

Anti Academies Alliance



“A good local school for every child”

‘Free Schools’ briefing

Why we oppose ‘Free’ schools

Michael Gove claims that Free schools are about driving up standards and meeting the need for new school places. The evidence suggests otherwise.

Shortage of school places

There is a serious shortage of school places, with more than a quarter of a million extra places needed by 2014-15. The government is relying on the market to provide school places for our children through groups of local parents starting up Free Schools. These are state funded schools and as academies they are approved by, and report directly to, the Secretary of State for Education, with no local democratic accountability. With no local authority checks on their quality, concerns about standards in the free schools are increasing, and Ofsted has judged three of the first nine inspected to require improvement. The publicity will tell you that it is parents, teachers and charities that set up free schools but they are dominated by religious groups or businesses who want a slice of the action.

Effect on local schools

Free schools can take pupils and hundreds of thousands of pounds of funding from other local schools. Free schools can advertise for pupils by criticising their neighbouring schools. For instance Hackney New School says it’s being set up ‘due to parental demand for better standards in local education’,

but the government says Hackney’s secondaries are already amongst the best performing in the country.

Pet projects

Despite the austerity programme, the government has pushed through this £6 billion pound project based on free market ideology and selective use of evidence. In 2012, the National Audit Office criticised a £1 billion overspend on academies and free schools. Bolingbroke Free School in Battersea, which the Ark academy chain opened in September 2012, received £25.95m from the Department for Education in site acquisition and construction costs. That would be enough to educate tens of thousands of children in existing schools. If all children are to achieve their very best, it stands to reason that resources should be directed to all schools not just a handful catering for a tiny minority of pupils. The Secretary of State spent another half a million on the ‘New Schools Network’, a charity to champion free schools. Their founding chief executive has since been recruited to head up ‘Amplify’ – a subsidiary of the Murdoch empire which markets technology to schools.

Divisive

The Secretary of State says that free schools are designed to bring high quality education to hitherto deprived areas but an analysis by the Financial

Times in 2013 showed that there are 3-4 times more free school bids in London and the South East than in Yorkshire and the North West. Poorer areas are receiving just a fraction of the new facilities. Data collected by Gooch in 2012 show that the overall proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at free schools was 9.4%, significantly lower than the national average of 16.7%. The West London Free School says it takes more disadvantaged children than its borough average but, when compared with its immediate neighbours, it’s taking fewer.

International comparisons

Proponents often cite the initial success of Swedish free schools. However Sweden is now sliding down the international comparison tables and in May 2010, their education minister said ‘We have actually seen a fall in the quality of Swedish schools since the free schools were introduced ... 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’ and he added: ‘Most of our free schools have ended up being run by companies for profit’.

In the US, Charter Schools were initially hailed as a great success for children in poor areas but now they recruit fewer children with



>>> special needs or entitled to free school meals than district schools. Yet even with this bias in admissions they do not perform any better than their state run counterparts (CREDO study, Stanford University 2009).

The UK education system is among the most socially segregated in the world (OECD 2010) whereas Finland is much less segregated; in fact Finland has no private schools. Finland has a systematic approach involving every school and every teacher in improving teaching. Ben Levin, of the University of Toronto, said in 2012 that no high performing system can operate on the basis that every school is autonomous. Rather, all high performing systems pay attention to every school, every teacher and every child.

Seckford Foundation

The Seckford Foundation operates private nursing homes and a private school in Suffolk. They've said that moving into the state school sector will help them cut costs in their private enterprises.

Although there were already popular state comprehensive schools nearby and no significant shortage of places, Seckford put in a proposal to open two free schools in Suffolk. Education consultant Rob Cawley was recruited to investigate whether the proposal was viable. After deciding that proposal should go ahead, Mr Cawley was appointed as executive principal of the two free schools. The two schools opened in September 2012 with hundreds fewer pupils than planned. Each empty space is costing the taxpayer £1,000s which could have been spent on existing schools.

Ten things you should know about free schools

1. Like academies, free schools are exempt from most education legislation. For example, they do not have to employ qualified teachers or follow school food regulations.
2. The concept of free schools is motivated more by politics than educational 'best practice'. Mr Gove wants to create a 'market' in education in which schools compete with each other. He calls this a 'supply side revolution'. But the evidence is clear - schools do better when they collaborate.
3. Critics say that free schools, and academies, are part of the government's agenda to privatise public services, like in the NHS. Local councils are forbidden from opening their own new schools and now several big businesses are running chains of free schools and academies. Head teachers are being encouraged to set up their own chains of free schools and academies through 'mergers and acquisitions'. Independent, fee-paying schools are converting to free school status to take advantage of public funding.
4. Public resources are being used to benefit the wealthiest parts of the country where attainment is already higher. For example a new primary free school in a wealthy North London suburb cost £6 million for just 60 pupils. Overall the free schools and academies programme has overspent by £1 billion.
5. Because the government believes that the market will provide sufficient places, there is no national or local planning. What happens to the children already in the schools that may not succeed in this market? Or the children who do not have a school place while we wait for the market to provide a solution?
6. There is no evidence that increased autonomy improves schools. Free schools are new but they are governed in the same way as academies and, while some academies have been successful, some are failing.
7. Critics argue the free schools and academies programme is having a negative impact on the wider education system. After 10 years of the academies programme, UK schools remain 'among the most segregated in the developed world' according to a recent OECD report.
8. Although free schools and academies are not run for profit, there are many companies making profits from the programme. Some schools are being run on a 'for profit' basis. Mr Gove has said he would be comfortable with state funded schools making profits.
9. Critics warn that, as the impact of austerity becomes more severe, school budgets will be threatened. They say it is better for schools to work together in their local family of schools.
10. Free schools can be successfully opposed but we rarely hear these success stories in the national media.

How to campaign

● **Act quickly** – As soon as you hear about a proposal, write to the proposers demanding that they be clear and transparent about themselves and the process. Contact heads and governors of nearby schools and tell them that their pupil numbers and their reputation could be affected by the proposed school.

● **Get advice** – The AAA has resources and advice available by email, phone or on our website and social media.

● **Demand full and democratic consultation** – Local communities have a right to consultation in an open, democratic way. There should be opportunities for both sides of the argument to be heard.

● **Make sure your voice is heard** – Stakeholders can find different ways to make sure they are listened to. This can include letter

writing, petitions, leaflets and protests. The AAA can help. School staff should always seek advice from their trade unions.

● **Use the local media** – Free schools are a controversial issue. Most local media outlets – radio, TV and newspapers – will cover the issue sensitively. You can also use social media like Facebook & Twitter.

● **Build alliances with other stakeholders** – Schools have different stakeholders – parents, future parents, staff, the local community and political representatives such as MPs and Councillors. It is important to involve all these groups in the discussion.

● **Be prepared for hard hitting and coordinated action** – Experience has shown that free schools can be stopped when communities take action together.

Produced by the Anti Academies Alliance working with

SERTUC

the TUC in London, the South East and Eastern Region

An online version can be downloaded or for printed copies: contact the AAA office.

www.antiacademies.org.uk
office@antiacademies.org.uk
07528 201 697

PO Box 71271, London SW11 9GU

Twitter: @antiacademies

Facebook: Anti Academies Alliance

Affiliate: <http://antiacademies.org.uk/affiliate/>