



# Why would a school want to become an Academy?

Despite the controversy, head teachers and governors, including those in primary schools, are considering conversion to academy status. This briefing looks at some of the main questions asked about why they are seeking to convert.

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# 1. To raise attainment and close the attainment gap?

According to the government, Academies 'have been securing improvements in standards well above the national average' (White Paper 2010, p16).

But the evaluation of Academies, commissioned by the government itself, doesn't agree:

*"The evaluation suggests that there is insufficient evidence to make a definitive judgement about the Academies as a model for school improvement."* (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008, p220)

Independent research supports PwC findings, arguing that:

*"Overall, these changes in GCSE performance in Academies relative to matched schools are statistically indistinguishable from one another."* (Machin and Wilson, 2009, p8)

The 2010 National Audit Office report, 'The Academies Programme', showed that Academies have changed their intake, taking fewer pupils on free school meals:

*"The proportion of such pupils attending Academies between 2002-03 and 2009-10 has fallen from 45.3 to 27.8 per cent... it is substantial improvements by the less disadvantaged pupils that are driving Academies' improved performance overall."*

Pupils from poorer backgrounds have been left behind:

*"On average, the gap in attainment between more disadvantaged pupils and others has grown wider in Academies than in comparable maintained schools".* (NAO Report, 2010)

But perhaps the most important point here is that attainment is not raised by structural change. As the 2007 McKinsey Report noted:

*"The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers."*

Improving attainment requires a relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. As John Hattie noted in his study 'Visible Learning' (2010), *"It is the quality of teaching that has the biggest effect on attainment"*.

**Whilst some Academies have done well, others have not. There is no Academies 'magic bullet'. Nor is there any evidence that Academies either raise attainment or close the attainment gap. Attainment is improved by improving teaching and learning.**



## Alberta on my mind

We have become accustomed to think that democratically elected local authorities in the public sector cannot deliver high quality education with real choice for parents and students. A 'discourse of derision' has polluted the debate implying the whole state system is underperforming. The politicians then tell us to look to Sweden and the USA for privatised models of education for answers.

The good news is that there is an alternative. People often talk about the success in Finland. This is the most successful system in the world but it has other key differences (no OFSTED, no SATS or GCSEs etc).

However the school system in Alberta, Canada has more similarity to the English system. Teachers TV, before it was privatised, commissioned Rhonda Evans to make documentary about their system. It is well worth watching. You can view it here: <http://www.evanswoolfe.com/alberta/>

# 2. More autonomy over the curriculum?

The government claims that Academies have much more freedom. They say they are free from local authority control. But local authorities don't control schools. They support and challenge schools. In contrast, Academies are in effect 'government' schools. Their funding agreement is a contract made directly with the Secretary of State.

Although Academies are free "to depart from aspects of the National Curriculum where they consider it appropriate" (White Paper, p42), this freedom is greatly exaggerated.

The National Curriculum is being slimmed down and all schools will have more freedom. All state schools will be held accountable for their performance in tests and exams which reflect the National Curriculum. It's the SATs, GCSE exams and the new EBacc (English Baccalaureate) which will determine what schools teach, and they are the same for Academies as other schools. Research evidence shows that Academies do more or less the same things as other schools to raise standards:

*"In their efforts to improve teaching and learning, Academies are generally operating in similar ways to improving schools in the LA maintained sector."* (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008, p17)

As Warwick Mansell recently revealed (<http://www.educationbynumbers.org.uk/2011/03/30/if-michael-gove-really-cared-about-academic-achievement>), the freedoms Academies have over curriculum have often been used to narrow it, excluding students from a range of subjects.



Academies underperformed maintained state schools in the new EBacc league tables because they have narrowed the curriculum, limiting subjects such as history, geography and languages.

## 3. Freedom to control admissions?

Academies are their own admissions authorities – but so are 42% of maintained schools – you don't have to become an Academy.

Academies have to adhere to the Admissions Code of Practice – but there is still leeway to select. Is that why Academies want to control their admissions? Will they choose to admit more children from poor backgrounds? Unlikely.

The charity Barnardo's says handing schools control of admissions disadvantages poor children (*TES*, 27 August 2010). A report by Professor Anne West, London School of Economics (October 2010), concluded:

*"Studies have shown that schools that are their own admission authority are more likely to have admissions criteria that enable schools to be unfairly selective in their intakes."*

Overt and covert selection is therefore likely to increase. This is a worrying trend, particularly when Michael Gove has already said his foot is "hovering over the pedal" of increasing selection and the White Paper promises to 'simplify' the Admissions Code.

