

Britain: Government's flagship academy schools failing

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The government's attempt to push ahead with its state-funded but privately run school academies programme continues despite growing evidence of their lack of educational value, and in the face of popular opposition.

On February 5, the *Kilburn Times* reported that school staff had voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action if a planned enforcement of nine teaching redundancies took place at the Crest Boys' Academy in Neasden, London, an effort by the school to plug a £1.2 million funding gap resulting from a drop in pupil numbers.

The Edutruster Academies Charitable Trust (EACT), which is in charge of Crest Boys' Academy, blamed the academy's predecessor, John Kelly Boys, for the financial crisis. But Brent Council insists that both Crest Boys and Girls Academies were launched without inheriting any debts.

It is thought that one of the reasons for the falling rolls at the Crest Academy is the recent opening of the rival Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) Academy in nearby Wembley. ARK was set up by multimillionaire Arpad Busson, who also runs the hedge fund group EIM. It was built following a five-year campaign against its construction by local teachers and members of the community in the Wembley Park Action Group, who occupied the site on several occasions, culminating last year in a 36-hour standoff with the council.

Industrial action was also threatened last month, over possible job cuts at the proposed Falmer Academy in Brighton. School support workers, including cleaners, caretakers, office workers and dinner ladies, are threatened with loss of employment to introduce a larger management team, whose combined annual salaries are approximated at £1 million.

The academy is to be run by a trust headed by multimillionaire businessman Rod Aldridge, the founding chairman of the technology company Capita. Capita was handed more than £1 billion of government contracts, including administering the Home Office Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and handling the coal miners' compensation claims, before Aldridge was forced to resign in 2006. This was after it was revealed that he was one of a list of millionaires who had made secret donations to the Labour Party of more than £1 million in response to an urgent plea for funding to help Tony Blair to win a third term in the 2005 general election.

It was also announced last month that another school run by the Aldridge Foundation, Darwen Aldridge Community Academy, has produced worse results for GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education—the standard school-leaving qualification) than the school it replaced.

Since the autumn term, when the government announced a significant expansion of its academies programme, a series of similar potentially damaging results and revelations has beset these privatised institutions.

In November, the government was forced to ban the largest sponsor of academies, the United Learning Trust (ULT), from taking on new schools until it could demonstrate an improvement in the ones it already controls. Even so, it allowed the ULT to go ahead with the proposed opening of two more academies this September term. The ULT is a religious charity run by the Anglican Church, chaired by the former Conservative education minister, Dame Angela Rumbold, and includes the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey on its board. In addition to the 17 academies that it controls, the ULT also runs a chain of 10 private schools.

In December, amid increasing alarm at the basic competency levels of many academies and dubious test results, the independent think tank Civitas called for a freeze of the academies programme while an independent evaluation was carried out. It said in a press release, "It is very likely that Academies will become subject to Freedom of Information in the near future. However, we cannot wait for this to happen: instead Civitas is calling on the DCSF [(government) Department for Children, Schools and Families] to publish a breakdown by subject and qualification of all Academies' GCSE and equivalent results by January 2010.

"Both government and the Tories are extolling Academies on the basis of 'GCSE' results which are improving at 'over twice the rate' of other state schools. But new evidence, in a report from the independent think-tank Civitas, *The Secrets of Academies' Success*, raises serious doubts over whether Academies are in reality all they have been cracked up to be."

Civitas pointed to the fact that when the government championed A*-C improvement at GCSE in academies, other than in the case of English and maths, it was never made clear which subjects academies were gaining their A*-Cs in. In

addition, it wasn't even transparent whether academies are gaining these A*-Cs in GCSEs at all—or in what is termed “equivalent vocational qualifications.”

Results submitted to Civitas illustrated how, through the sidelining of important academic subjects, the educational quality for children and young people in particularly deprived areas was being undermined. A Yorkshire and the Humber-based academy had no geography GCSE entries and only nine GCSE history entries in a cohort of around 150 students. An academy in the East Midlands had just 12 entries for history and geography respectively, out of a cohort of around 230 pupils. In a North East-based academy, there were only 15 entries for geography and history, respectively, compared to a cohort of more than 200.

Unlike all other state-funded schools, academies are exempt from the Freedom of Information Act, so that a breakdown of their results cannot be publicly obtained.

Out of those academies that agreed to participate in the Civitas research, only 43 percent were willing to disclose their latest GCSE and equivalent results by subject and qualification.

In January, the GCSE results of 74 academies were revealed. Of these, 32 percent saw their results fall.

Last year, the government lavished praise on Bristol Brunel Academy. Latest figures reveal that Bristol Brunel Academy's results have dropped by 10 percent. On the other hand, 34 community schools show either better or the same improvement as the two leading academies.

On January 31, the *Sunday Times* reported that two Academy head teachers were being paid £200,000 per year, and a further 11 were on £150,000 salaries. The paper pointed out that this meant that at least two academy heads had overtaken the salary of the headmaster of Eton College.

The average pay for a secondary school head teacher is £74,000, and considerably less than this for a primary school head. The elite of at least 11 academy principals earning £150,000 was an increase from 6 the previous year. A third of academies have yet to submit accounts.

These salary figures will inevitably understate the total packages received, as many academy heads receive generous bonuses and add-on payments for running spin-off businesses based on school premises, while some charge consultancy fees for “advising” other schools.

While the educational standards of the school academy model are being widely discredited, the programme has been successful in terms of its actual goal of handing over large parts of the education system to big business. But to focus solely on the academy programme seriously understates the extent to which private capital has taken hold of the entire formerly state-run education system.

The academies are the most visible extreme of a process that is affecting the whole state schooling system. Whether directly, in the form of academy, independent, co-operative, voluntary-assisted, faith or “special” schools, or within formal local

educational control, the market has come to predominate.

The socially polarising effect that the appearance of academy schools has had on already impoverished areas—by distorting local education budgets and excluding a high number of pupils—has exacerbated pressure on neighbouring schools, already struggling with staffing problems; increasing class sizes; the corporate land grab of school grounds; and the general decline in quality of education and resources.

The funds spent by the government on education over the past decade have largely gone to businesses, including huge fees for consultancy firms and lucrative contacts for construction companies to assemble often wasteful new-builds, and are administered by a swollen layer of “super-heads” and business managers.

Recent figures revealed that head teachers working for seven local authority-controlled schools were paid in excess of £150,000 in 2008, the latest year for which figures were available.

Sir Alan Davies, former head of Copland, a comprehensive in Brent, west London, is being investigated by Scotland Yard over a series of generous payments. In a single year, he was allegedly paid more than £400,000 after clinching a series of lucrative deals including a contract to work as “project manager” on a development at his own school. His extra payments are said to have totalled £600,000 over five years, in addition to his six-figure salary.

Greg Martin, head at Durand primary school in Stockwell, south London, more than doubled his £70,000 salary by charging fees for managing the school's health spa and other facilities.



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