How to stop your school becoming an academy

Opposing academisation campaign toolkit
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This toolkit is also available online so that all the web links can be easily accessed:
antiacademies.org.uk
We are in a different environment since the government’s retreat from full academisation.

Schools which felt they had to ‘jump before they were pushed’, can stop jumping. Schools which were labelled ‘coasting’ can feel more confident choosing other ways to improve. Schools in the maintained sector can stay with their local authority, with local oversight and local governance, and can stay responsive to their parents and communities.

But the ideology of privatisation, competition and marketisation means the Department for Education (DfE) and Regional Schools Commissioners are still driving forward the expansion of Multi-Academy Trusts. There are still ambitious heads who want a CEO salary unregulated by national terms and conditions. There are governors who are easily swayed by the arguments of consultants with vested interests in academisation. We all must be prepared to oppose it.

The evidence is on our side. Academies have proved inadequate in their supposed primary purpose, school improvement. They have failed the children and they have failed the taxpayer. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report into converting schools to academies (https://bit.ly/2KTWEu0) shows the policy is flawed, eroding accountability and exacerbating inequality between schools. The litany of academy problems continues to grow – trust failures, high costs, lack of transparency for parents, and loss of local oversight and it is often the most deprived and most vulnerable children who have paid the heaviest price.

On transfer to an academy, teachers and non-teaching staff are taken out of national and local agreements. This fragments and divides us all, with the potential for worsening conditions and different conditions in different schools. And staff’s working conditions are children’s learning conditions. Education unions have policy that is totally opposed to academisation.

Labour’s decisive shift
Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner’s speech at Labour’s conference in September signalled a decisive shift in Labour Party policy, reflecting the influence of Corbynism, the internal contradictions within the academisation process and the determined efforts of campaigners over the last decade.

The evidence is on our side. Academies have failed the children and the taxpayer.
It came as a result of clear pressure within Constituency Labour Parties and the trade unions. This groundwork was helped by the steady stream of academy scandals that are now catching the eye of major TV programmes such as Panorama. Bronagh Munro’s demolition of Michael Dwan, the CEO of Bright Tribe, has marked a watershed in the public’s perception of academisation. The label ‘privatisation’ is sticking as evidence of corporate greed continues to emerge.

This shift brings an end to the cross-party consensus in favour of academisation that has dominated Westminster politics for more than a decade. It was this consensus that often made campaigning so difficult. Until recently only the Green Party and a handful of Labour MPs would speak out against academisation. But the tide has now turned. We need to find ways to engage the new layer of Labour councillors and MPs prepared to speak out. Indeed reports from the Tory Party conference suggest we might even find some Tories who are worried about academisation!

While some will have reservations about the details of Angela Rayner’s policy announcements – and much of the detail remains to be seen – we should not let that hinder us from giving a positive welcome for this shift and from making a serious commitment to engaging with developing the policy.

There was a radical edge to Rayner’s speech, calling out, for example, the fat cats and the unacceptable use of related party transactions. But perhaps more importantly there was an offer to work with experts, to listen and to try to move forward together in building a National Education Service.

We should all take this offer seriously. It needs us to focus on producing policy ideas, such as the ideas outlined by Professor Anne West and David Wolfe (Academies, the School System in England and a Vision for the Future, LSE). There are some things that we will disagree on – the cooperative model for example. But the debate around what structures are needed to secure democratic accountability needs urgent discussion. What sort of ‘middle tier’ is created really does matter.

The mantra ‘standards not structures’ was always a flabby nonsense – like a body without a skeleton. But it is a complicated project to recreate a new system – whether going back to the old Local Authorities or to something new, perhaps even more democratic.

Labour’s idea for a National Education Service is exciting, but one thing we can be certain of, is that the CEOs, MAT bosses and assorted neoliberal apparatchiks that rule the education system will squeal about it. It will take a
popular revolt to defeat them. So, however significant this political shift is, on the ground academisation and the need to fight it continues. It is actually conceivable that attempts to academise may accelerate (after slowing last year) as ambitious heads and greedy chains aim to ‘grow their business’ before the next election closes the door.

