

UK schools privatisation programme continues despite failures

Tom Pearce
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As the Academy programme—the flagship education policy of the previous Labour government—enters its 14th year, all Westminster parties have embraced it.

Under the Conservative government, there has been an exponential increase in academies, allowing all schools to convert or to be forcibly converted by the Department of Education.

There were 4,676 Academies created in June 2015 and hundreds more are planned. The Academy programme has created a fragmented system of education and has forced through the privatisation of state education behind a smokescreen of a professed aim “to improve pupil performance and break the cycle of low expectations.” In August 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that he wanted to make all schools academies. “I want the power to be in the hands of the head teacher and teachers rather than the bureaucrats”, he asserted.

In reality, as 2016 begins, the biggest academy chain in England, the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), has been accused by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) of “failing too many pupils”. Inspectors say that 40 percent of pupils in primary schools run by the AET are in “academies that do not provide a good standard of education”. “It is even worse in secondary, where 47 percent of pupils attend academies that are less than good”, says Ofsted.

Across the AET’s 67 academies, there is a particular weakness in the progress of disadvantaged pupils, with poorer pupils performing “particularly badly”. Inspectors also warned about “unacceptably low” attendance levels. There was also criticism of “insufficient detail” about how the trust is governed.

Ofsted cannot give a judgement on an academy chain. They can only carry out multiple inspections of individual schools under its control. The Academy

programme has left parents with an unregulated education system that is going unchecked.

Similar problems have been found at other large academy chains. E-Act—which in the past had been heavily criticised by inspectors, leading to it losing control of 10 schools two years ago—has been judged by Ofsted as having low standards. Attempts to improve “have not had enough impact”, Ofsted said.

There is no substantial evidence that the Academy programme has improved education. In fact, the privatisation of schools has led to a substandard level of education for swathes of children and large academy chains controlling schools across wide geographical areas. The AET has education establishments in the Isle of Wight, Hull, Birmingham, Essex, Leicestershire and Gloucestershire. E-Act’s 23 schools are spread across England, with a number in places including the West Midlands, Buckinghamshire, Bristol, Yorkshire and the North West.

The aggressive privatisation agenda is continuing. The Conservatives intend to completely break the link between local authorities and schools by forcing every school into becoming an academy. The conversion from local authority-controlled to academy status is also being offered to further education centres like sixth-form colleges, with the option to convert as in the primary and secondary sectors.

The financial gain promised to state-run schools (controlled by the local authorities) when converting to academies is instead leaving head teachers in a desperate funding situation. Some schools need to find savings as budgets are squeezed to pay for further academy conversions. This has led to staffing cuts and the setting of unrealistic targets for performance pay. The Newark Academy moved to new £20 million buildings in January, and it has made staffing cuts,

which the trust said was due to reduced income and a short-term staff surplus.

It has also led to schools and academy trusts scrambling to raise funding from elsewhere. The Inspiration Trust headed by Jesuit Rachel de Souza, which runs 14 schools in the East of England, took over the Hewett School in Norwich.

School land is to be sold off to the private sector to generate funds. It is owned by the Central Norwich Trust, which in itself has a variety of members including the business Aviva.

The selling off of land by an academy (and its sponsor) can be forced through by the government's education secretary if no deal can be brokered satisfactorily. This demonstrates the dictatorial state of play where the government can ignore democratic process and enforce its rule across the country.

There has been widespread opposition to conversion of schools into academies over the last decade from communities across the UK, with protests including people chaining themselves to railings to protest forced conversions. But this opposition has been isolated and localised by the teaching unions.

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) led strike action in response to academy conversion and redundancies in Newark, but is now in further talks with the trust.

The leader of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), Christine Blower, has recently spoken about the academy chain AEG. She said the chain had been allowed to expand too quickly, and "this speaks to a wider problem with the chaotic system of academies and academy chains. The government continues to promote the expansion of academies and the growth of chains against all the evidence."

The same arguments are repeated again and again by the unions, but there has been no mobilisation of their membership nationally to challenge the government. Instead, the strategy of the NUT and NASUWT is to carry out local and regional token strikes—the most recent being a nine-day strike at Small Heath School in Birmingham, where the NUT rep has been suspended.

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) declared, "There is overwhelming support. ... Workers can win—but the national union needs to ramp up the pressure on school bosses."

There is no chance of this happening, as has been

proved again and again.

The SWP plays a central role in insisting that the trade unions and Labour Party can be pushed to fight in the interests of teachers and in opposition to the destruction of state education by the Tories. Alasdair Smith, a member of the SWP and a leading figure in the NUT in London, is the national secretary of the Anti-Academies Alliance (AAA). In December, Smith stated, "Lucy Powell and the Labour Party need to clearly state that they will reverse this harmful academies programme."

He chooses to forget that the Labour Party began the academies programme and has no intention of reversing this policy as it serves the interests of big business. The AAA is affiliated by the Trades Union Congress and a majority of teachers' unions.



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