

Anti Academies Alliance



PO Box 5408, Brighton BN50 8HB Twitter: @antiacademies Facebook: Anti Academies Alliance
Email: office@antiacademies.org.uk Website: www.antiacademies.org.uk

“A good
local school
for every
child”



Germ warfare

There is a widening chasm – not between the Westminster political parties – but between the political class and those who work in and use our schools. Both students and teachers find the experience of school increasingly toxic. The testing culture, the league tables, the narrowing curriculum – the never ending cycle of politically motivated reforms are sapping our strength and enthusiasm.

The dividing line is stark. On one side there are parents and teachers who

GERM is the name given to the global attack on our education systems. This attack is highly contagious and is spreading rapidly. It is an acronym created by the renowned Finnish Professor of Education, Dr Pasi Sahlberg and it stands for Global Education reform Movement. We are fighting GERM warfare.

want a good local school in which their children will thrive whatever their background, interests or talents. They believe in education as a force for social justice and fulfilment of every individual.

On the other side there are the businessmen, politicians and some head teachers who see education as a business opportunity. They see children as commodities, schools as markets and teachers – and especially teacher unions – as the enemy! This is the >>>

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>>> GERM – the Global Education Reform Movement.

Their representatives have dominated education policy for more than three decades. From Thatcher through Blair and Adonis to Gove, they have pursued the fallacy that markets, choice and competition drive up standards. They have legislated to privatise and deregulate to allow ‘edu-business’ entrepreneurs to flourish whilst restricting pedagogy and

curriculum in order de-professionalise and demonise teachers.

GERM has created an education system so deeply fractured that it is often hard to see a way forward. It poses some very sharp questions. First and foremost, it raises the question of political action. How can we fight GERM? How can we change the education system along progressive, democratic pathways?

Historically, progressive educationalists sought support from the

Labour Party. But New Labour under Blair was the vanguard of GERM. Blair and his advisors Michael Barber and Andrew Adonis constructed a big vision of education that not only co-opted the old right-wing views of the Black Papers, but also included progressive rhetoric about social justice. This opened the door for Gove and the hard right to unleash a programme of privatisation that Thatcher could only dream about.

Conference report:
On 7 February 2015 SERTUC and the Anti-Academies Alliance jointly hosted a conference entitled “An even better state education for all in schools: equity and equality in education”. This brought together teachers, trade unionists, parents, policy makers and academics to discuss the current state of the education system and the impact of Gove’s damaging reforms. A key theme was the rise of GERM, how it has damaged education, and how to fight it. Here we outline the contributions from the key speakers at the conference and their different perspectives on the attacks faced by our education system over the past few years.



Dr Mary Bousted,
General Secretary
of ATL

Dr Bousted focused on the lack of accountability and transparency at the DfE. She pointed out that, although the department are still pushing academies, the current evidence doesn’t allow us to draw conclusions on whether they are a positive force for change. Indeed there is some evidence that academy status slows down the progress of some failing schools who then convert, possibly because conversion acts as a distraction from raising

standards of teaching and learning.

She also noted the findings of the National Audit Office after they published an adverse opinion on the DfE’s ability to keep track of the spending of 3,905 academies. The NAO said it did not trust the accuracy of the DfE’s accounts and could therefore not assess if it was providing value for money. It also said it was concerned that 18 academy sponsors – who collectively educate 100,000 pupils – had been prevented from taking on any more schools because of concerns about their standards.

While there is no evidence that academy status has a positive effect on improving a school’s performance Dr Bousted pointed to cooperation and collaboration between schools as an effective way to share good practice and raise standards.



Dr Patrick Roach
NASUWT

Dr Roach told the conference that, since 2010 we have witnessed an attack on the right to quality education and the rolling back of the entitlements of children and young people. In 2015 the assault on entitlements looks set to include the right to be taught by a qualified teacher, the right to a school place, the right to a broad and balanced education, and the right to education that is free at the point of use.

He pointed to the attacks on equality within our education system including SEN

budgets cut by 40% leading to the loss of specialist SEN support, the abolition of the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant and the dilution of the legal duty on schools in respect of community cohesion, among others. There is also the additional scandal of the widespread use of admissions and exclusion procedures in many academies and free schools, leading to selection by stealth across the system – penalising BME pupils, pupils with SEN and other disabilities, and other vulnerable groups.

Looking forward he felt that the government should be concentrating its efforts in the following areas if it is really serious about improving education rather than tinkering with school structures:

- Entitlements of children and young people should be key focus
- Education and skills need to be key priority, not left to vagaries of the market
- Quality education and better life chances
- Devolved, democratic leadership of education at local level
- Fair admissions
- Adequate supply of school places
- Broad and balanced offer.

