

London primary school mounts legal challenge over academy status

Harvey Thompson
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Downhills Primary School in Haringey, north London, has launched a legal challenge to Education Secretary Michael Gove's attempt to force it to become a privately run academy. The school has accused Gove of illegally trying to force the school to be taken out of its local authority remit and be taken over by a private sponsor.

Gove wants to force Downhills, which inspectors last year put under notice to improve its performance, to accept that it will become an academy by the end of this month or face the dissolution of its governing body.

Academies are state funded but privately controlled schools. They are free from any Local Authority control, including pay and conditions, and are given extra cash for services that councils would have provided. Some of this extra expenditure is channelled through to existing academy chains ready to provide these services.

The move by Gove is part of a government drive to turn 200 "underperforming" primary schools into academies. This builds on the legacy of the previous Labour government, which targeted mainly secondary schools.

The case of Downhills has attracted much attention from parents and teachers at other schools seeking to fight off academy status being imposed on them.

Downhills head teacher, Leslie Church, told the *Observer* that as the school was due for an Ofsted (England's schools inspectorate) inspection within the next four months, it was premature of the education

secretary to force it to act now.

On January 9, around 600 parents, teachers, governors and supporters attended a protest meeting organised by the Save Downhills campaign group in the school hall.

The previous week, Gove had used a speech at Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College, an academy in south-east London, to attack opponents of academies as "ideologues happy with failure."

"It's the bigoted backward bankrupt ideology of a left-wing establishment that perpetuates division and denies opportunity," Gove said. Talk of a "left-wing establishment" in Britain is, of course, ludicrous. Gove employs it as a bogeyman to rally right-wing support in the wealthier layers of the middle class.

Downhills school is one of many that are compelled to operate with limited resources in the face of massive social problems, and which are then traduced as "underperforming." The school is located in the deprived inner city area of Tottenham just a few hundred yards from where last August's riots began.

Over 40 languages are spoken at the school, with significant numbers of pupils and their families originating from the Caribbean, Bangladesh, Africa, as well as those with Gypsy Roma and eastern European backgrounds. A large majority of pupils speak English as an additional language and a significant proportion are at the early stages of learning English.

The number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well above average. Some middle-class families are attracted to the school due to what they feel is its inclusive, creative ethos.

The *Education Guardian* quoted Elsa Dechaux, a research scientist whose son Oscar, four, is in reception at the school, explaining, "I visited all the schools around here, and this is the one I chose, because of the

teachers' enthusiasm. I want my children to be happy to learn. I don't want them to be little robots, doing only English and maths."

James Redwood, whose four-year-old son, Arthur, is in reception, said, "I'm a composer, and I visit a lot of schools. This is a fantastic, happy place. It is the end of state education if they can do what they are doing to a place like this."

The last Ofsted inspection noted 92 percent of parents returning questionnaires agreed with the statement, "I am happy with my child's experience at this school."

Schools in England and Wales are expected to ensure at least 60 percent of 11-year-olds reach the governmentally-determined level expected for their age in English and maths. A school is judged to be below the "floor standard" if it is below average for the progress pupils make between the ages of five and 11.

Downhills rose just above the "floor standard" this year, with 61 percent of eligible pupils achieving the expected level in both English and maths. But the school was given a "notice to improve" by Ofsted in January.

Official league tables published this month for primary schools revealed that around 1,300 schools out of 16,000 in England do not achieve government targets in English and maths.

The pressure is being massively increased on schools that have suffered years of neglect and underfunding. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government is using Ofsted to pressure schools into either taking on academy status or face closure. Schools given a "notice to improve" are to be inspected just three months after and will be re-inspected within a further six months instead of the previous 12 to 18 months window to improve results.

A new inspection framework being introduced will reduce from 27 to just four the headings against which a school is judged. Mirroring similar school "reform" programs in the United States and elsewhere, the new framework uses raw test results, devoid of any social context, to target schools in poorer areas for cuts.

Officials from Gove's department and Haringey, the local authority, have been in discussions since July. Published correspondence in *Education Guardian* shows the Department for Education (DfE)

pushing for 19 of the borough's primary schools to convert to academies.

Haringey, where at least three other schools have been given an ultimatum to agree to academy status, is one of nine local authorities where government officials are pushing hardest for more sponsored primary academies: Kent, Birmingham, Essex, Lancashire, Leeds, Durham Northamptonshire, and Bristol.

On January 17, Gove announced he had instructed Ofsted to carry out an expedited inspection of Downhills.

Downhills governors stated that they were "pleased to note that the secretary of state has agreed to wait until the school has an inspection by Ofsted before taking any further action," with school governor, Roger Sahota, calling this a "victory" for the school.

It is nothing of the sort. The government is engaged in the most severe assault on the social conditions of the working class and has no intention of backing down. The attempt to privatise and dismantle state education is part of this assault.

No confidence can be placed in the structures and the personnel charged with implementing this unprecedented assault on state education, or in the official channels for expressing opposition. Everything depends on the mobilisation of the broadest layers of workers and young people in a political struggle against the government and its local representatives.



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