

UK prime minister boasts of “busting open” state education

Julie Hyland
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UK prime minister David Cameron used his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos last week to showcase the “achievements” of his government.

Naturally, Cameron did not mention the perilous state of the British economy, poised on the verge of a “triple-dip” recession. Instead, he boasted that the UK’s “corporation tax rate is the lowest in the G7”, before highlighting more of his government’s “successes”: “In welfare reform we’ve been radical”, he said. “In education—revolutionary, busting open the state monopoly and allowing new schools to start up.”

Cameron’s statement makes explicit the purpose of the measures now being introduced thick and fast in welfare and social provision. They are aimed at dismantling in its entirety all that is left of universal, state-run provision established at the end of the Second World War.

Welfare, health and education are being deliberately run down in order to justify their being turned over to private operators for profit. As the prime minister made clear, education provision is at the centre of this offensive.

Only in November, Education Secretary Michael Gove demanded head teachers take “robust” measures against staff involved in industrial action in opposition to the attack by central government on their pay and conditions, by docking wages. This was followed by Gove’s announcement in January that the right of teachers to automatically progress up the pay scale based on length of service will end in September. It is to be replaced by “performance-related” pay determined by appraisals and head teachers.

Gove’s pronouncements are aimed at intimidating and demoralising teaching staff in order to help clear the path for the transfer of all state-run schools to privately run charities or business. The preferred models for these are Academies. First introduced by the Labour government of Tony Blair in 2000, academy schools are free from control of Local Education Authorities, funded directly by

central government and not bound by national teaching pay and work agreements.

These have grown exponentially in the two years since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government came to office, and the intent is to convert 600 more schools into academies by the end of the year—making nearly 3,000 in total. Of the 2,309 academies now open, almost 2,000 “voluntarily” converted. In addition to these schools controlling their own budgets, the unstated message has been that those converting could avoid the cuts being implemented in the state sector.

But research by the *Financial Times* into 2,000 academies and 150 local authorities found that academy schools have also been given more funding by central government, despite stipulation that they should be set on equal pegging with state-run schools. According to the *Financial Times* (*FT*), the average secondary academy school received £90,000 more than a local authority-run school this year alone.

The overpayment has been presented as a “blunder” in the system of grants available under the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant (Lacseg), but there is no doubt the extra funds have been used in order to help the government’s case that academies “perform” better.

The Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, London, was cited as a flagship for the privatisation programme by the Labour government. It is to receive £738 per pupil, compared to £517 spent on state-run schools. Nottingham-based Ashfield Academy was overpaid £943,000, according to the *FT*, “a 10 percent increase in its budget.”

The government has said it will not try to claim back the overspend. Instead, the £174 million “mistake” is to be recouped by laying off 1,000 employees—one quarter of all staff—in the Department of Education over the next two years as part of a 50 percent cut in its budget.

The Lacseg is to be abolished next year, which the *FT* anticipates will lead to cuts of 1.2 percent in academy

budgets—approximately £100 million.

In the meantime, the government is stepping up its efforts to force schools into accepting academy status. The prime mechanism for this is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ostensibly a system of inspection to assure standards, it functions as a political means through which successive governments have deemed schools to be "failing" as a means of pushing them into "special measures"—the precursor to their takeover by academy chains.

Ofsted have now launched a league table ranking local authorities according to school inspection ratings. In January, it was announced that teams of inspectors had begun unannounced "swoops" in six regions in England. It was claimed that the Ofsted visits were necessary to sort out "failing" schools and rectify "stark inequalities" between regions.

The swoop began in Derby, which has seen several strikes by teachers and educational staff. For the first time, the BBC reported, should Ofsted be dissatisfied with a school's progress, it "plans to go into town halls to inspect school improvement services."

Speaking at an education conference, Ofsted chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw said that "if councils seemed unable to drive improvements...Ofsted would report them to the Education Secretary, Michael Gove," the BBC reported, adding, "This could lead to some councils being stripped of some of their responsibilities."

"The secretary of state has to look at a range of alternatives," the BBC quoted Wilshaw, adding, "He may want to use an academy chain or a private provider."

The same month, damning Ofsted reports on three schools in Croydon, London, cleared the way for them becoming academies. Westwood College for Girls and Winterbourne Junior Boys were placed in special measures, while Benson Primary and Nursery was judged to have "serious weaknesses".

Tim Pollard, Conservative councillor and cabinet member for children, families and learners, said government policy was for schools failing Ofsted inspections to become academies.

Another mechanism for forcing schools into academy status is the use of GCSE (age 16) examinations. The government recently raised the minimum pass rate on GCSEs leading to the number of secondary schools failing to meet the target almost doubling in one year. This was despite the fact that overall results had improved.

According to the *Guardian*, "The increase in failing

schools is likely to accelerate the already rapid transformation of schools into academies," with the 195 schools "seen as failing...targeted for takeover by academy chains."

Parallel to this, the government has announced it is relaxing planning rules to enable Free Schools to be set up without planning permission. Free schools are the Conservatives' addition to the Labour-inspired private academies. They currently account for less than 4 percent of schools. In a bid to increase this percentage, the government has made clear its indifference to the health and safety of pupils and staff.

Under the plans outlined by Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, from June Free Schools will be allowed to set up in premises—warehouses, shops, etc.—for 12 months before having to apply for planning permission for a change of purpose. Local Authorities will only have to check for traffic and noise issues before this time.

The government has also announced that regulations governing the ratio of nursery staff to children are to be revised. This "childcare revolution" will mean that the number of two-year-olds looked after by a single nursery worker will be increased from four to six, while the ratio for babies will increase from three to four.

Education Minister Liz Truss claimed that overturning "onerous requirements on numbers" would make childcare more affordable.

In the face of this onslaught, the national executive of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) voted against holding a one-day strike against government measures. The pseudo-left groups have constantly sought to bolster the credentials of the NUT as a "fighting" union. Many of their members are in the union leadership. But the executive committee made clear its stance, voting against a national strike on March 13.



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