That means we must increase our efforts to stop academisation. Crucial to any campaign’s success is early knowledge that the process is being considered. In Newham and Ealing, campaigners are using an ‘early warning system’ of checks to see if they can unearth proposals before the official consultation begins.

This year we have spoken at more meetings, had more new campaigns and more victories than ever before. We need to continue this into 2019 in order to keep the pressure on. The current government is incapable of solving the problems facing our schools. A Corbyn-led Labour government can begin to.

This toolkit has grown out of the experiences of many campaigners opposing academisation across the country, in both primary and secondary schools, with increasing levels of success.
The Governing Body

A Governing Body (GB) has the right to decide the school’s future. Their minutes have to be available to the public, staff and parents. Parents should ask for them. They will show where the school is with regard to any plans, academisation included.

At the first sign of a GB considering conversion to academy status, parents should send the GB a letter, signed by as many parents as possible (this can be in the form of a petition) with the demand that they be properly consulted. The AAA can provide a model letter for this, but ‘local’ letters will always have a greater impact. A demand that the deadline for consultation should be extended should be made.

This can be supported by leafletting, petitioning and lobbying. A strong presence at the start will focus governors’ attention.

If the governors still decide to proceed with academisation:

Find out all you can about the GB. Their names and roles will be on the school website. Some may have links to other organisations or community positions. It may be helpful to create this in diagrammatic form showing who they are employed by, and who they are involved with.

Find out who is pro-academy, who is anti-academy and why. Anti-academy governors are important allies. Which governors can be won over?

Find out about governing body resignations and vacancies. Get governors, and new governors standing for election, to pledge that they will oppose academisation. Then at least you can try and hold them to it.

Who are the parent governors? Demand that they talk to you and are prepared to listen to your questions and bring them to the governing body.

Lobby tactics

When lobbying the governing body meetings remember many governors have heard only the arguments from the pro-academy consultants, the CEOs, councillors, and so on. They need to hear the other side. Request that a parent delegation be allowed to address their meeting.

Printing off names of members of the GB and holding them up at a lobby, and pressing individuals to declare their intentions can be quite effective. If the press is around this helps!

Find out who is pro-academy, who is anti-academy and why. Which governors can be won over?
Hold to account

Many governing bodies have a designated local authority member. The council will have a list of councillors on governing bodies. Parents’ delegations can lobby at councillors’ surgeries.

Request the GB come to a meeting at the school where parents can hold them to account. These mainly unelected people can take away the school from the community for good. They should be held to account in as many ways as possible.

Delve deeper

Freedom Of Information (FOI) requests can often elicit information that those supporting academisation would prefer parents not to see. For details of how to make an FOI request go to the government’s website: https://www.gov.uk/make-a-freedom-of-information-request

It will also be worth searching Companies House to find out more about the Trust(s) that governors have been in contact with: https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/search/companies

Due diligence and MATs

The governing body is supposed to conduct a due diligence exercise to ensure that the MAT they’re thinking of joining is, amongst other things, financially sound – before making their decision.

This should not be a paper exercise – as it should include things like, how much more will the school pay in pension terms (they are required to have actuaries carry that out), how much more insurance will they pay, are the MAT’s reserves sufficient and do any buildings need repairs etc. All this could eat into your school’s reserves.

The original MAT system kept reserves for each school separate. However, that has now changed and now they are all lumped together – meaning in many cases, what one school saves is given to another – more often the lead school that gets all the publicity.

Many schools do not seem (certainly as far as sharing this information with all the school’s stakeholders is concerned), to conduct proper due diligence, and when parents and teachers are made aware of this, they rightfully lose faith in the process, often resulting in stronger support for remaining a community school. A copy of the due diligence should be kept in the school – ask for it. If the GB has not done its homework tell it that it should do so, and present its findings to all and wait for a response from all stakeholders before making a final decision.