**The 'direction of travel' is for more autonomous admissions authorities and less regulation.**



## 'Perhaps the most important decision that a gov

Academy conversion is a fundamental decision – perhaps the most important one that a governing body and head teacher will ever take. It should not be done without having full information, without being certain about the impact of the policy and without the full support of all the education stakeholders including staff, parents and children.

And of course head teachers and governors will change in the future. Whatever the promises made by the current head and governing body – for example to safeguard staff pay and conditions or to keep the present admissions policy – there is no guarantee

that a future head or governing body might not take the school in a very different direction.

### Consultation catastrophe

The 2010 Academies Act allows Governing Bodies to agree to convert before any consultation. It asks only that governors consult 'who they see fit'. This consultation can happen before or after the decision.

But for such a fundamental decision there should be full consultation with staff, parents and the wider community. The views for and against should be presented fully. The National Governors Association (NGA) have given detailed

## 4. Freedom from national agreements on pay and conditions?

Academies operate under private school legislation which means they are not bound by national and local union agreements. Some heads and governors want this – but most don't, because it creates a jungle where schools are competing over pay and conditions, and many schools will lose out as a result.

Why would heads and governors want to break from national agreements? Will they improve pay and conditions, or make them worse? This is what the *TES* magazine said, 14 January 2011:

*"In reality, most Academy pay scales differ little from the national norms and only principals and vice-principals command supersized salaries. Look carefully at what is on offer. An Academy may pay its NQTs above the going rate in the maintained sector, but without the same level of progression higher up the scale."*

*And it's not all about money. Some Academies abide by the national 'Burgundy Book' agreement with regard to working conditions, but many have their own contracts, which tend to be less favourable. Key paragraphs to note include sick pay, maternity leave and working hours. Some Academies require staff to be available during the school holidays, while others put no upper limit on working hours."* (p11)

Staff will be told that their pay and conditions are protected by TUPE arrangements if their school

converts to an Academy. This is a worthless promise. The new Academy can change them as it sees fit. New staff start on new contracts and a 'two tier' pay and conditions structure emerges. Staff can do nothing about it – except, of course, take industrial action. There has been a significant increase in the number of ballots and strikes against Academy conversion.

**Freedom from national pay and conditions is likely to be used to cut pay and conditions.**

## 5. To get more money?

This is the main attraction at a time when schools face cuts in their budgets. A recent survey showed that over 70% of heads said this was their main reason for seeking Academy status.

Schools converting get a share of the money the local authority holds back for central support services: the LACSEG – the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant. But how much would a school benefit? The figures on the DfE website ready reckoner may not be accurate. It is difficult to find out the exact figure. There are 'known unknowns'. For example it is not always clear what price services will command in this new market. One local authority is already charging Academies a different rate for services. There are uncertain liabilities such as support staff pensions, maternity leave, etc.

It also looks like it is only a one year cash benefit. The 'Importance of Teaching' white paper suggests in future schools could be directly funded by



government under a 'national funding formula' (p80).

The National Audit Office has already identified weaknesses in financial management in some Academies and many Academies are making cuts and redundancies. Every school is facing a financial squeeze. Reducing structural costs rather than changing status would seem a more effective way to address this problem.

It should also be recognised that the LACSEG money is not new money. It comes from the budget that provided services for all schools. Academies that take that money are taking funding for services for other schools. This is robbing Peter to pay Paul. Or maybe it is just "I'm alright Jack"?

**The short term cash benefit could be outweighed by future liabilities. There is no new money so other schools will be affected.**

## 6. To increase collaboration with other schools?

The government wants "schools increasingly to collaborate through Academy chains and multi-school trusts and federations" (White Paper, p12). But Robert Hill, in a report for the National College in 2010, found that leaders of chains of schools

*"...are failing to take advantage of sharing and learning from other chains. The conviction that the particular teaching and learning model they have developed is right could inhibit their openness to learn from the experience of others, particularly since some chains are beginning to claim*

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## Governing body and head teacher will ever take...'

advice about what consultation should look like.

It is disturbing to think that in the 1990s, when schools were considering grant-maintained status, they were required to hold ballots.

