

# Academies: Pros and Cons

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## Introduction

Over the last few days I've been considering some of the debate surrounding the Academies Bill, and wondering whether or not it would be an appropriate move for our school. The following notes, quotes and comments present some of my own thinking in this area.

There are a number of key areas surrounding academies that it worth us considering carefully. I'll present these below, together with key quotes from other headteachers, Professors of Education and professional bodies.

## 1. The Financial Arguments

(Headteacher quotes from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jun/01/school-headteachers-academies-offer>).

There may be financial benefits in the short term:

*“The financial freedom that comes with academy status could be the answer. I would miss working with my local authority, Kent county council, and the excellent support they provide. But I'd be stupid not to; it's manna from heaven for me, but a tragedy for local authorities”* . Paul Luxmoore, Executive headteacher, Dane Court grammar school and King Ethelbert school, Broadstairs, Kent.

But these may come at a future cost, given the prospect of future heavy cuts to education budgets:

*“This will not be a re-run of the grant-maintained gold-rush because there's no new money on the table, just a slice of the dwindling local authority pie; even the disassembling of the DCSF logo is an eerie promise that there's no crock of gold where the rainbow used to stand. **I worry that the scramble for resources in these times of austerity will damage our new-found strength, which we found in collaboration with our local community schools** . Of course there'll be opportunities, but I suspect that they'll be built on shifting sands, **a promise of less regulation but an increased expectation of delivering outcomes. My worry is that with this greater freedom will come strong-arm accountability like hoodies lurking somewhere in the darkness ahead.**”* Andy Kelly, Headteacher, Branfil primary school, Upminster, Essex.

There is also a very real risk to wider educational provision and LA services in the short, medium and long term. There is no new money here. Additional money for one school comes directly from the LA and, consequently, other schools will suffer. The Times today are reporting that the financial gains from becoming academy may well be smaller anticipated by schools (possibly around 3 – 4% rather than the often Government average of 11%; see <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article7148618.ece> ).

If large numbers of schools go down the Academy route the LA will have insufficient funds left to support the services it currently provides. Non-academy schools would loose out and receive a poorer service. This is where the increasing worries about winners and losers in the educational system may be realised. If we take the 'I'm alright Jack' approach which only focuses on the benefits

to the children in our school right now then going for Academy status would, perhaps, be a possibility (at least on financial grounds). But that should not be our view. I believe we have obligations to the wider community not to adopt a 'beggar my neighbour' approach to neighbouring schools and the LA.

## 2. Greater degrees of autonomy and a lack of accountability

Academies are autonomous. Some see this as a benefit:

*“The proposals will give schools much more autonomy and flexibility to be innovative and creative without the obstacles placed by the local authority or legislation.”* Pank Patel, Headteacher, Wood Green High School, Wednesbury, West Midlands.

For others, collaboration is essential to the work of an effective school. Many Governors overwhelmingly value the support of their LA and the way it helped them collaborate with other schools in the community:

*“Our members like to feel they have someone on the end of the phone who can help them when they need advice, or that they're part of a bigger network that spreads best practice... by being free you're also on your own.”* Emma Knights, chief executive of the National Governors' Association.

This **lack of accountability** is a major concern. Ofsted will not be visiting schools ranked as 'outstanding' unless their examination results dip below a certain level. Curriculum advice from the LA will not be forthcoming, nor will the QCDA exist beyond next year. Other bodies that provided advice to schools (e.g BECTA, the agency for ICT) are being abolished. We will be left on our own to sink or swim. **Who knows what is best for our school?** We – the Governing Body and the Headteacher – know a lot. But are we arrogant enough to state that we know it all?

This is particularly worrying for teachers. Their contracts with the LA will be terminated and reinstated with the Academy Trust. The assurances of School Teachers' Pay and Conditions being maintained may be questioned. Their professional body, the GTCE, has been abolished and the teaching unions are weak in many respects. They have been marginalised within the academy consultative process and this is a disgraceful slur on their professionalism.

