

School: BBC documentary reveals impact of education cuts

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The BBC documentary series “School” highlights the wretched cost to pupils, parents and teachers of education cuts, the conversion of schools into academies and the results-driven inspection system.

The six-part series lives up to its ambitious tagline: “One education trust, three secondary schools and 5,000 students. A Documentary series examining the British education system—from bike shed to board room.” It investigates three secondary schools belonging to the Castle School Educational Trust (CSET)—Castle, Marlwood and Mangotsfield—located in South Gloucestershire through the 2017-18 school year.

We witness the distress resulting from teacher shortages, large class room sizes, dilapidated buildings and insufficient support for children with special needs, in pursuit of “balancing the budget.”

CSET is a product of the school academy programme launched in the early 2000s under former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair. Labour promoted the myth that bringing in private sponsors in inner city areas would tackle deprivation and increase social mobility.

Academisation has grown dramatically under the current Conservative government, which claims it gives schools more “freedom” from Local Authority control.

Nothing could be further from the truth. According to a recent report the academisation process has “in fact resulted in over 70 percent of those schools having less freedom than they had before, if indeed they legally exist as separate schools at all.” (West, Anne and Wolfe, David (2018) *Academies, the school system in England and a vision for the future*. London School of Economics and Political Science)

Nearly a third of publicly-funded schools in England, around 7,500, are now academies—a quarter of primary and three-quarters of secondary schools. They are

owned and run by not-for-profit private trusts registered with Companies House and function as businesses. Central government provides (and cuts) the funding to each academy directly.

More than two-thirds of academies have since become part of “chains” or Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), each managed by a single board of directors and led by a Chief Executive Officer rather than a head teacher. It is just one step away from the MATs being swallowed up wholesale by private education corporations and milked as a lucrative source of profit—in a similar process to that happening with charter schools in the United States.

Throughout the series we hear the refrain “We have to make our school financially viable.” CEO Will Roberts reveals that CSET has already suffered £1 million in budget cuts, leaving government funding insufficient to maintain current services. He declares, “We are at the absolute limit of what we can do with the finance available to us.”

Angie Browne, interim head teacher at Castle school, arrives at a MAT board meeting to be told another £296,000 of “budget savings” must be made before the end of the academic year. Redundancies are discussed. You can tell Browne is torn between supporting her staff and having to implement the MAT’s demands. Ultimately it is decided to cut the Teaching and Learning Responsibility payments (TLRs) teachers receive for “significant” extra work such as behavioural support. Around 40 teachers will suffer a £6,000 pay cut and children will be denied the help they need.

Browne tells her staff about the proposals. There is shock on their faces. A consultation period is proposed—a whitewash with the decision already taken. One teacher says, “Teachers have always worked

[above and beyond] without being paid but there is no motivation now to do it.”

There is clearly a lack of staff, with 17 teachers leaving the school in 2017 heaping pressure on those who remain and resulting in poor behaviour of pupils. One science teacher says, “Schools are under increasing pressure to turn out the numbers [results] and teachers are putting stress on the pupils.”

With only six staff in the pastoral support team after staff and hours were halved last year, they are firefighting each day.

At Marlwood school, head teacher James Pope is “facing a perfect storm.” The school has been placed in “special measures” after being judged inadequate by an Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection. With no extra money for resources or personnel—in fact a fourth consecutive year of deep budget cuts—Pope talks despairingly of a “downward spiral” and a “sinking ship.” Parents stop sending their children and the school suffers a calamitous 28 percent drop in income in one year.

At his wits end, Pope announces to a shocked staff meeting that he is resigning—joining the half of all head teachers in South Gloucestershire who were to resign in 2017-2018. Shortly after Pope’s resignation, highly respected modern languages teacher Julie Thomas follows suit telling the cameras, “Cut after cut after cut. The toll it takes on people is unbelievable.”

The effect on the children, especially the most disadvantaged, is the most moving part of “School”. The Castle school supports the largest proportion of pupils in the Trust with Special Educational Needs (SEN), of whom 43 with the most severe learning difficulties require an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

As budget “savings” are enforced, the support staff who work with the SEN children face significant cuts to their team numbers. Instead of one-to-one support, it becomes one teacher to four children.

It is heartrending to hear the mother of 14-year-old Down’s syndrome boy Olly say how they “fell in love” with Castle and wanted him “to be seen” and “treated like everyone else.” We are told that his one-to-one support is compromised and even with an official EHCP “his future funding is not guaranteed.”

At Mangotsfield the staff are trying to overcome the often poorer-performance of “Pupil Premium” (PP)

children—those with difficult home backgrounds—who make up one quarter of pupils. When it is decided to concentrate on 14 boys who need the most support one teacher remarks, “I think to myself I wish we could help you all, but we can’t. We have to be selective.”

The problems at CSET are nationwide. Last month research from the Sutton Trust charity showed that poorer children in 38 of the country’s 58 MATs were performing below the national average. The government’s academies programme has “failed to deliver its goal of boosting educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils,” the report concluded.

It is remarkable what teachers and pupils achieve at Castle, Marlwood and Mangotsfield despite the lack of funding. Academies receive just £4,000-£6,000 per pupil per year from the government, £935 extra funding for each PP child and up to £10,000 for the most severe EHCP cases. But even these most deserving of young individuals get no more than practically every child that is privately educated. Fees at such schools average £17,000 and can be as high as £35,000 in places such as Harrow and Eton.

Whether or not the producers of “School” deliberately excluded any mention of the teaching unions is not known, but they are entirely absent from the series.

The unions are responsible for the intolerable situation facing staff, pupils and parents. Teachers have repeatedly shown their willingness to fight the attacks on education, only to see any struggles isolated along local and regional lines and led into a dead end. What few strikes have been organised have been of a token character and designed only to placate growing anger.

There have been many campaigns to stop the drive to academisation, but apart from union names on the sponsors list, or a bit of funding, these have been led by individual teachers and parents. As for the unions’ claims that electing Labour to government will solve the problems, the party has no commitment to reversing either the academy programme or the devastating cuts suffered year on year.



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