

Anti Academies Alliance



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“A good
local school
for every
child”

Free Schools Briefing

What are Free Schools?

The Conservative-led government wants private organisations to set up and run new state-funded schools. These so-called ‘Free Schools’ are Academies, which means they are outside local authorities, free from local accountability, free from national union pay and conditions agreements, with greater freedom over the curriculum and able to set their own admissions policies.

Free Schools can be set up by groups of parents, community organisations, charities and businesses. The government has received 323 applications, but the quality is poor and only 40 have been accepted for consideration and only 17 of them have had their business case approved. Between 10 and 20 Free Schools are expected to open in September 2011. Many applications are from Academy chains such as ARK, E-ACT and Harris, from groups of middle-class parents wanting grammar school-type education, from private schools seeking state funding, and from religious groups (over one-third of all applications).

6 reasons why you should say no to Free Schools

1. Because they take pupils and money from existing schools
2. Because they increase social segregation
3. Because they aren't the answer to raising standards
4. Because they will be run by business for profit
5. Because they threaten pay, working conditions and union rights
6. Because they are not democratically accountable

1. Because they take pupils and money from existing schools

Free Schools damage existing schools in three ways.

BSF and IT programmes cancelled to subsidise Free Schools

Part of the capital and start-up costs come from the scrapping of the Building Schools for the Future programme and part also comes from the Harnessing Technology Fund, intended for improving IT in schools.

Running costs come from local authority budgets

Free Schools, like all Academies, are given a share of the funding the local authority currently retains to spend on central services, reducing their capacity to support those schools and children most in need.

Patrons: Lord Roy Hattersley, Tony Benn, Fiona Millar, Professor Gus John, Michael Rosen, Alan Gibbons, Joan Sallis OBE
National Trade Union Affiliates: TUC, NUT, NASUWT, ATL, UCU, UNISON, UNITE, GMB, FBU, MU, PCS

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Free Schools take pupils and money from neighbouring schools

Because the money follows the child, neighbouring schools lose money, which has a negative effect on the quality of education they can offer, leads to job losses by teachers and other staff, and could even lead to schools being closed down.

2. Because they increase social segregation

Many Free Schools will increase social segregation, either because they aim to attract 'academic' pupils at the expense of other local children or because they are run by religious organisations. For example, the Free Schools being set up by Toby Young and Katharine Birbalsingh in London will both teach Latin, which is guaranteed to deter many working-class parents looking for an education for their children geared to today's needs.

Bolingbroke Academy is a Free School opening in Wandsworth, run by ARK and backed by leading City finance firms. Pupils from a struggling primary school serving a deprived council estate have been told there will be no place for them at the school, while four other primary schools in wealthier parts of the same area have been chosen as feeders. Labour MP Lisa Nandy said: "This is a shocking indictment of the Government's policy on Free schools, transferring money from the poor to the rich."

The primary and secondary Free Schools being set up in Handsworth, Birmingham, by the Guru Nanak gurdwara are Sikh schools. Bhagwant Singh, campaigning against them, says "They are likely to only attract Sikh children. I would say to a Sikh parent, choose an existing local school where children from different backgrounds are all mixed together. When they're separate it's bad for the community. And if the Free Schools take children from other schools it could result in them being closed."

Free Schools in Sweden are a model for the Tories' policy. The evidence shows that they increase social segregation. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education "choice in the school system has led to a tendency to segregate in terms of pupils' sociocultural background, performance and ethnic background." (Skolverket 2006, p.51).

3. Because they aren't the answer to raising standards

One of the main arguments used by leading advocates of Free Schools is that they will reduce social inequality in the school system by providing better schools in poor areas. That was the aim of Labour's Academies, but the evidence shows that they are no more successful than local authority schools with similar intakes, and those that have done better have done so by changing their intake to attract more pupils from middle-class backgrounds and by entering them for easier vocational exams instead of GCSEs. Evidence from the Tories' models – Swedish Free Schools and US charter schools – also shows that they do no better than other schools, unless it is by selecting higher-achieving pupils.

The most recent large-scale study of US charter schools was published in 2009 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University: *Multiple Choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. It concluded that "17 percent provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools." (CREDO 2009, p1)

In Sweden "The children from highly educated families gain mostly from education in independent schools, but the impact on families and immigrants who had received a low level of education is close to zero." (Wiborg (2011, p282). The Swedish Education Minister, Bertil Ostberg, said "The Free Schools are generally attended by children of better educated and wealthy families making things even more difficult for children attending ordinary schools in poor areas." (Daily Mirror 30 May 2010)

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4. Because they will be run by business for profit

The myth is that Free Schools will be run by parents. The truth is they will be run by companies for profit. The government received so many incompetent applications that it had to tighten up the regulations. Free School evangelist Toby Young complained that it would be "virtually impossible" for groups of parents to start their own schools – it's "much more about encouraging multi-academy sponsors setting up schools."

