

London march against Academy status for schools

Jo March
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A demonstration Saturday of over 1,000 parents, children, teachers, assistants and residents in Harringey, London protested government plans to force three local primaries to become academies.

The march began at Downhills primary school and walked through the busy high street to Harringey Town Hall where a rally was held. Marchers chanted, “No to academies, Save our schools” and “[Education Secretary] Michael Gove, we won’t be beaten, Leave our school and close down Eton.”

Downhills in Tottenham, North London, an area of social deprivation that was the starting point of last summer’s riots, was given 12 months to improve its performance last year. It faces being made an academy by 2013.

Each school received a letter from the Department for Education in the last week of term informing them that they had until mid-January 2012 to decide to become an academy. If they do not agree, the threat is that the DfE will disband the governing bodies and replace them with Interim Executive Boards to facilitate the process of forcing acceptance of academy status.

The academy programme, begun by the Labour government under Tony Blair, has been bulldozed forward by Education Secretary Michael Gove. It takes schools out of local authority control and hands them over to businesses and voluntary organisations to run. Gove announced earlier this month that he intends to force 200 of England’s “worst performing schools” to become sponsored academies next year.

A new inspection framework focuses on raw test

results, removed from any social context, so that deprived schools will be expected to achieve the same results as children from better-off areas. The schools inspections agency Ofsted has announced that the one in three schools currently rated satisfactory will in future be termed “requires improvement” and join the list of failed schools if they do not improve within three years.

At the rally, Downhills parent Karen Jacobs spoke passionately against the plan: “Our school, along with others, is being bullied. Instead of being supported to improve it is being given to businesses to make money. There has been no consultation.”

“Gove talks about giving parents choice, but it seems that is only for parents who agree with him,” she said. “He has accused us of being ‘happy with failure’, but we have ambition for our children. We are stakeholders in our children’s future.”

The schools in Harringey are being compared with schools in a borough where each child receives £1,500 more in funding per year, which in Downhill would amount to an extra half a million pounds. This would make a huge difference.

Jacobs concluded by thanking the hardworking teachers and support staff in the borough.

A teacher from Noel Park, one of the other primaries threatened, said that the pupils on the march were an inspiration, commenting, “Coming on the march is a great lesson for them on how to stand up for themselves.”

Kevin Courtney, the National Union of Teachers’ (NUT) executive member for inner London, gave a

short, demagogic speech congratulating the marchers for “doing the right thing” and saying the government should be “listening to parents”. He offered no prospect of any industrial action. The teaching unions have put up no resistance to the academy programme since it was rolled out by the Labour government, despite the fact that academies and free schools are not bound by the current pay system for teachers.

Reba, whose daughter was at the school 20 years ago, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Downhills has always been a good community school and should stay that way. Private companies should not be allowed into education.”

Thelma, whose children are at Belmont school, said that the school was not yet on the academy programme but that the government was “trying to force the school to go from two to three form entry.”

“We are all supporting each other,” she said. “This is a fantastic community and to force schools into private hands is disgusting. It is all to do with money and it is not just Harringey. We need to join with schools around the country.

“Ever since the banks sent us into recession, they have been saved. The RBS [Royal Bank of Scotland] boss gets a huge bonus, but we get public service cuts.”

A teaching assistant from West Green Primary School said, “I live in the local area and work in a primary school and I think they shouldn’t privatise our schools. Today is brilliant. There has been a great turnout. It really shows that people care about their schools. The government just wants to cut back on everything to make money.

“It’s the same with our pensions. We will have to pay more and get less at the end. I will have to pay about £40 more a month.”

A teacher from the same school added, “I think today has been a fantastic demonstration of the creative energy that we see in our schools every day. Our school is on the long list so we are here out of solidarity, but also if we can stop Downhills becoming an academy

they won’t come for us.”



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