“ Academies and free schools are excluding at a much higher rate in proportion to the total number of school. In 2012-13 a total of 18,763 maintained schools excluded 2,700 pupils. Yet, only 2,390 academies excluded 1,930 pupils (a mere 770 less than all maintained schools). And to close the circle, the same academies that are excluding students at the rate described above are being commissioned to make provision for them on that other track, the pupil referral unit (PRU). Students are rarely allowed to take the same subjects at GCSE in these units that they were doing in school prior to exclusion... ”

Gus John

The AAA believes we need to think big too. We need to expose GERM but also create a shared alternative vision that can motivate sustained resistance and transformation. We believe there is considerable support for this across the profession and wider society. That was the case in 1963 behind the then successful campaign for education and was the idea behind the stalled 2014 beginnings of a National Campaign for Education.

Our problem is not a shortage of better visions for progressive education. The recent Compass ‘Big Education’ report is just one of many reports that provide decent alternatives. Our problem is united, sustained action. Whatever a party promises in its manifesto is subject to the Westminster consensus on the need for austerity and the market. Instead of understanding how poverty, inequality and market failure damage children’s

education, the political class uses austerity as the rationale to de-regulate and privatise education. In such conditions, only a movement from outside the old parliamentary polarities has a realistic chance of delivering change. The AAA remains committed to fighting GERM and uniting with progressive education forces to build a better education system.

Alasdair Smith, Anti Academies Alliance



Kevin Courtney NUT

Kevin Courtney talked about the Government’s failings and the positive alternatives in the NUT manifesto. He quoted from the Education Select Committee’s 2015 press release and report on academies to consider:

“Current evidence does not prove that academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children”.

“We have sought but not found convincing evidence of the impact of academy status on attainment”.

“We agree with Ofsted that it is too early to draw conclusions on the quality of education provided by free schools or their broader system impact”.

To laughter Courtney said that they had even stopped looking for evidence of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in Iraq after 10 years.

Courtney said that the coalition government education policy had collapsed and could be summarised in the

phrase “the wheels have fallen off”.

The lack of planning for school places means that we are already at a crisis point with studies suggesting another 900,000 places could be needed over the next decade.

Courtney also highlighted the fact that trainee teacher numbers have slumped with UCAS recording a huge decline, applications down 11,000 in a year. This is exacerbated by the fact that the numbers of teachers leaving the profession is at a 10 year high and rocketed by 25% under the coalition government. The TES reported that one teacher in 12 had left the profession last year.

All in all, Courtney summarised that the ‘reforms’ undertaken by the government had been deeply damaging to the education system and a significant amount of work needed to be to repair it, and to once more make teaching an attractive profession where teachers feel they are valued and trusted.

But he said that teachers had to articulate and campaign for a positive alternative for education and pointed to the NUT’s campaigning around its manifesto – through scores of Education Question Times and hundreds of street stalls.



Lessons from Sweden

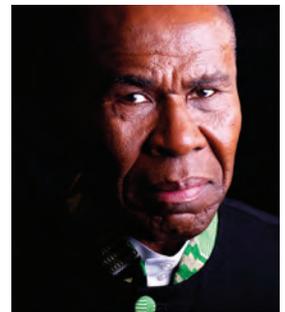
Linda Norrby from Swedish teaching union Lärarförbundet was the key note speaker at the conference. Sweden were the first country to introduce the free school model, and are where Gove and others from the GERM have looked to for new ideas on how to marketise our education system.

However the experiment has seen Sweden’s results in Maths, reading and natural sciences fall below the average across the OECD, and the country has dropped in the PISA tables. In 2013 the Education Minister Jan Bjorklund admitted that the country should have renationalised its failing schools. Earlier the same year the collapse of JB Education, a firm owned by Danish private equity firm Axcel, cost almost

1,000 staff their jobs and left more than a billion kronor (£92 million) of debt to banks and suppliers, as well as leaving 11,000 students without school places.

Norrby spoke about the early expectations for the free school programme in Sweden. She said that the politicians suggested that the introduction of these new school structures would lead to diversity, higher quality, cost effectiveness, and that the increased competition would lead to higher salaries for teachers.

This has not been the case and Norrby confirmed that the free school programme had led to increased social segregation. She said that while not all aspects of free schools were bad, the teaching unions had been naïve in their acceptance of government assurances about how positive the programme would be for their education system.



Professor Gus John

The schooling system in this country is in crisis and has been for some considerable time. It is in crisis because, among other things, school improvement and raising standards as measured more or less exclusively by test and examination results, has become the be-all and end-all of compulsory schooling. We are therefore being made by the state to hand our children over to schooling regimes that are becoming increasingly more hostile, punitive, lacking in empathy for students and teachers alike and that increasingly separate children’s academic learning from their holistic development as young people at crucial stages in their human growth and development.