Minute details

MATs must publish their minutes online, most don’t. It’s usually because they’re hiding negative information as MATs that do publish usually withdraw them once the minutes
start to show they’re struggling financially. Request copies of all the minutes for your school GB and MAT meetings, especially the ones from the finance committee – there’s always revealing stuff in them.
- If the reserves of a MAT fall too low they can be declared insolvent, with all the debt recovery of a business, unlike a community school which isn’t governed by company law and can always draw funds from the council to support it.
- Insolvency can lead to the re-brokering to a MAT of the regional schools commissioner’s choosing, resulting in a complete lack of control over the school’s destiny. Alternatively the school can end up as an ‘orphan’ school in limbo, without MAT or local authority support. Low reserves = cuts to staff and pupil provision.
- The main reason trusts expand is because the MAT financial model is fundamentally unsustainable, and the only way they can stay afloat, albeit temporarily, is by taking over schools with good reserves then running those down.
- Additionally, MATs typically take between five to 10 per cent every year from their schools’ grants in order to provide their services. They trade on the myth that councils take more than that.

Parents and carers

- Parents can be a powerful source of creative, passionate engagement for leafletting, petitioning, calling meetings, lobbying governors and councillors, making placards, organising events, challenging heads/chairs, joining picket lines and even occupying the school premises!
- There is a legal requirement in the academy process for parents to be consulted. Section 8 of the Education and Adoption Act 2016 states that: “Before a maintained school in England is converted into an academy, the school’s governing body must consult such persons as they think appropriate about whether the conversion should take place.”
- The legislation goes on to state that this consultation can occur before or after an academy order, or an application by the governors for an academy order has been made. The Department for
Education (DfE) guidance for schools applying to convert voluntarily to academy status states: “Your governing body must consult formally about your school’s plans to become an academy with anyone who has an interest in your school. This will include staff members and parents, but you should also involve pupils and the wider local community.”  

For a useful guide to consultation ‘requirements’ see:  
https://schoolsweek.co.uk/academy-conversion-who-do-you-have-to-consult/.  

Get going  
● It’s best for parents to leaflet outside their schools so they can engage with other parents. Other members of the community can also help with leafletting.  
● Organise a parent and community meeting at a location near the school and at a time and day that is good for parents, for example straight after school. This is where the campaign can take off and where difficulties can be discussed.  

Find a nearby cafe or other friendly venue where open campaign meetings and discussion can take place.  

Provide creche facilities and light refreshments.  
● It’s useful to have a cafe or other friendly venue close to the school where open campaign meetings and discussion can take place.  
● There may need to be many meetings. Experience shows that a core group of parents will emerge and organise themselves and their networks. Keep liaising/organising with them to address any issues and campaign plans.  
● Produce a leaflet with meeting details and the facts about the school and academisation to distribute outside the school gates and in the local area (see page 11).  
● Translate it into the languages that are most relevant. Some parents and/or community members are likely to speak other languages and can help produce leaflets and other publicity where they are needed (see example, left).  
● Produce a petition (online and paper copy) to gather names and contact details of those opposed to academisation.
Publicise and encourage attendance at parent consultation meetings. These are often not well publicised by the school management, are hidden on a website, are at times inconvenient for parents/carers, and are often without translators, so those for whom English is not a first language are excluded. Active parents can challenge this and organise to get high turnouts at meetings (see page 12, “Consultations...”).

Ask Parent Governors to meet with parents. If there’s a Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) this can be a good forum. If not, a new PTA can be started.

Meeting checklist
For the meeting (you may need more than one to really get started) do the following.

- Make sure you invite parents, staff (at least one of the union reps, and certainly a union officer), governors and local councillors.
- At the meeting circulate a contact list (see resource – contact list) for names, phone numbers, email (a box format works well so email addresses are written clearly), tick boxes for permission to be on a school campaign Whatsapp group; anyone interested in being on the campaign committee; column for language (if relevant at your school); and extra information that may be useful, for example if someone is a councillor or has IT skills.
- Have a leaflet at the meeting with suggested ‘next activities’, such as the next meeting, consultation, governing body lobby, etc.
- At secondary schools contacting parents and arranging a meeting is harder. Getting a list of parents’ evenings and leafletting these can be effective.
- Involving parents/carers of SEND students can be successful as these parents come to the school more regularly and they will often have concerns about the effects of academisation on SEND provision.
- Once parents start organising themselves there are no holds barred. They are not beholden to heads, they care passionately about their children’s education and they are free to act. The more they find out about the business model, the loss of land, buildings, the narrowing of the curriculum, the higher pay for the top and the detrimental effects on other staff, the more they can become the strongest advocates against academisation. They are free to talk to the press, head, governors, and councillors.

