Academisation – the democratic deficit

by WARWICK MANSELL
Journalist and founder of Education Uncovered website

Anyone in any doubt about the problems with the government’s academies policy should have attended public meetings about two forced academy controversies, which took place in December and January.

I turned up for the events, put on by campaigns set up around the forced academisation of Waltham Holy Cross primary, in Essex, and Barclay, a comprehensiv in Hertfordshire, and each time heard two hours of community members coming together.

During those packed, standing-room-only gatherings, I heard not a single voice, among the many parents, pupils, governors and staff with close knowledge of these schools, raised in support of the government’s plans to academise both schools under new control and probably new leadership.

Extraordinary

Instead, there was passionate support for the schools’ existing management teams, of a kind which any institutional leadership – and a saner government – would surely see as hugely valuable.

Views taken into account

Parents, governors, staff and pupils have no official rights even to detailed information on the reasons why their school might be chosen to academise under a particular trust, let alone to have their views taken into account in the process.

Instead, the academies policy sees all decision-making as a closed-loop process between central government and academy trusts themselves, with no decision-maker even answerable at a local level to the people who depend on the decisions.

I have set up a (subscription) website, Education Uncovered, to try to track this and related policies. Sadly, the challenge with all of it is keeping up. But it is an important job: the views so powerfully articulated at those meetings should not be being ignored.

A broad-based, coordinated national campaign can help these struggles. There has been a significant growth in significant campaigns against voluntary chain academisation. Angela Rayner has already made clear a Corbyn-led Labour government will end this approach. But we can’t afford to wait until an election. The Tories are vulnerable – both the National Audit Office and Education Select Committee have raised serious concerns about the risk that this policy poses to schools. A broad-based, coordinated campaign that brings local campaigns together within a national campaign can help shift government policy.

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National Secretary, Anti Academies Alliance

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Damian Hinds was forced to acknowledge this when he withdrew the academy order at William Torbitt, but the government seem unwilling to draw sensible conclusions from what has happened there. Figures from both Ofsted and the Local Government Association show that councils, rather than academy chains, are better at turning round schools that have been rated as ‘inadequate’ (not a term that we believe is helpful in any case). Other schools continue to be forced to convert against the wishes of parents and staff. In some cases, such as the recent forced conversion of the Barclay School in Stevenage by Lord Nash’s Future Academies Trust, there has been a strong whiff of cronism, if not corruption.

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Our campaign was against the forced academisation of our school after Ofsted deemed it ‘Inadequate’ in June 2018. Whilst there was no guarantee that we would win by campaigning against the academy order, we didn’t give in, but fought back with full force. Our campaign was supported by parents, the community staff, the local authority, local politicians and trade unions. There were two main reasons we fought against the academy order. Firstly, to protect the education of our children and to ensure that they receive the best school experience possible. This of course is not guaranteed under an academy which can employ unqualified teachers. Secondly, to protect the wellbeing and working conditions of our staff who are a brilliant and amazing team. Because of our campaign and because of our staff members working so hard, we achieved a new Ofsted rating of ‘Good’ in January 2019 and as a result the academy order was revoked.

William Torbitt Primary, Redbridge

When we read the Ofsted report in June 2018 we were in shock. It described a school we didn’t recognise. We had some difficulties (five Heads in four years) but it was damning. Inadequate is not a word we should use about people or schools. Forced academisation is the most outrageous attack on democracy and accountability, where unqualified civil servants (RSCs) alone along with Headteachers Boards made up of academy inspectors have taken control to close or be used for something different. It was the reason for our campaign to use all means at our disposal to try and save our school.}

