

Britain: Education Bill to extend privatisation of state schools

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Prime Minister Tony Blair used the occasion of a visit to the City of London Academy at the start of its new school year to reaffirm his commitment to establish 200 academy schools across England by some time around 2010.

Blair expounded on his vision of a totally privatized secondary education system, which will be advanced in plans to be outlined in next month's government White Paper on education.

Stating that both the education system and the National Health Service are "going through the most systematic process of reform since the war," Blair added, "In each case, the reform programme is roughly halfway through."

Comparing the academy schools, of which there are presently only 27, to state schools, Blair said, "What really makes academies different is their ethos, their sense of purpose, the strength of their leaders, teachers and support staff, the motivation of their parents and pupils."

Schools that have been reopened as academies are testing grounds for the new-style school system that Blair envisages. Schools are to be totally self-financed and governed independently of national control, accountable only to their "shareholders."

The academy schools that have either been set up or proposed are all in areas of high social disadvantage. Up to now they have replaced state schools deemed to have failed to meet academic standards. These schools tend to be the most expensive to run.

Sponsors are invited to contribute up to £2 million to the capital costs for building new schools or remodeling existing ones. The government provides \$25-30 million pounds. However, it was revealed by the *Times Education Supplement* that if a sponsor is prepared to take on more than three schools, the

sponsor will gain control at the discount rate of £1.5 million.

Running costs are paid directly to the school by the government, which means the academy can be independent of the local authority. The academies can be flexible on what they are allowed to teach and they can also set their own pay and conditions.

Almost all of the companies involved with academies have been set up specifically to run them. These companies can get round the usual difficulties faced by schools in socially deprived areas by expelling problem students instead of working with them. Kings Academy in Middlesbrough, which the government holds up as a success story, expelled 10 times the national average of students last year—many of them with special educational needs.

In the last few months, a number of articles and research reports have been published which contradict the government's claim that the closed schools were failing. They also make clear that the academies are not the educational success that Blair would like the public to believe. Former head teachers at some of the closed schools have spoken out and produced papers to show how their schools were set up and primed for takeover.

Willesden High School in London, which is now Brent Academy, is typical of the kind of school being targeted. It was the only local authority-run school in an area where all the others were grant maintained. The latter were state schools that opted out of local authority control and voted to obtain funding directly from the government. This made the school responsible for all of its assets, income and admissions. Most such schools have now opted for foundation status—the foundations being for the most part religious bodies that set admissions criteria.

Funds for Willesden High School were cut by the

local council in 1993 and between 1997 and 2003. As the only school with spare places, Willesden had a high socially disadvantaged intake, but it was still able to exceed targets set by outside agencies.

However, once the school was identified as a possible academy, the parents of children at the school, who were two-thirds Muslim, were given a straight choice of an academy or a Church of England takeover. Further details of this are evidenced in a document entitled “Willesden High School, the Last Decade: a Story of Success Against the Odds.”

Blair’s speech propagates the myth that academies are “a growing and increasingly successful movement in our secondary schools.” The accounting and consulting firm Price Waterhouse Cooper wrote an interim report before the programme was rolled out last year, stating grave reservations. The government has steamed ahead in order to pursue its privatization agenda, whereby eventually all schools will no longer be under the guidance of the Local Education Authorities (LEAs).

The White Paper, expected in the autumn, will ostensibly discuss how to improve the choice on offer to parents, by which is meant a higher degree of academic selection in school admission and an enlargement of private capital in the education sector. Academies will be expanded, as will places at the most popular schools. How this will be funded is yet to be explained, but the implications are clear in the funding provisions allowed to academies. It paves the way for extreme cost-cutting within schools, places the burden of funding onto parents, and makes education dependent on business sponsorship, rather than the state.

Another feature of the academies is that the majority are to be run by Christian organizations. The most notable are the Vardy Foundation, which teaches creationism as a valid theory and carries out “Bible checks,” and the United Learning Trust. The ULT was set up to operate the academies as a subsidiary of another charity, the United Church Schools Trust, which runs a number of private fee-paying schools. Its stated aim is to “offer students a high quality education based on Christian principles of service and tolerance.” ULT is already involved with six academies and a further four are in the pipeline. Its interests are clearly bound up as much with privatized education as with

proselytizing.

Since the Blair government came to power there has been a 30 percent rise in faith-based schools. There are currently around 7,000 in England—600 secondary and 6,400 primary schools. The vast majority (6,995) are Christian, with 36 Jewish, 5 Muslim and 2 Sikh schools.



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