Experience shows that a core group of parents will emerge and organise themselves and their networks.
Leaflets and other printed publicity

We can help you publicise your campaign.

The Anti Academies Alliance can provide professionally created artwork for leaflets, posters and other publicity, available both in AAA and more generic styles if you prefer (see right).

Petitions

- At primary school gates in the morning, both before and after parents drop their children, is a time to engage parents with a petition.
- Most will not know about academisation, or will have heard only the pro-academy side from the school. Engaging, informing and getting petitions signed may take many sessions. It’s worth it! A committed parents’ group will help build the confidence of school staff.
- An online petition started by a parent can be key in mobilising not only parents and carers locally but friends and family who can also sign and share and boost the profile of the community campaign. Some schools have found that their schools are part of strong community networks. Other schools can call on parents who are well known in the area or are celebrities.
- Addressing the governors and head by name in the petition is an important part of applying pressure and exposure to those who will make the ultimate decision on academisation. Knowing that they will be publicly held to account and that their role – and name – in the process is ‘google-able’ can often make them re-think and re-evaluate their responsibility. The Keir Hardie Primary School petition started by PTA member Lisa is a good example:

Consultations, surveys and ballots

Parents should demand to hear a speaker or speakers for the other side – the case against academisation.

- If or when the process of academy conversion starts, the school should organise consultation sessions. Challenge the date and time if necessary. Organise for the largest attendance possible.
- The case for academisation will be put by the head, chair of governors, the proposed CEO and/or the academy consultant. Parents should demand to hear a speaker or speakers for the other side – the case against academisation. Sometimes, rarely, this has been allowed so make sure that you have someone ready to do this!
- Provide information and questions for parents. Organise for questions to be put to each member on the platform, especially the governor(s). Parents should insist on their questions (consultants are masters at trying to stop this) and answers being recorded.
- Parents should force a hand vote of FOR and AGAINST academisation and/or a full fair parent YES/NO ballot on academisation. Be prepared for the platform to do almost anything to stop such votes!

Survey...
- The school may also organise a ‘survey’ on academisation. It will probably have a choice of answers: yes, no, don’t know, and a space for reasons. It is highly likely this survey will not be organised with a view to getting a high turnout. You will have to work hard to get parents to read and respond. It is very important and parents should insist that the survey results are collected and counted in a fair and transparent manner. Notes should be made of anything contrary to this.
- Avenue School in east London organised a survey, which produced a massive indication against academisation (134 votes against academisation – 4 for), but the school tried to ignore it and only persistent campaigning highlighting this had the intended result. They took the governing body to court claiming ‘unlawful consultation’. The judge agreed and the process was halted pending a return to court.
- This challenge to the nature of the consultation process was one reason the Avenue governors finally took academisation off the table. The 19 days of strike action by staff plus the parents spontaneously occupying the head’s office were other reasons!
...or ballot?

- In any case neither consultations nor surveys will be good enough or democratic enough. Much better is a ballot.
- Newham Council recently passed a resolution positively encouraging ballots, see text above. In March 2018 a motion was passed unanimously by a full council meeting of Cambridgeshire County Council, which urged “governing bodies to engage parents and teachers in a full range of opinions” over academisation.
- So the demand for staff and parent ballots is a completely democratic demand. The law says a few governing body members have the only binding vote in the process. This is so obviously profoundly undemocratic that exposing this fact can be a spur to both staff and parents’ action.
- If those who are seeking conversion to academy status are so convinced of their arguments, why wouldn’t they encourage proper, meaningful and balanced consultation and support the demand for a ballot!
- At every meeting, with governors, with councillors, with the head, at parent consultations and meetings, fairly conducted full ballots of staff and parents must be proposed and campaigned for.
- If a ballot is agreed, then it makes the case for a balanced meeting organised by the school all the more important. If the school won’t do this, parents and campaigners must organise such a meeting independently, calling for a ‘no’ vote. We can provide support and speakers/leaflets if necessary, outlining why a ‘no’ vote is essential.