Numerous leading edu-businesses such as Gems, Pearson, Serco, Tribal, Nord Anglia, Cambridge Education, as well as US-based Edison Learning and two leading Swedish chains, are planning to make profits out of Free Schools. Not only will they set them up on behalf of parents and others, they will take over the running. And don't think it's the parents who will make the key decisions, it's the company. For example, Appleyards offers to "Build a workforce that reflects your school vision; recruit and appoint senior leaders, including principals; determine the curriculum – what will your teachers teach and to whom?"

Zenna Atkins, last year chair of Ofsted, is now CEO of a company called Wey Education which plans to run a chain of academies and Free Schools. She calls for companies to run schools for profit. (TES 20 May 2011). According to her website "Wey Education is developing a schools operating framework and education delivery model...The model ensures that a surplus can be generated annually based on state per pupil funding."

At present Free Schools cannot be actually bid for and owned by these profit-hungry companies, unlike Swedish Free Schools, but there is a powerful lobby demanding just that, ranging from the Adam Smith Institute to the Confederation of British Industry. Given the shortage of applicants which satisfy even the government's criteria, and its commitment to privatising the public sector, it seems only the fear of a backlash of opposition is holding Gove back from agreeing.

5. Because they threaten pay, working conditions and union rights

Free Schools, like other Academies, do not have to pay national union rates for teachers and support staff, or abide by national working conditions. In fact they do not even have to recognise trade unions, and many of them won't. And, unlike other Academies, they do not even have to employ qualified teachers. Existing staff who apply to work in a Free School will not be protected under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) and will be required to accept the Free School's contract. This is a recipe for cutting pay, worsening conditions, and destroying the ability of the education unions to defend their members, in order to boost private profit.

6. Because they are not democratically accountable

The New Schools Network – a Tory Trojan horse

The government set up the New Schools Network to advise about Free Schools, giving it £500,000 without advertising the contract. But it is not an independent or neutral body. It is run by Rachel Wolf, an ex-adviser to Gove, its trustees represent the Academy lobby, and its job is to promote Free Schools.

Set up without consultation

Free Schools can be set up on demand by as few as 50 parents. They don't need to consult the local community, or neighbouring schools, or the local authority, before getting government approval. After that, any consultation is a sham because the school can just ignore opposition and go ahead.

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Undemocratic governing bodies

Local authority school governing bodies are one-third parents and have staff and local authority governors. Free School governing bodies only need a minimum of two elected parents. The rest of the governors are appointed by the Free School owners, with no entitlement to staff or local authority representatives.

Outside the local authority, unaccountable to the local community

Free Schools, like other Academies, are not part of the local authority system. They are accountable only to the secretary of state, not to the local community. They come under the control of the Young People's Learning Agency, a quango which will soon be the bigger than any local authority in the country.

Local Councils cannot block Free Schools being set up and councillors have no role if problems arise for parents or neighbouring local authority schools. One major problem area is admissions and the provision of pupil places. This requires effective planning to ensure that the needs of the whole community are met and the expense of unnecessary surplus places is minimised. The spread of Free Schools and other Academies, all acting as their own admissions authorities, makes planning impossible. The Coalition Government claims to want to increase localism but in practice it is destroying the role of local authorities and replacing local democracy with a fragmented and chaotic market system.

Say No to Free Schools – they can be stopped!

The Free Schools policy does not have majority public support.

In 2010 an Ipsos Mori poll found that 44% considered schools being run directly by private companies, religious groups, charities or groups of parents rather than being run by the local council as a bad idea, compared to 24% who supported it. 62% thought that local authorities are best placed to run schools. In 2011 a YouGov survey of parents in 22 local authority areas where Free schools are being planned found that about half said local authorities should run schools and 43% said teachers, compared to 30% for charities, 25% for parents and 15% for private companies (people could specify as many options as they liked). 31% said they were against or "tended to be against" a new Free School, with most undecided.

Of course we all want the best education for our children. We recognise the equality gap in our schools and we share the concerns of those parents who feel that schools are not meeting the needs of their children. But we say to them that the answer is not Free Schools, the answer lies in parents and communities working with schools and local authorities to continue to improve our existing school system.

Across the country parents, school union members and concerned citizens are campaigning against Free Schools being set up. Visit the Anti-Academies Alliance website for news of local campaigns which you can support and join.

References

CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes) (2009) *Multiple Choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University.

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