## 3. Democracy in action, or anti-democratic to the core?

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jun/06/academies-bill-gove-teachers-authorities> )

The whole principle behind this policy is anti-democratic. The bill dispenses with parents' and teachers' legal right to oppose such plans and removes local authorities' powers to veto a school's attempt to switch status. Under Labour, schools that planned to become academies had to consult local authorities, which could stop them. Disputes went to an independent adjudicator. But this will not happen if the new legislation is passed. Instead, Gove can make a "discontinuance order" and no consultation need take place. It will give too much power to school governors, who are unpaid and, in many cases, unelected.

*“It is hard to escape the conclusion that this bill is undemocratic. What this does is remove the public process. Nobody, apart from the education secretary and the governors will be able to stop the process. You are handing power to the governors to steal the school. If they want to change the*

*ethos or make the pupils wear the uniform of Etonians, they will be able to, and parents and teachers will be powerless to stop them.*” David Wolfe, Barrister.

*“This bill is riddled from top to bottom with silencing the voice of the workforce. We think the whole idea of academies is anti-democratic because it severs schools' links with democratically elected local authorities.”* Chris Keates, General Secretary, NASUWT.

*“There is no requirement to consult parents, staff or anyone locally when an academy gets set up. Local communities are being completely disempowered from having a say in the establishment of a new form of school. For all that we have heard from the new government about devolving power, this is actually a much more highly centralised system of control.”* John Bangs, Head of Education, NUT.

#### **4. Educational Standards: Up or down?**

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/10/michael-gove-academy-schools-data>)

Gove claims that Academies have raised standards. But this claim rests on dubious data. The claim is that academies improve results twice as quickly as maintained schools. But, other than English and Maths, we don't know in which subjects academies are gaining their A\* to Cs.

Academies are not required to publish breakdowns of their results, nor does the DfE hold them, nor can they be accessed via freedom of information requests. Academies are exempt. There is no detail about what academies are actually succeeding in. This is a tenuous base indeed for a wholesale conversion. **Evidence suggests it is freedom from transparency which is generating academy 'success' rather than freedom from central diktat .**

Gorard's article (2009) makes a more eloquent point:

However, it is not immediately clear that they [academies] are doing a better job overall than their colleagues in non-Academy schools in similar circumstances, for whom I have similar admiration. To say that struggling Academies are doing no better than their non-Academy peers is not to denigrate them. But it does suggest that the programme is a waste of time, effort and energy at least in terms of this rather narrow measure of KS4 outcomes. There is some evidence that despite the independence conferred on Academies one of the ways in which some improve is by becoming more like non-Academy schools again. (Gorard 2009, p.112)

Independent evaluations of the Government's academies programme by Pricewaterhouse Coopers confirm this point consistently (Hatcher 2008, p.671).

#### **5. Curricular Considerations** (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/10/michael-gove-academy-schools-data>)

The unchallenged choices made about the curriculum on offer within academies seems to put certain subject areas in jeopardy. As an example, history and geography have been cited as being at risk (but other subjects may also be currently at risk or may follow). Last year, Gove lamented a drop of 31% in the number of pupils studying history. Yet in some academies, the percentage is less than a sixth of that. In one academy in the Yorkshire and Humber region, out of 150 students only nine were entered for history in 2008-09. No one was entered for geography. While academies' A\*-to-C performance is extolled, it sounds infinitely less impressive when it transpires, as it has, that only 0.5% of an academy's 70% A\*-to-C rate is in history, and 18% is in an ICT course dubbed

weak by Ofsted. This is an excellent example of the 'soft bigotry of low expectations'. A decline in academic subjects is affecting all state schools. But surely the point of academies is to turn around any weaknesses in education, not entrench them.

The potential introduction of iGCSEs is also problematic. At present, many of these have not been validated by Ofqual. This has led some to wonder whether Ofqual has a future under this Government. Commentators believe that the move to allow schools to introduce a full range of iGCSEs heralds the end of the dominance of the National Curriculum within state education (see Mike Baker's recent article at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/10299194.stm>). The main reason for Labour's refusal to allow state schools to teach iGCSE was not that the qualifications in themselves are not valuable or rigorous. Rather, they mark a significant shift to curriculum content away from that described and legislated for within the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4; Baker's article reminds us that nine iGCSE that fell outside NC subjects were approved for teaching within state schools by Labour.