On 15th October 2018, Newham Council’s cabinet ratified a council resolution which included: “That schools will be encouraged to hold a ballot of all parents and a separate ballot of all their staff as part of a meaningful consultation process on whether or not to become an academy.”
Social media and other media

Don’t forget that some people do not have easy access to the internet, but...

Facebook

- Parents should set up and name their own campaign Facebook page. This makes the campaign a traceable and shareable entity that is visible to anyone with internet access. It is immediately identifiable and can be ‘liked’ and shared with network member friends that parents and community members have.
- The parent group – which means individual parents don’t need to be identifiable – can share stories and facts on academisation and also promote protests and the ensuing photos and videos from them. School staff can also access it and witness the support and solidarity underway for them without compromising themselves.
- Choose a catchy title and a photo which shows mass participation for the page. It is always good to have two or three admins for this page.

Twitter

- It’s useful to have a campaign Twitter handle and hashtag which parent and community activist members can co-run and tweet from, while keeping their identities hidden. This can be useful in tweeting directly at the school and trust and naming and shaming or congratulating key decision-makers. High profile campaigns and tweeters can also be contacted to amplify the campaign’s demands. Again, the account should have two or three admins.
- Likewise, the campaign Twitter account can act as an instantly accessible news stream for unfolding events such as council sessions/meetings, protests and pickets. Journalists are often alerted to campaigns via Facebook and Twitter.
- Twitter, like Facebook, is also vital for sharing online petitions and crowdfunders for legal action or strike funds.

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**WhatsApp**

- As an all-informed network where information can be shared quickly and mobilisation can happen easily, WhatsApp is very useful. It can bring people closer together – opinions and analysis is shared in confidence. It is excellent for organising meetings and leafletings often at short notice. But it must be made clear to all users at the start that it is only to be used for the campaign. And again, more than one admin is a good idea.

**Local papers and radio**

- These will normally be interested in local stories, particularly protests, strike pickets, rallies or any ‘clash/conflict/controversy’ story. Phone the local paper and ask for the Education Desk or News Desk and give as much notice as you can before a meeting or event.
- Parents and community members involved in the campaign need to step forward to be contacts for the press and be ready to speak on behalf of the campaign group. Local newspapers are typically short-staffed and can be very receptive to reports and photos being sent in. Once it’s on the local newspaper online page it can be shared widely.

**National coverage**

- National journalists are well worth contacting for coverage, especially if high profile individuals join the campaign, or if a major direct action happens. Main ones are *The Guardian* reporter Warwick Mansell, via his blog ‘Education Uncovered’: [www.educationuncovered.co.uk](http://www.educationuncovered.co.uk); the *TES*: [www.tes.com/magazine](http://www.tes.com/magazine); and *Schools Week* [https://schoolsweek.co.uk](https://schoolsweek.co.uk).
- The government’s Education Select Committee on Education reports ([www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee)) are also very useful. These can be shared on Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook to inform and encourage campaigners.

**Celebrities**

- If anyone has contacts for well-known people, ask them to tweet, post or attend a rally or picket line.

**Stunts**

- There have been precedents of parents occupying schools and school playgrounds, releasing balloons with anti-academisation messages, holding breakfasts together, even living in tents on the proposed academy site, to name a few. Think creatively about how you would like to highlight your campaign. Be prepared to have some parents go on the record to speak about the action. Parents can speak anonymously if they prefer.
Other ways of putting on pressure

**Councillors**
- The effectiveness of pressure on councillors varies in different places and times but they are at least elected and nominally accountable. Trustees are not.
- Many governing bodies have a councillor who is a member. These should be lobbied at their surgeries. They should be emailed by the union, by parents and community members. Responses should be kept and if there is a lack of response this should be followed up.
- Councillors in the ward of the affected school should be involved. They should be made aware of the issues and demands made of them that they are responsive to their constituents.
- A campaign should consider marches, protests, lobbies, presenting petitions to the council. You usually have to submit questions and request delegations in advance of council meetings. Find out your council’s schedule of meetings and the rules that apply from their website.
- Some councils and councillors say that academisation is out of their hands as governors and the DfE make the decisions. Do NOT let them off the hook! Local Authorities have responsibility for children and young people. Academisation affects the LA’s ability to provide this care.

