

Britain: Businesses to control more state schools as government-backed academies fail

Harvey Thompson
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The start of the new school term has seen a welter of government activity in support of the expansion of its privately run academies programme, even as the educational value of these institutions is discredited.

On September 7, Labour's drive to privatise state education lost some of its cosmetic disguise when it announced it is to stop charging businesses, entrepreneurs and private charities a nominal £2 million sponsorship fee to run the academy schools.

New private sponsors will now simply be vetted by an accreditation system based on their "educational record"—a meaningless stipulation.

Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), noted for example, "The requirement of interested companies simply having to prove they have the 'necessary skills and leadership' to run an academy does not stand up to scrutiny. One of the latest academies to open is being sponsored by Aston Villa Football Club. I defy anyone to suggest that a football club can know more about the running of schools than a local education authority."

Sponsors will contribute nothing towards the start-up and running of future academies, the full cost of which will be borne by the state.

As soon as the government announced the academies programme in 2000, many corporate sponsors made it clear that they wanted control of state schools without paying anything in return. Ministers soon assured sponsors that they could provide the "up to £2 million" as "cash in kind" in the form of gifts of company products, or the services of former company executives to sit on school committees.

Few of the sponsors ever produced the full £2 million in any form, but the notional fee was used by the former Prime Minister Tony Blair to face down critics as proof of the benefits of turning to the private sector.

The government sought to bury the news of the removal of the £2 million fee in a flurry of media-friendly propaganda surrounding the opening of the latest batch of academies.

Cabinet and regional ministers, led by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, visited 28 new academies to pose with school children. Altogether 67 new secondary (11- to 16-year-olds) academy schools opened this term, including Nottingham Academy, the largest school in Europe, taking the total to 200.

Ed Balls, the schools secretary, told the press it was part of the biggest wave of new schools since the Victorian era, and reiterated that the government was on course to hit its target of 400 academies.

Earlier in the year, Michael Gove, Conservative spokesman for children, schools and families attacked the government for proceeding too cautiously with the academies programme. He reminded Labour that extending academy status to primary schools (5- to 11-year-olds) was a specific goal of Lord Adonis, the "father" of the academies programme, during his time as an education minister and as head of Blair's Number 10 policy unit.

"It is more important than ever as a result of the dire economic situation that we press ahead with education reform," Gove said. "We are carrying forward the Blair agenda in education to where he would have wanted to take it."

As Labour and the Tories wrestle for Blair's mantle, the educational development of hundreds of thousands of children is being sacrificed to corporate profit.

Many existing academies, based in predominantly socially deprived areas, are failing to provide the miracle cure for under-achievement promised by the original sponsors. The situation facing many academies, after attempting to mask years of social

neglect while funnelling vast amounts of state funds into corporate coffers, is now being made apparent.

The Sheffield Park Academy, run by the United Learning Trust in Sheffield, South Yorkshire at a cost of £30 million is now the third academy school to be placed in “special measures”—an official category designating academic failure—by the government’s inspection service, Ofsted.

The school replaced by the present academy was not recorded as failing by Ofsted when it closed. Waltheof School was found to be making “reasonable progress” in 2004, but it was closed in September 2006. The replacement academy moved into new buildings in April last year, despite the fact that Waltheof had been rebuilt in 1998 at a cost of £8 million.

The academy’s inspection report rates it “inadequate” in all categories and criticises its leadership and management.

The United Learning Trust (ULT) is an Anglican Church charity chaired by the former Conservative education minister, Dame Angela Rumbold. It includes the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey on its board. It is the largest academy sponsor, with 17 schools.

ULT is a subsidiary of the United Church Schools Trust, which also runs a string of fee-paying schools. It controls its schools rigidly from the centre, forbidding head-teachers to speak to the press without authorisation. It has been condemned for keeping staff on low pay.

Sheffield Park Academy’s sister school, Sheffield Springs, also run by the ULT, received a critical ruling from Ofsted in June, when its teaching was said to be inadequate.

A previous inspection report on Sheffield Park, from July 2008, commented on the difficulties it faced. Half its pupils were said to have learning difficulties. Their test results before joining the school were well below national averages and their reading ages were described as “exceptionally low.”

The uninterrupted expansion of the academies programme is causing growing alarm amongst those working in education.

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, commented, “The idea that a private provider will automatically solve deep-rooted generational problems in a school serving a poor area is

simply untrue. Sheffield Park just illustrates this.

“The case hasn’t been made for academies... We have a target which will mean one in 10 secondaries are academies and the jury is still out on whether academies work... It can be a dangerous experiment. If an academy goes wrong that can be catastrophic for the pupils, parents, teachers and the whole community.”

The most extensive evaluation of academies was published last year by the global accountancy firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers. Even with the inevitable corporate-bias, the rosier assessment the evaluation could offer was that, in some academies, educational results had improved. But so too had the intake of middle-class pupils. There was “considerable diversity” in improvements between schools, but it was not an “academy effect” that had driven up standards, the evaluation concluded, but rather “different reasons at different schools.”

The record of corporate-controlled former state schools—wasted state funds, dishonest social and educational claims, pedagogical incompetence and a failure to meet even the most modest standards in school governing—is being ignored by those in power both nationally and locally. Abbeydale Grange School, also in Sheffield, which was slated for closure by the city council before the summer recess, is now being looked at as a possible candidate for academy status. In light of the removal of the £2 million requirement, sponsors are being considered from companies such as the Co-operative Bank, the high-priced super-market giant Waitrose and building firm, Kier.



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