### Governors' heavy responsibilities

Governors face a heavy burden. In most cases governing bodies voting for academy conversions are voting the stakeholder model of governance out to be replaced by a governing body dominated by the Academy Trust (possibly a sponsor or a minority of the governing body). There are also greater

responsibilities, including personal liability.

### Head teachers: Are you CEOs or leaders of teaching and learning?

The role of the head teacher is changing in similar ways to that of the GP in the NHS. Head teachers will be increasingly responsible for bureaucratic processes rather than teaching and learning. Local Management of Schools created welcome autonomy, but two decades of top down, central directives have put heads under intense pressure. The CEO or executive head role takes heads further away from their core purpose as the leader of teaching and learning.

### Do you want to be a fat cat?

Academies are increasingly paying huge sums to head teachers. The 'going rate' for a secondary Academy head is now approaching £130,000. Many earn far more than this.

The record so far has been set by Michael Wilkins, Principal of Outwood Grange School in Wakefield. He has raked in £1 million over the last four years. He receives £182,000 as principal of Outwood Grange School. He and another member of staff set up 'Outwood Grange Consultancy Ltd' which collected £497,400 for his services to other schools. £148,637 of this was paid to Leadership Challenge Ltd, Mr Wilkins' private company.



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>>> intellectual property rights for their teaching and learning model.” (p32)

The school system is in danger of becoming increasingly fragmented into competing groups of schools. Chains of Academies mean that individual schools lose their independence and are controlled by geographically remote sponsors. But perhaps the most obvious point is that Local Authorities already exist to promote collaboration. Academy chains are just another layer of bureaucracy.

**Academies are designed to create competition not co-operation.**

## 7. To fulfil the pledge of the ‘Big Society’ which gives power back to the people?

David Cameron likes to situate the Academies policy in with his theory of the ‘Big Society’. Yet the spread of Academies will take our schools further away from democratic accountability to local people. The undermining of the role of Local Authorities in planning schools places and the admissions process could create chaos.

There will be less collective accountability to the community through elected local councillors. Some Academy converters schools may end up having to align with a sponsor who will provide remote leadership (see box right).

For parents and students, access to those who make decisions will become harder. For example, where parents have problems with their school local councillors will not be able to help. Parents’ only remedy would be to complain to the DfE in London.

**Political rhetoric about a ‘Big Society’ can’t hide the fact that privatisation will be create a democratic deficit.**

## Privatisation – plain and simple

A number of Edubusinesses are lining up to run large chains of Academies.

● **Babcock Education**, formerly Vosper Thornycroft, made £23.6 million out of education in 2009. It wants to run a large chain of schools. Its managing director for education, Marcus Watson, told *The Times*: “I don’t think 1,000 schools is unrealistic”.

● **E-Act**, formerly known as Edutrust, aims to run 250 schools within four years. The head of E-Act is Sir Bruce Liddington, a former schools commissioner, who is paid £265,000. Sir Bruce told the *TES* that he expects the group to have around 50 free schools, 50 “traditional” academies that replace underperforming schools, 100 “converter” academies and 50 primary schools.

E-Act made £2.4 million in 2009 and are already making teachers redundant in some schools.

● **Edison** is a US company with a growing empire in the UK. Its £1 million,

three-year contract – the first and only of its kind – with Turin Grove School in Edmonton, North London, has not been renewed. Martin Cocks, the chair of governors, said that dealing with a company instead of a single headteacher had not been “without difficulties”.

● **ARK** call themselves a “Philanthropic Cooperative”.

However ARK are an organisation run entirely by Hedge Fund managers. Hedge Funds are the finance companies which tipped the world into economic crisis in 2008. Hedge Funds are companies who make huge profits by gambling on market prices. In 2008 they profited from driving down the value of bank shares.

The teachers union ATL have produced an excellent pamphlet, ‘England’s schools: not open for business’, which can be downloaded from:

[www.atl.org.uk/Images/ATL%20Privateers%20Brochure.pdf](http://www.atl.org.uk/Images/ATL%20Privateers%20Brochure.pdf)



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This Briefing was produced by the Anti Academies Alliance. We are a campaign composed of parents, teachers, unions, governors, councillors and MPs.

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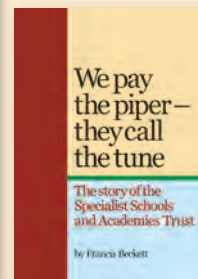
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