It is a schooling system where, despite an apparent acceptance of the principles: that every child matters; that >>>

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“A good local school for every child”

Gus John (cont.)

>>> every child is entitled to an education and that no child should be left behind and shaken out of the system as a failure, children are being excluded for the most banal and unjustifiable reasons.

This situation calls for collective resistance and defiance. Resistance and defiance in defence of rights and in affirmation of a vision of the kind of society we want to build and to facilitate and equip all young people to build.

More and more, schools are becoming like supermarkets, driven by a similar ideology. Notions such as: market share, brand dominance, customers, customer choice, customer satisfaction, competitiveness, shareholder interests, league position and quality of output are becoming commonplace. The corollary of that, of course, is that exclusion is being seen as a necessary management tool and one to be employed both at the admissions stage and when students have already been admitted to the school.

School exclusion has been a major issue in schooling for decades, especially for African heritage communities where African-Caribbean boys especially have been disproportionately excluded since the 1960s.

The supermarket model of schooling provision and the government's insistence that all schools should become academies constitute a twin-track schooling system where only the fittest and

conformist are included, while the rest are rejected and cast aside, not unlike the process by which farmers reject misshapen fruit and vegetable in order to make sure that there is uniformity in whatever we buy in any of a supermarket's chain stores. No room here for diversity, difference in need, difference of levels of self-management and self-discipline, difference in rate at which children unlearn inappropriate behaviours and adopt desired social and life skills. 'Zero tolerance' of manifestations of development needs and of different learning styles and approaches mirror supermarkets' 'zero tolerance' of misshapen fruit and vegetable.

And to close the circle, the same academies that are excluding students at the rate described above are being commissioned to make provision for them on that other track, the pupil referral unit (PRU). Students are rarely allowed to take the same subjects at GCSE in these units that they were doing in school prior to exclusion. There is no greater acceptance of and attention to their specific needs and learning difficulties and for too many of them, the PRU represents a containment centre at best, if not the ante-chamber of a young offender institution and a graveyard of hopes and ambitions.

In this period of the commodification of schooling and the increasing separation of students' academic development from their emotional, social, moral, spiritual and

physical development, it is imperative that we place human rights at the centre of schooling provision and use the law to hold schools to account. But, this is also a period when political parties are hell-bent on distancing Britain from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and from international

human rights standards generally.

If we believe in justice and in the need to defend the rights of the most vulnerable in society, we must insist that compulsory schooling should not necessitate our sending our children into the brutalising environments that too

many schools have become, where they are sifted and graded, with the by-product of massive human wastage being seen as an acceptable consequence of a schooling system that sees the pursuit of excellence, as measured by examination results, as its only goal.



Sara Tomlinson, Anti Academies Alliance

When we started the Anti Academies Alliance, a decade ago, we warned that this scheme was about the break up of state education and the attempt to privatise our schools.

We take no pleasure in saying that the evidence has proved us right. When we started there was a small group who passionately campaigned against academy status. Now the views we were advocating then are much more commonly accepted and there is a wide audience for the argument that the academy and free school movement should be stopped and reviewed before more harm is done.

Misuse of public funds

There have been some high profile cases of the use of school money for dubious purposes. There was the school which

used funds to purchase a Vera Wang fine china tea set, the schools where a head teacher, formerly a head teacher of the year, who received an OBE for services to education, who was found to have spent school money on her own birthday party, amongst other things, and as a consequence was given a lifetime ban from teaching. The recent grilling at the public accounts committee exposed that the Head of Durand academy trust, paid over £400,000 per year, had opened a dating agency from the school premises. Margaret Hodge asked him how a busy Head teacher could find the time to run a dating agency. What also emerged was a blurring of the rules with regards to the trust paying corporation tax.

'No evidence that academies raise standards'

The report widely publicised by the education select committee at the end of January 2015, concluded that there was no evidence that academies raised standards. Although the Tory chair, Graham Stuart, tried to qualify that there was no evidence 'yet', it is clear that for most people, ten years is enough to

conclude that the evidence is overwhelming proof that the project has failed to improve standards.

Cameron announces more academies as part of his election promises.

Despite the wealth of evidence, David Cameron has pushed ahead with the Tory plan to increase the number of academies, threatening that schools with a 'requires improvement' judgement would be forcibly turned into academies, in his recent announcement. There is a question mark over the ability of the government to find 3,500 Heads willing to take on such a challenge.

We need to unite to defeat germ

There are many unions in education and many campaigns. The key for us is to join forces and harness the power of our movement to make the fight to save state education as high profile as the campaign to save the NHS. The conference was a useful step in this direction. The AAA will be working up to and after the general election to make sure that academisation is high on the agenda for politicians and voters alike.