South Shields

We decided to fight against a ‘leak’ during the summer holidays of the school possibly closing. Parents, staff, and students were opposed without academisation. This would appear to be supported by the interim Ofsted report of September 2018. Catherine Shaw, chair of Budmouth’s IEB, said ‘the school had wanted the opportunity to come out of special measures and due diligence process, so the academisation order was not needed.’ We have an incredible staff who are committed to our children’s education. Parents believe in our school and staff and that was why we chose to fight against the academy order and against the decision to close that was made way before Christmas. Forced academisation are acting against our schools – they are destroying them. We have a community against academisation in South Shields. The school has fallen victim to a terrible government policy. Huge PP debts and dismissals of orderers are creating enormous pressure on our schools a time when school budgets are already being cut. Schools should be free to improve before major decisions like direct academy orders are placed on them. Get rid of ideologies of Manchester and South Shields anti-academisation campaign

Little Green Special, Chichester

The campaign against the forced academisation of Little Green School failed to stop. Solent Academies from taking over the school in January 2019. Campaigns were warned of the detrimental effect academisation would have on pupils, how the unnecessary disruption would impact pupils and undo the positive work that our campaign had done. The school taking effective action in July 2018. Parents’ and campaigners’ voices were not listened to. Solent’s lack of SEMT expertise and insistence on immediately changing routines and systems brought the chaos to the school. Parents now feel anxious and unsafe. Reports of what has happened have led some parents to have significant safeguarding concerns. Privatisation of education means our schools should be local and democratically elected. However, the order planned, alongside pressure from the local Conservative MPs, forced an original agreed sponsor was never to be an academy. This resulted in a ‘leak’ to media involved and an action plan to get the school in Special Measures.

Budmouth College, Weymouth

Following an ‘inadequate’ Ofsted inspection in May 2018, Budmouth College is under an academy order. The sponsor, Aspirations and Growth Academy Trust (AAT), was chosen by the RSC in January 2019. Outstanding for many years, we believe Budmouth has the potential to become good or outstanding again without academisation. This would appear to be supported by the interim Ofsted report of September 2018. Catherine Shaw, chair of Budmouth’s IEB, said ‘the school had wanted the opportunity to come out of special measures and due diligence process, so the academisation order was not needed.’ We have an incredible staff who are committed to our children’s education. Parents believe in our school and staff and that was why we chose to fight against the academy order and against the decision to close that was made way before Christmas. Forced academisation are acting against our schools – they are destroying them. We have a community against academisation in South Shields. The school has fallen victim to a terrible government policy. Huge PP debts and dismissals of orderers are creating enormous pressure on our schools a time when school budgets are already being cut. Schools should be free to improve before major decisions like direct academy orders are placed on them. Get rid of ideologies of Manchester and South Shields anti-academisation campaign

Mackie Hill Junior and Infant, Wakefield

The attempted forced academisation of Mackie Hill School is being driven by blatant political game-playing on the part of the DfE. Mackie Hill School received an inadequate OFSTED rating in December 2017. Changes were made, culminating in an extremely positive HMI Monitoring Visit in December 2018. The RSC (Vicky Bee) chose to ignore the substantive evidence of progress made and nominated the New Collaborative Learning Trust (Postlethwaite College) as an ‘appropriate’ sponsor. PNC is a six plus provider with no track record of primary education.

Barclay, Stevenage

Our community campaign to resist the forced academisation by Future Academies Trust began following a public meeting called by a local Labour councillor in November 2016, triggering an academy order, however 18 months later. efforts by the Barclay community turned things around; getting out of this OFSTED category in record time. This demonstrated that our school was heading in the right direction; academisation was not the answer.

However, the order remained, and alongside pressure from the local Conservative MPs, an original agreed sponsor was never to be an academy. This resulted in a ‘leak’ to media involved and an action plan to get the school in Special Measures.

Cardale, Wakefield

Our campaign against academisation came about after parents fought for three years – that we had an excellent school placed on our school by the DfE and the MAT in 2016, triggering an academy order, however 18 months later. efforts by the Barclay community turned things around; getting out of this OFSTED category in record time. This demonstrated that our school was heading in the right direction; academisation was not the answer.

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