Should we be worried about the demise of the NC? Yes. It provided a common, broad and balanced curriculum entitlement for all pupils. It represents consistency and much of the work that underpinned the established and definition of subjects within it has much of value. It has been debated and constructed by subject experts representative of many different subject cultures (e.g. the Historical Association) in a way that no single set of examination specifications is required to do. The significant differences between the NC and the iGCSE, as compared to the GCSE, need to be examined at a subject level with a much greater degree of rigour than has previously been undertaken.

The abolishment of the QCDA represents another voice silenced. The Government has indicated its desire to slim down the National Curriculum. Academies will have no one telling them what to do in respect of the curriculum they offer. Ofsted will not inspect them. This is a dangerous move on many levels.

## 6. Other Issues of Concern

### a. The proposed number of academies (<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6047277>)

The official impact assessment for the Academies Bill states that there DfE only has the time and resources to create 200 academies this year (and a similar number for the next three years). Liberal Democrat **Baroness Walmsley**, who speaks on education in the Lords, told The TES she felt the DfE had “over-egged” its aspirations on the number of academies opening in September:

*“I don't think it will happen,” she said. “It's very unlikely as there will be an enormous amount of work to be done. They have to consult all interested parties, they have to give teachers the time to process the offer. There are the serious legal sides to it, and the audits need to be carried out on the land and the buildings. I just don't think schools will have the time.”*

Fellow Lib Dem education spokeswoman **Baroness Sharp** said she felt schools had been given a “very misleading impression” by the offer of becoming an academy, adding that the DfE will have to revise its aspirations. “I think it's quite obvious the Department doesn't have the capacity to process these schools,” she said.

b. The socially exclusive affects (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jun/06/academies-michael-gove-poorer-children>)

This policy risks creating a two-tier system in which resources and attention are focused on the most middle-class schools. An analysis by the Observer found that secondary schools judged as "outstanding" by Ofsted are taking 40% fewer poor pupils than the national average.

*“The figures do suggest that the new cadre of academies will be more socially exclusive than schools as a whole. The freeing-up of state schools makes it even more important that strong checks and balances and incentives are in place so that school intakes reflect the social mix of the communities they serve – and that any education reforms benefit all children, not just the most privileged.”* Dr Lee Elliot Major (Director of Research and Policy, Sutton Trust).

To this end, the academies bill is really not about providing a comprehensive educational system for all pupils. New Labour academies focused on schools that needed a major overhaul and catered for the most disadvantaged. This is a considerable contrast to the offer being made to 'outstanding' schools today.

c. Implications for the structure and work of the Governing Body

A move towards academy status will involve a significant restructuring of the Governing Body together with the establishment of an Academy Trust. Experience has shown that academies tend to have fewer parent governors. Emma Knights, chief executive of the National Governors' Association, commented that this struck her as “deeply ironic given all they've said about how they're going to give power to the parents”. It will also involve a significant amount of additional work for the Governing Body in the short, medium and long term. Governors will have a much greater degree of responsibility and will be held to account should things go wrong.

d. An abundance of uncertainty

“Uncertainty is the biggest issue right now. It's difficult to see how the funding will work, and hard for schools to understand the impact this could have. There is no shape to it at the moment. If budgets go direct to schools electing for academy status and these numbers increase rapidly, what happens to the provision for the most vulnerable? Will outstanding schools which opt in immediately get an advantage that others opting in later won't get? As head of a school judged outstanding, like many of my colleagues I want to work in a system where we do the very best for our own communities, **but don't want to do it at the expense of those least able to protect themselves or disenfranchise sections of society.**” Liz Quinn, Headteacher, The Stourport high school and sixth-form centre, Worcestershire.

“Information is power and **the lack of detail about academy status is a major concern to governors**, who can turn a school into an academy without any parental consultation. As a good school with outstanding features, Guildford county school enjoys light-touch local authority intervention, but we know a wide variety of support is there when we need it – without the need to tender.” Janette Owen, Chair of governors, Guildford county school.

e. What's the rush?

“We couldn't possibly do a proper job of weighing out the pros and cons by September. It's suspicious. **Why this unseemly haste to have academies by September?** It just wouldn't be in the best interests of my pupils.” Sue Devereux, Headteacher, Banks Road primary school, Liverpool.

There is also no financial benefit in being an early adopter. The financial benefits as they are today will still be available to schools a year from now.

**References**

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