**MPs**
- Parents should write to the local MP and invite him or her to meet constituents opposed to academisation. Persist. You deserve a meeting. Be prepared to ask questions and challenge your MP and tell them what you want them to do to support your campaign.
- Parents can write to the head and governing body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the DfE. Some MPs are involved with Academy Trusts in various capacities – expose this interest and demand that they either resign from the Trust or, at the least, make public their conflict of interest.

Some councils and councillors will say that academisation is out of their hands as governors and the DfE make the decisions. Do NOT let them off the hook!
Building a borough partnership
● Councils can be important in opposing academisation. They can also keep or develop structures and services to help maintained schools so they don’t attempt to academise. Make demands of councillors!

OFSTED
● The Academies Act 2016 states that any school given an ‘inadequate’ rating by OFSTED must be open to an academy sponsored takeover, tying OFSTED into the academisation process.
● There are a number of reasons why a school may be deemed ‘inadequate’. Some schools have good grounds to challenge OFSTED decisions and have done so. There is no right of appeal for parents and staff at present but the pressure should be kept up. Parents can be very supportive when made aware of the reasons the school has problems.
● A large number of these forced ‘academy orders’ have been revoked over the last year and the schools involved have been able to remain with the local authority – don’t give up!

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs)
● Appointed by the DfE there are eight RSCs nationally. They make decisions on the conversion of maintained schools to academies. The DfE states, ‘They typically have backgrounds as highly experienced academy headteachers, chief executives of multi-academy trusts or leaders in education.’
● Naming and shaming the RSC involved in the transfer of your school, on leaflets to parents and to the press, exposes their lack of contact with the local community and the bias built into the process.
● Protesting at the premises of the RSC who has decided your school should academise is another possible focus.

Headteacher Boards
Each RSC is supported by a Headteacher Board (HTB). These are made up of experienced academy headteachers and other sector leaders who are supposed to advise and challenge RSCs on the decisions they make.
● But they too are biased in favour of academisation. These boards can be very hard to engage with and, it seems, do not always fulfil their role appropriately. FOIs again can be useful here. Exposure of the potential conflicts of interest of these decision-makers can strengthen your case.
Striking

- Where all these measures fail to stop a governing body pursuing academisation, union members may decide to take strike action. It is so important that parents, campaigners and community members support teachers and other staff who have decided to do this.
- Maximum involvement of parents on strike days is crucial – in communication and persuasion, but also in writing leaflets, informing other parents, attending meetings, making placards.
- Before the strike a parent/carer petition specifically supporting striking staff is a morale booster for the teachers, staff and union. It also provides evidence of parent and community support for schools remaining with their local authority.

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Supporting strikers
You may need:
- A megaphone – you will find the talent out there, chant-leaders, speechmakers, and so on.
- Homemade placards – people are very creative!
- Slogans in different languages – involve other parents in this.
- Leaflets with the latest information and anti-academisation arguments for parents and the local community, also in different languages.
- Leaflet and petition the neighbourhood and community venues around the school.
- Meeting together after a morning picket line can be an opportunity to discuss and strengthen the action together. It brings all the energy and ideas together and can be really inspiring for all involved.

Lastly – persist, don’t give up. Campaigns can win!
Resources

Four-page A4 factsheet which sources reports and articles to reveal the facts about academy conversion. [link]

Four-page A4 leaflet. Lots of points and facts, plus we speak to a union officer about campaigns in Ealing. [link]

Six-page A4 leaflet supporting the idea of creating a National Education Service. [link]

To order these and other resources email: office@antiacademies.org.uk

How useful has this toolkit been? Have we missed something? Can you offer other advice? Please do get in touch.

AAA Toolkit 19
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