British government introduces plans for market-driven school system

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The Conservative-Liberal government has begun fast tracking an Academies Bill through Parliament. Together with an Education and Children's Bill in the autumn, the new arrangements will lay the basis for a market-driven, competitive system of schools, free from Local Authority control and increasingly run by the private sector.

Such a system presages a severe deterioration in teachers' pay and conditions and the creation of profoundly unequal education for Britain's children.

The Academies Bill, which is set to become law this summer, will allow a planned 500 secondary and 1,700 primary schools to apply for academy status for September and leave Local Authority control. For the first time, primary schools will be able to apply to become academies.

The Academies Bill allows all schools judged "outstanding" by Ofsted, the government inspectorate, to apply directly to the Education Secretary for "academy status". They will be funded by central not local government on the basis of pupil numbers. While still described as "state" schools, they will function as privatised entities, free to set up partnerships with the private sector, and determine their own curriculum, pay rates and admissions policies, based on student "aptitudes". They will also be free from routine Ofsted inspections.

Operating as private concerns, academies are exempt from normal rules of public procurement whereby outsourcing contracts must be advertised and subject to competitive bidding. They are also exempt from freedom of information legislation.

The Labour government first introduced Academies in 2000, building on the previous Conservative government's City Technology Colleges—the first attempt to open up state schooling to the private sector. Under Labour, schools had to raise £2 million to become an academy and were able to go into partnership with private companies, religious institutions or "voluntary" groups to achieve this. But the requirement for private sector funding was soon dropped when corporations refused to provide any money. There are currently 203 academy schools nationally, out of 3,100 secondary schools.

Immediately after announcing the legislation, Education Secretary Michael Gove wrote to all 23,000 primary, secondary and special schools in the UK, inviting them to apply to become academies. On June 2, Gove announced to Parliament that 1,114 schools had applied. Of these, 273 were primary schools and 52 special schools. In addition, 626 of the secondary schools, rated as "outstanding", are to be fast-tracked for academy status by the autumn.

The Academies Bill will also allow schools to become "Free Schools" to be run by outside providers, along the lines of the growing private school network in Sweden. The proposed free schools will be called academies and will, like them, be funded by central government and be free from local government control.

The move to convert schools to academies and introduce Free Schools will lead to a network of elite institutions in which access to a good education will be based on selection, overwhelmingly using the criteria of social class and the ability to pay.

Many schools, designated as "failures", will close, and thousands of staff will be sacked. Prior to the general election, Gove pledged that around 75 schools already in "special measures" would be taken over and reopened as academies by September 2011.

Academies are to be specifically tailored to the requirements of business and their sponsors. For example, the East Manchester Academy, sponsored by

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building firms Bovis and Laing O'Rourke, one of seven new academies scheduled to open across the city, will be "linked to future growth sectors of the city's economy".

Gove stated in the *Financial Times* that he supported the principle of firms making a profit from schools. "If a group of parents or teachers want to work with a private sector organisation then that is a good thing", he said. The Conservatives had looked at education policies in several countries. "I'm as much a fan of Alberta [Canada] as I am of Obama, as I am of Sweden as I am of Singapore", said Gove.

Gove spoke approvingly of the Swedish Free Schools model, noting they were introduced in the mid 1990s after the Swedish banking collapse and "a period of austerity". More than 1,000 Free Schools now operate in Sweden, accounting for more than 40 percent of the 945 upper secondary schools. Of the 4,755 schools teaching a younger age group, 677 are Free Schools.

Education Minister Bertil Ostberg, one of the pioneers of the Free Schools system in Sweden, said recently, "The free schools are generally attended by children of better educated and wealthy families, making things even more difficult for children attending ordinary schools in poor areas". He added, "If you want independent schools, it's necessary that you have companies that can have profits".

According to the *Daily Mirror*, "Gove has been deep in talks with Kunskapsskolan, a company that runs schools for profit in Sweden and hopes to open up to 30 in the UK". It is the largest provider of private secondary education in Scandinavia, operating 32 schools with a turnover of $100 million. It recently took over its first UK academy in Richmond.

Dubai-based GEMS, which bills itself as the "largest global provider of private education in the world", currently runs 12 schools in the UK, including five in Manchester and one in London. The company plans to take over 200 schools. Anders Hultin, its chief executive in the UK and a co-founder of Kunskapsskolan, wrote in the *Spectator* magazine that the problems schools faced are "a simple matter of incentives. The solution to these problems is profit. Not a vast profit; some schools make no profit at all. But they behave like businesses, treating parents as customers—and this is what counts".

VT Education & Skills, a subsidiary of the British defence and services company, already co-sponsors four academies and provides services to 403 schools in Surrey and another 87 in northeast London, and plans to run up to 1,000. Other global firms expecting to bid to take over schools are Serco, already involved in hundreds of UK "school partnerships", and the US-owned company EdisonLearning, which works in partnership with 100 UK schools.

The New Schools Network has promoted the policy in Britain. Falsely described by the *Guardian* as "an advisory service for groups that want to set up their own schools", it was founded by Rachel Wolf, the daughter of Martin Wolf, the chief economics commentator at the *Financial Times*. Rachel Wolf was a former advisor to Gove, and played a major role in writing the Conservatives' education policies for the general election.

Wolf is an ardent supporter of charter schools, the publicly funded but privately run schools that the Obama administration has championed in the US as it presses for the closure of public schools and sacking of thousands of teachers in working class communities.

Another prominent academy supporter is Stephen Pollard, once a leading figure of the Labour Party-supporting Fabian Society. In a *Daily Telegraph* article headlined, "Michael Gove's first fight is against the enemy within", Pollard wrote that the "free schools policy was the most persuasive reason for voting Conservative in the recent election". He called on the government to face down all opposition to its Free Schools from teachers, saying, "Now he [Gove] has to stand strong and defeat the educational establishment".

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