

Britain to continue privately run school academies

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As the new academic year approaches, the Brown Labour government plans to push ahead with its flagship privately run school academies.

This is despite opposition to academies from parents, teachers and education specialists, as well as the underwhelming academic record of many of these corporate-backed schools.

According to the government, there are currently 133 academies open in 64 Local Authorities. Up to 80 more are scheduled to open in September 2009 and up to another 100 in 2010. The government has recently announced it is committed to establishing at least 400 academies in total.

What are academies?

In 2000, the Labour government under Tony Blair announced the academy school programme. This was to enable companies, charities and religious organisations to take over and run certain schools. No prior educational experience or commitment was necessary, just the payment of around £2 million towards capital costs. The state was to provide the rest, sometimes in excess of £30 million.

Academy schools would be outside of the control of Local Education Authorities. They could pay only the most tenuous lip-service to the national curriculum—which has enabled some to introduce the teaching of religiously based theories such as Creationism—and could set their own conditions and pay for staff employed.

In his book, *The Great City Academy Fraud*, journalist and education writer Francis Beckett traces the New Labour initiative back to the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), launched in 1986 by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. The CTCs also appealed for corporate sponsors to take over and run formerly state schools.

Initially, Labour targeted schools deemed to be “failing”—i.e., those where less than 30 percent of pupils

achieved five A to C grade GCSEs, including English and math. Over time, the academies programme has also encompassed some “successful” schools, where parents were told their children deserved better resources, which the new privately run schools promised to provide.

The end result has been the handing over to private companies of huge state resources and control over a significant portion of England’s schools system.

The impact

The establishment of an academy school invariably has an immediate and divisive affect in the local community.

Poorly resourced and often struggling with an accumulation of educational attainment issues to begin with, the problems of the neighbouring schools are compounded by the distorting affect of the nearby academy. Especially as parents, influenced by well-financed corporate spin, attempt to get their children into the better resourced “new thing in town.”

The corporate ethos of the academies puts an onus on strict discipline. Consequently, academies currently exclude at least twice as many pupils as state schools. In a gradual weeding-out process, these pupils are then passed over to neighbouring schools without any of the collaboration that usually exists in order to give such children a fresh start at another institution.

There are also reports that head teachers critical of the academies are pushed out of teaching, usually through early retirement.

Last month, the *Birmingham Post* reported that teachers and non-teaching staff with “strong ideological objections” to academies are being offered job-swap deals by Birmingham City Council. But as the newspaper conceded, “there is no guarantee, however, that teachers will automatically be able to transfer to other schools, since the

final decision will be in the hands of head teachers and governors.”

Five secondary schools in Birmingham are in line to become academies.

Because academies are not intended to address the perennial underfunding of education and social inequality, and because they are not led by education-based organisations and individuals, the cracks in official propaganda over their success soon appear.

In December of last year, a report by the education-based charity the Sutton Trust found that 13 of 29 academies reviewed by the government inspection body Ofsted were rated as “satisfactory,” a category now officially deemed as unacceptable.

Then, in January of this year, teachers in south London went on strike in protest over plans to create three private academies at their schools.

Five schools in Croydon were closed when around 130 members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) staged a one-day walkout. The union said teachers did not want to become the employees of private academies.

The January 27 strike coincided with the first day of Croydon council’s consultation over the proposals for secondary schools in the borough.

The secretary of the Croydon NUT branch, Dave Harvey, said, “The council has produced a review of secondary education provision which removes all of the secondary schools in the borough from council control. There would not be a single community school in Croydon, only faith schools, trust schools, academies and foundation schools. We describe this as an abdication of municipal responsibility.”

A planned strike against private academies by around 50 teachers at the Royal Docks School in Newham, east London, was suspended after the mayor came to an agreement with the NUT.

In July, it was announced that South Leeds High School, in West Yorkshire, is to be turned into an academy.

South Leeds High School was created only in 2004, after the closure of two other schools. According to the *Guardian*, it was placed in special measures by Ofsted in June 2008, not due to its academic record but “after financial deficits from the two previous schools hindered improvements.”

In neighbouring South Yorkshire, both of Sheffield’s academy schools have recently been rated poorly by inspectors. The *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) reported July 24 that Sheffield Park Academy is to be “failed” by Ofsted after a visit earlier in the month. It is the third academy to be put into “special measures.”

This follows a verdict last month on its sister school, Sheffield Springs Academy, which inspectors said provided

“inadequate standards” of teaching.

Both the Sheffield academies are run by the United Learning Trust (ULT), which operates 15 schools nationally. The Christian charity is typical of the large number of religious organisations involved in academy schools.

ULT was established to manage academies by the educational charity United Church Schools Trust, which was founded in 1883 to help establish schools based on “Christian principles.”

ULT has been criticised for its recent appointment of Fiona Oomen—a former manager of John Lewis department stores, who has no teaching experience—to a senior position in helping develop “academy leaders.”

David Lewis, principal of Sheffield Springs and executive director of Sheffield Park, has now left his job, the latest in a series of departures from the leadership team.

Heads at more than half of ULT’s academies have been replaced within two years of the schools opening. Sheffield Springs is currently looking for its third head in three years.

Another Sheffield school, Meadowhead, is planning to become a Trust school. This is another variant promoted by Labour as a means of targeting funds at certain schools, while incorporating businesses into education. Meadowhead’s partners are to include Gilders motor group and chartered accountancy firm Hart Shaw.

The onset of economic recession has exposed government claims that the private sector is better able to run major institutions and services efficiently and effectively. Tens of billions of pounds have been spent bailing out Britain’s failing banks at huge costs to the taxpayer. Still, the government continues to press ahead with the dismantling of public education.



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