state schools are

governed by elected parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, local councilors, and people living in the area. In contrast, the governors of academy schools are to be appointed by their sponsors, with a minimum requirement of one elected parent governor, one Local Authority governor, and one member of the teaching staff.

Because the academy schools are classed as independent, they are not bound by national agreements on teachers' pay and conditions. Teaching unions report that some of their members in the academies are forced to work longer hours.

Similarly, unlike staff in state schools, those employed in the new institutions are not required to register with the General Teaching Council (GTC), leading to complaints that teachers disciplined by the GTC could avoid further regulation by taking up positions in academy schools.

At the end of 2004, a government-backed initiative to turn Northcliffe school in Conisborough, South Yorkshire into another Vardy academy was repulsed by teachers, governors and parents after they waged a public campaign to oppose the measure. Organisers of the campaign said they believed that the Vardy Foundation had been promised the Conisborough School as part of a backroom deal with the government and local politicians.

Research carried out by the *Guardian* on the proposed sites for some of the latest academy schools showed that in Sheffield, two secondary schools sited in an area with one of the highest levels of child poverty in Britain are being vied for by the Christian United Learning Trust, which was developed specifically to run academy schools in England.

The government hit back by claiming that the academies were subject to "a lot of myth-making." Schools Minister David Milliband claimed, "The role of the sponsors has been completely misrepresented. Their sponsorship is purely philanthropic. They contribute to the capital cost of the academy and that is important. But more important is the successful experience they bring from outside."

In reality, there is growing evidence of an intermeshing between corporate interests and the government's agenda for schools and education. The *Times Educational Supplement* discovered in August last year that the government's leading adviser on

academies is employed by a firm that has been working with three of the new schools.

Sir Bruce Liddington, who was appointed by the Department of Education in 2000 to give professional advice on the development of academy projects, is a freelance associate for Veredus Executive Resourcing. Veredus had been selected to find senior staff, including head teachers, for three London academy schools. Veredus, a part of the Capita group, is responsible for recruiting senior managers to posts across the public and private sectors.



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